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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the Violence of Silence: The Intergenerational Transmission Mechanism of Implicit Family Trauma in *'night, Mother*

Xiaole Liu
Southwest Jiaotong University, School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu, China
Corresponding Author: Xiaole Liu **E-mail**: liuh55939@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

Marsha Norman's one-act play *'night, Mother* (1979) centers on a 90-minute conversation after the daughter informs her mother of her suicide plan. With its almost brutal theme of "suicide," the play condenses the life crisis under the silent violence of the family—an achievement that earned Norman the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and established the work as a classic Broadway production. Through the tragic fate of the daughter Jessie, the trauma-internalization mechanism of the family's silent system can be clearly observed in shaping her individual life. The father's emotional neglect, the mother's discursive evasion, and Jessie's "self-silence" (a result of trauma internalization) together form an invisible power structure. As a form of structural violence, silence leads to the disintegration of individual existence through the logic of "discourse suppression → trauma normalization → behavioral compensation." Essentially, Jessie's suicide is a desperate resistance against the "unspeakable pain" embedded in the family's power structure. *'night, Mother* not only provides a literary model for understanding the implicit trauma caused by silence but also offers an effective perspective for examining social and family issues in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s.

| KEYWORDS

'night, Mother, silence, implicit trauma, intergenerational transmission

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Marsha Norman (1947—) is hailed as "the most successful serious feminist playwright in contemporary American theater" (Brown, 1991, p. 60). Her works have consistently focused on the spiritual predicaments of marginalized groups and the hidden violence within family power structures, and she has won numerous prestigious awards in the international theater community, including the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award. In 1983, Norman won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *'night, Mother* (1979). This one-act play centers on a 90-minute conversation between the daughter Jessie and the mother Thelma after Jessie announces her suicide plan. In this distorted family space constructed by the father's absence and the mother's silence, the mother-daughter dialogue is constantly enveloped by an inescapable silence. While methodically cleaning a gun and finalizing the details of her suicide, Jessie engages in trivial back-and-forth with her mother over daily matters such as "the shortage of snow cakes" and "the storage of towels." Beneath the superficial triviality and tranquility of their communication, an inexpressible undercurrent surges in the family relationship, turning this conversation into the playwright Norman's incisive inquiry into "how family silence gnaws at the individual." This work, published in 1979, is by no means an isolated emotional tragedy but a profound artistic response to the pains of social transformation in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, the United States was deeply torn by multiple transformations: the second wave of feminism impacted the traditional family order, drastic changes in the economic structure shattered the stable foundation of life, the sexual liberation movement clashed fiercely with conservative backlashes, and traditional family values teetered amid such tensions. Issues brought about by social transformation, such as intensified intergenerational rifts and the spread of mental health crises, turned "silence" into a prevalent "family malady." The collective stigma and reluctance to discuss mental illness among the public, communication barriers between generations, and emotional alienation among family members together constituted a suffocating living environment.

Moreover, this "silent pathology" in families and society resonated alarmingly with the continuously rising suicide rate at that time, enabling *'night, Mother* to transcend the scope of a personal tragedy and become a profound portrayal of the spiritual predicament of that era.

Since its premiere in 1983, *'night, Mother* has become a key text in academic circles for analyzing family power and women's predicaments. Existing studies, mostly framed by feminism and psychoanalysis, focus on interpreting the play's distorted power structure, women's identity crises, and the symbolic implications and philosophical orientations of Jessie's suicide. In terms of power relations, Brown (1991) points out that Thelma strengthens her dominance over Jessie through emotional manipulation. While these studies profoundly elaborate on the external manifestations of family power imbalance, they fail to conduct an in-depth inquiry into how such power oppression permeates the individual's spiritual world. In the context of identity disorientation and spatial oppression, Shi Jian (1998) employs the binary opposition of reality and fantasy to analyze Jessie's identity dilemma; Li Lin (2018) explores the systematic oppression exerted on women by physical and psychological isolated spaces from the perspective of feminist geography. Regarding the interpretation of suicide behavior: Jafari & Kiaei (2015) draw on Lacan's theory of "jouissance" to emphasize that suicide is an attempt to transgress the oppression of the symbolic order. Although these interpretations reveal the multiple implications of suicide behavior, they collectively overlook a core element—namely, the "silent violence" hidden in the characters' daily interactions, i.e., the implicit silence itself constituted by the reticence of refusing communication and the pauses of hesitation to speak. This intangible silence, as an independent and powerful traumatic force, continuously acts on the fractured mother-daughter relationship. Shahsavari et al. (2018) once analyzed Thelma's aphasic state under patriarchal oppression and Jessie's psychological trauma manifested through behaviors such as refusing communication, anorexia, and smoking. However, their research focuses on the constructive function of language in subjectivity, treating silence merely as an appendage to the absence of language rather than an independent carrier of trauma. This orientation results in existing studies failing to answer: how does silence cause individual trauma through intergenerational transmission?

To summarize, although existing studies interpret *'night, Mother* from perspectives such as power structure, identity crisis, and trauma representation, they still have obvious limitations. First, they only simplify "silence" as a "by-product" of power oppression or traumatic experience, failing to regard it as a structural violence with independent momentum. Second, the analysis of family trauma mostly stays at the level of external oppression, ignoring the mediating role of silence in the generation and transmission of trauma. Third, the interpretation of Jessie's suicide focuses on its symbolic meaning, yet fails to reveal its core as the essence of silence—namely, that suicide is the most thorough resistance to the family's silent system and also a breakdown of the individual's survival logic after being deprived of the right to speak. Therefore, this study attempts to address the following questions: how does family silence lead to individual self-denial through mechanisms such as discourse suppression, trauma denial, and behavioral compensation? What insights does the literary representation of Jessie's suicide—as the "most thorough declaration of silence"—offer for trauma intervention in real society? Centering on the trauma caused by family silence, this study elevates silence from a "background existence" to a core object of analysis. By dissecting the triple silence chain of the father, the mother, and the self, it reveals how silence, following the logic of "discourse suppression—trauma normalization—behavioral compensation," constructs the family power structure, creates intergenerational trauma, and ultimately leads to the disintegration of individual existence. This study, which focuses on the traumatic nature of silence itself, not only supplements existing power analysis and trauma theories but also provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding implicit family violence.

2. The Cultivation of a Soil for Silence by Social Structural Forces

The violence of family silence in *'night, Mother* is by no means an isolated private tragedy, but a concentrated epitome of multiple structural contradictions during the period of American social transformation in the 1970s–1980s. At that time, the loosening foundations of patriarchy in American society triggered a crisis of male role identity; the conservative backlash reinforced and sustained the false illusion of the "perfect family"; and the phased limitations of the feminist movement inadvertently intensified the implicit gender discipline imposed on women. These intertwined social forces collectively gave rise to a survival logic of "silence as justified": emotional expression was labeled as "weakness," the exposure of trauma was dismissed as "shame," and individual suffering was frivolously reduced to a "private matter." As a microcosm of society, the family became the direct bearer of this distorted logic. The father's emotional neglect, the mother's verbal avoidance, and Jessie's self-erasure are, in essence, inevitable projections of social structural pressures into the private sphere.

In the 1970s, the United States was experiencing the growing pains of "the collapse of patriarchal order," yet the social discipline governing male roles failed to evolve accordingly, and this profound contradiction directly gave rise to "emotional muteness" among the male population; from an economic structural perspective, the decline of manufacturing undermined the traditional foundation of men's identity as "the family's economic pillar—In 1970, manufacturing employment accounted for 25.1% of non-agricultural employment in the U.S., and by 1980, this figure had dropped to 20.7%[1]—in the past, men gained family authority and social recognition through material provision for their families, but the massive loss of manufacturing jobs

[1] Is U.S. Manufacturing Disappearing? - Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago

plunged many men into anxiety about their capabilities, as they struggled to adapt to the new demands brought by the rise of the service industry and were unwilling to confront their own predicaments, and this sense of economic frustration translated into obvious "emotional withdrawal" within the family, leading them to choose "silence" to maintain their last shred of dignity when unable to prove their worth through material support; from the perspective of cultural discipline, the social definition of "masculinity" remained confined to the traditional framework of "rationality, strength, and restraint," and mainstream media in the 1970s—whether feature stories in *Life* magazine or plotlines in family dramas—continuously reinforced the notion that "men should not show vulnerability," equating emotional expression directly with "incompetence," a discipline that forced men to suppress their pain inwardly and form a collective unconscious of "evasive silence," making them isolate themselves from family emotional exchanges through endless work or mechanical hobbies and suppress their genuine need for communication with rigid, formulaic "rational discourse"; the father's "absence" in the play is a typical product of such social discipline, as his excuses of "pretending to go fishing" and his "closed bedroom door" are essentially reactive evasions of the social expectation that "men must be strong," and when he could no longer affirm his self-worth in the social sphere, he resorted to physical isolation and complete emotional withdrawal to avoid exposing the truth of his "incompetence" within the family, a kind of silence that is not only an individual survival strategy but also a collective predicament under the discipline of the era.

"From the end of World War II to the period of the Reagan administration in the 1980s marked the period of the rise and establishment of American conservatism" (Li, 2019, p. 34). The conservative resurgence led by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, through elaborately constructing the mythic narrative of the "perfect family," alienated internal family conflicts and problems into "social stains" that must not be revealed to others, forcing countless families to build defensive mechanisms of silence and secrecy. And in the 1980s, television commercials and family dramas—such as *The Cosby Show*—continuously reinforced the model of the "happy, intact, conflict-free" family, a seemingly idealistic narrative that in fact harbors a rigorous disciplinary logic, where any family deviating from the "perfect template" would be branded as "threats to social order" and face implicit group exclusion and moral prejudice. Against this backdrop, mental illness became a typical family taboo: although medical understanding in the 1970s–1980s had clearly distinguished between physical illnesses and mental disorders, the general public still stubbornly regarded epilepsy, depression, and other conditions as moral flaws or family curses, and this collective stigmatization gave rise to the survival rule of "covering up family scandals," forcing families to use silence to conceal their real predicaments. The mother's concealment of Jessie's epilepsy history in the play is precisely a microcosmic reflection of such social pressure. She never revealed her daughter's medical history to anyone, even keeping it a secret from her husband and this act is essentially an instinctive avoidance of the "risk of social exclusion"; under the filter of the "perfect family," any abnormality could become a target of attack, and the "pressure to remain silent" created by the conservative resurgence ultimately transformed families from emotional havens into containers for secrets, with "not speaking out" becoming the only option to maintain the illusion of family "normality."

While the second wave of feminism fought for women's rights in the public sphere, it failed to shake the deeply entrenched gender discipline in the private sphere of the family, ultimately trapping women in a double bind: they were forcibly shackled to family responsibilities while being deprived of the right to voice their suffering. In the 1970s, the American feminist movement placed workplace equality at the core of its agenda; as the civil rights movement advanced, women began to enter the labor market on a large scale, actively advocating for equal pay for equal work, equal promotion opportunities, and protection from workplace sexual harassment (Hartmann, 1976). Although the landmark Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 explicitly prohibited gender discrimination in education, it barely touched the power structure within families. In social cognition, the family was still regarded as women's "natural domain," and traits such as "gentleness, sacrifice, and forbearance" were continuously idealized as the criteria for judging whether a woman was "qualified" (Friedan, 1963); society still tacitly assumed that maintaining family harmony was a woman's inherent mission, and revered "gentleness, sacrifice, and forbearance" as female virtues. This expectation suppressed women's right to speak from two aspects: on the one hand, under the family-oriented social ideology, a woman's personal suffering was often equated with a threat to family harmony, and when they attempted to express the pressure, exhaustion, or dissatisfaction they endured in their family roles, they often faced dual resistance from both within the family and outside society (Rich, 2021); on the other hand, heavy family responsibilities continuously drained women's energy, leaving them no time to attend to their own needs and gradually depriving them of the ability to express their emotions (DeVault, 1991). An even more hidden form of suppression lies in the "double stigma of illness and gender": for female patients, society not only discriminates against their illnesses themselves but also forcibly associates these illnesses with "femininity"—epilepsy is misinterpreted as "proof of women's emotional instability," and marital failure is attributed to women's "lack of virtue." This double stigma makes it even harder for women's suffering to be taken seriously, as they fear both being excluded due to their illnesses and being labeled as "unqualified women" for complaining. Jessie's self-isolation in the play—"most of the time, I don't want to talk" (2)[2]—is essentially a helpless compromise to this double suppression; when speaking out only brings

[2] In this paper, all questions in plays are retained the original wording and spelling from the source texts, even though some of the linguistic forms differ from contemporary English.

more harm, silence becomes the only safe option. However, women's silence does not alleviate their own suffering; instead, society's ignorance of the truth prevents the much-needed help and support from ever reaching them (Zhou, 2001).

The social structural forces of the 1970s–1980s provided a perfect breeding ground for the emergence of "family silence." As Zhang Deming stated: "The violence of silence has turned the entire postmodern society into what David Riesman termed an 'other-directed' society" (Zhang, 2004, p. 119). Men chose emotional evasion amid identity crises, families opted for secretive existence under conservative pressure, and women resorted to self-suppression within a double bind. These social roots intertwined to form an invisible web, trapping individuals in an inescapable predicament of "unspoken."

3. Implicit Trauma Induced by Silence Spreads Across Family Generations

The "family silence system" discussed in this study refers to an interaction pattern where family members exclude pain and conflict from normal communication through implicit means such as deliberate avoidance, emotional isolation, and discourse suppression; it is not merely "not speaking," but a set of unspoken rules that maintain power balance through silence. The father remains absent throughout the play, and his silence is materialized through the fragmented memories of his wife Thelma and daughter Jessie—Thelma once recalled a rare conversation with him on the porch: when she reminded him to add more clothes to keep warm, the father only responded calmly, "You're right, Thelma. If God had wanted humans to be naked, He wouldn't have given us clothes" (Norman, 1983, p. 45). This seemingly agreeable reply, however, elevates ordinary care to the status of unquestionable "divine order," reduces his wife's concern to a "natural law" that requires no discussion, and constructs discursive hegemony through a seemingly rational logical loop, completely closing off the space for dialogue. Thelma's admission, "I never really understood what he meant by that" (p. 45), precisely exposes the oppressive nature of this silence—it deprives her of the right to refute and negotiate, trapping family dialogue in a vicious cycle of "I speak—you listen—no response needed." The father's silence thus exerts its influence in such an invisible way. When Jessie presses Thelma, "Did you love Dad?" (Norman, 1983, p. 43) and "Did you never love him, or did he do something that made you stop loving him?" (p. 45), Thelma only replies, "He felt sorry for me" (p. 45) and "I didn't have what he wanted" (p. 45), and complains, "Agnes gets more communication from her pet bird than I ever got from you and Dad" (Norman, 1983, p. 46). These responses collectively indicate that the father's silence is not a simple absence, but an impenetrable barrier blocking the flow of family emotions. At its core, the father's silence, disguised as "rationality," is rooted in emotional alienation and incompetence—a microcosm of how many men, amid the drastic changes of the era, failed to adapt to new role requirements and fell into the predicament of "evasive silence." The detail that "his bedroom door was always closed" (Norman, 1983, p. 8) constitutes a spatial metaphor for an emotional desert: he blocks emotional connection through physical isolation, reducing his wife and daughter to the object position of "being watched but unable to communicate." As for his so-called "fishing trips," in reality, "he never actually fished; he just sat by the lake making models out of pipe cleaners" (Norman, 1983, p. 48)—it was merely an excuse to escape the family in the name of solitude, diverting the attention that should have been directed to his loved ones to inanimate objects and creating an "emotional vacuum" through active emotional withdrawal. As Cen Wei put it, "Jessie's father used silent emotional cold violence to destroy his wife's love for him" (Cen, 2010, P. 96). This silence, disguised as "rationality," is essentially rooted in emotional alienation and evasion of responsibility—a reflection of how men in the United States, amid the social transformation of the 1970s–1980s, struggled to adapt to new roles and fell into "evasive silence." Meanwhile, Thelma and Jessie, forced to become "silent others," perfectly embody the assertion of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak: "Whether in the colonial era, the postcolonial era, or even all social formations, 'the subaltern cannot speak' and can only be reduced to silent others" (Spivak, 1988, p. 309). The silent violence within this family is precisely a microcosmic manifestation of "the subaltern's inability to speak": the mother and daughter are deprived of the right to voice their trauma and emotional needs, becoming prisoners of the silence system. In essence, the operation of power within this family maintains the precarious patriarchal order at the cost of women's emotional needs and psychological security.

Maternal discourse in the family has been alienated into a tool for silent avoidance: when Jessie confronts her about her epilepsy, the mother, who has concealed the truth for a long time, finally admits, "I never told anyone, not even your father" (Norman, 1983, p. 69), and this deliberate concealment plunges Jessie into an isolated state where no one understands her. The mother claims, "I didn't want anyone to know, least of all you" (Norman, 1983, p. 70), but this is actually a disguise of "protection" to cover up her fear and denial of the illness; this strategy of "avoiding the truth" aligns with the father's logic of using silence to maintain the family's superficial order, and both are essentially evasions of emotional responsibility. The mother's protective silence is by no means a simple individual choice. Its roots are deeply embedded in the shadow of collective stigmatization of mental illness and psychological issues in American society during the 1970s–1980s: she portrays her daughter's epilepsy as an unspeakable secret, reduces Jessie's first seizure at the age of five to "suddenly falling down while eating a popsicle" (Norman, 1983, p. 68), and downplays the doctor's diagnosis as "a common minor condition in children" (p. 68), negating the traumatic nature of the incident through linguistic rewriting. As trauma theorist Judith Herman points out in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (2015) in her "three-stage theory of trauma concealment," "Linguistic rewriting is the first stage in negating the traumatic nature of an incident through semantic distortion" (Herman, 2015, p. 132); the mother's act of rewriting is not only a helpless attempt to internalize the social discipline of "covering up family scandals" and meet society's expectation of "normality, but also a microcosmic reflection of social silence within the family. The mother repeatedly emphasizes, "I never let

you out of my sight" (Norman, 1983, p. 69)—this overprotection, which seems to make up for her concealment, actually strengthens Jessie's "sense of loss of control" over herself; when Jessie erupts in anger after learning the truth and exclaims, "If I had known earlier, I would never have gone horseback riding" (Norman, 1983, p. 70), the core of her anger lies in the "cognitive blind spot" caused by the concealment of her illness. Yet the mother deliberately emphasizes, "You haven't had a seizure in a year" (Norman, 1983, p. 65), trying to offset the suppression of trauma with positive data, only to fall into the trap of Herman's "trauma normalization" (Herman, 2015, p. 157). This "normalization" strategy at the individual level forms a dangerous collusion with the "perfect family" narrative advocated during the conservative resurgence of the Reagan era: the one-sided emphasis on "optimism" and "harmony" in mainstream social culture suppresses the true expression of pain and imperfection, ultimately maintaining the false appearance of "normality" at the cost of sacrificing individual feelings. As Herman notes when analyzing the daily defense mechanisms of trauma survivors, "When trauma is wrapped in silence, daily behaviors are alienated into continuous avoidance of trauma" (Herman, 2015, p. 168); after Jessie calmly announces her suicide plan, the mother does not face her daughter's mental crisis directly, but instead obsesses over "sorting candies by color" and "adjusting the spacing between jars" (Norman, 1983, p. 81)—this obsession with the order of objects forms an intertextual relationship with her previous behaviors of avoiding the topic by concealing Jessie's medical history and negating in-depth dialogue with questions like "whether snow cakes are out of stock" (Norman, 1983, p. 4). The mother's concealment not only deprives Jessie of the right to know, but also cuts off the possibility of her obtaining external help; when Jessie roars, "This has nothing to do with epilepsy" (Norman, 1983, p. 71), she reveals that the mother's silence has become a more serious trauma than the illness itself. In the social atmosphere where illness was seen as a shame and pain was suppressed beneath the appearance of harmony, her desperate cries could neither penetrate the family's walls nor gain understanding in the broader social space. Jessie says, "Suicide is the only thing I can decide for myself" (Norman, 1983, p. 74), while the mother collapses and shouts, "I thought you were mine" (Norman, 1983, p. 82)—this dialogue exposes that protective silence has been alienated into an emotional shackle, degrading the mother-daughter relationship from a bond to a struggle for "ownership" and confirming Herman's assertion that "silent trauma alienates love into possession" (Herman, 2015, p. 230). When trauma is wrapped in silence, love loses its essence of nurturing relationships and is alienated into absolute control over the other's existence.

4. From "Others' Silence" to the Internalization of "Self-Silence"

The silent emotional cold violence that the husband inflicted on Thelma not only caused persistent tension in the mother-daughter relationship but also fostered a deep-seated estrangement between them over the years. Jessie could never understand why her mother did not love her father, while the father-daughter "intimacy" deliberately fabricated by the father sparked hidden jealousy and antagonism in Thelma toward Jessie. This complex triangular tension made it difficult for the mother and daughter to truly connect with each other even when they were physically close. Although Thelma took her daughter—who suffered from epilepsy and had just gone through a divorce—into her home to care for her out of a sense of responsibility, they never had any genuine communication despite years of cohabitation; they were nothing more than "familiar strangers" under the same roof (Craig, 2004).

It was not until Jessie told her mother about her suicide plan that this belated, forced conversation became the only genuine exchange between them in their lives; in their mutual confessions, they finally caught a glimpse of the truth behind many things—even though the father had long passed away, the shadow of his silence still invisibly manipulated their lives, and the fact that Jessie's epilepsy was inherited from him seemed to be a deliberate implication by the playwright: the trauma of the previous generation was achieving intergenerational transmission in a hidden way. Jessie regarded "speaking is dangerous" as her credo for survival, and her verbal silence was essentially the traumatic internalization of her parents' silence pattern. She repeatedly emphasized that "most of the time, I don't want to talk" (Norman, 1983, p. 2)—this self-isolation was not inherent in her nature, but an unconscious replication of her parents' emotional avoidance pattern. When her mother pressed her about the reason for her suicide, Jessie repeatedly diverted the conversation to trivial daily matters, such as "the grocery store doesn't deliver on Saturdays, so orders need to be placed before 10 o'clock" (Norman, 1983, p. 22) and "the washing machine repair number is stuck on the side of the machine" (Norman, 1983, p. 24). This was not a sign of Jessie's confused logic, but an unconscious imitation of her father's discourse strategy of "dissolving emotions with rationality"; both the father and daughter were accustomed to reducing their deep-seated pain to "manageable trivialities" to avoid the predicaments they needed to face directly. As psychoanalyst Cathy Caruth pointed out, "Traumatic events, unable to be symbolized through language, are forced into the unconscious, leading the individual into a state of 'disruption of speech'" (Caruth, 2016, p. 45). When Jessie looked at a photo of her innocent childhood and murmured to herself, "I was once a chubby pink baby, but now all that's left is this version of me" (Norman, 1983, p. 75), this fragmentation of self-perception was essentially the materialization of the "disruption of self-narrative" in Caruth's trauma theory. Trauma undermines an individual's perception of the temporal continuity between "past and present," reducing the self to fragments that cannot be integrated through language, and those unspeakable traumas become "blank spaces" in Jessie's self-narrative.

Jessie's silence manifests in dual dimensions: verbal and behavioral. She repeatedly emphasizes the use of "old towels and plastic sheets" (Norman, 1983, p. 5)—while on the surface this appears to be preparation for suicide, it is actually an attempt to counter the uncontrollable collapse of her "sense of existential meaning" through the controllable act of sorting objects. When

she "makes a list of all her birthday gifts" (Norman, 1983, p. 54), this predictive planning for future time precisely reflects her anxiety about her impending death, yet such anxiety cannot be directly expressed or confronted through language. Thus, Jessie turns to tangible, controllable actions like "making lists" and "planning" to construct an illusion that her life is still continuing by presupposing a future. She carefully plans the placement of towels and the position of plastic sheets at the suicide scene, attempting to imply "the controllability of the future" through the orderliness of her actions, thereby suppressing the underlying awareness that "her life cannot continue." This habitual behavioral silence also operates in her relationship with her son Ritchie: she casually mentions that "Ritchie is like his father—he calls less and less" (Norman, 1983, p. 56), seemingly attributing the parent-child alienation to genetics, but in reality, this is an unconscious evasion of her own responsibilities as a caregiver. In the final scene, she meticulously arranges every detail of the suicide scene yet leaves not a single word for her son; this "ultimate silence" completely severs the emotional bond with the next generation, and through this act, she delivers her last "silent upbringing" to Ritchie. By destroying herself, Jessie makes Ritchie a new victim of the family's silence system, which confirms Herman's assertion that "trauma perpetuates in an eternal cycle within silence" (Herman, 2015, p. 147). This intergenerational transmission of silence is precisely a microcosm of the widespread predicament in 1980s American society: at that time, discussions on "troubled teenagers" and "the generation gap" mostly focused on teenagers' superficial rebellion, while ignoring the fundamental impact of family silence-induced trauma and emotional alienation. Through Jessie's relationship with Ritchie, Norman sharply reveals how silence is passed down across generations in families, providing a previously obscured familial pathological perspective for understanding adolescents' mental crises.

Jessie's self-silence ultimately evolves into existential self-annihilation, with its trajectory clearly manifested as "Others' Silence → Trauma Internalization → Behavioral Compensation → Dissolution of Existence." She recounts, "I never became the person I wanted to be" (Norman, 1983, p. 75)—this self-negation is precisely the distorted cognition that took root in her heart after long-term concealment of her childhood trauma. Herman emphasizes that when trauma is transmitted across generations through silence, "survivors will attempt to end this cycle of violence through self-destruction" (Herman, 2015: 223), and this assertion resonates deeply with Jessie's final choice of suicide. The mother initially dismissed Jessie's suicide announcement as a "joke" (Norman, 1983, p. 13), and the father, during his lifetime, defined his daughter's worth with the term "runt" (Norman, 1983, p. 48); these negations from others led Jessie to assume she was unworthy of being heard. Even when sorting through her belongings, she deliberately reduced her self-worth to "ownership of items": "Give the calculator to Loretta" (83), "Leave the watch to Ritchie" (Norman, 1983, p. 84). This act of reducing the meaning of life to the distribution of material goods is not only the internalization of the "objectified identity" imposed by others, but also the active dismantling of her own existence under the cognition that "she is not regarded as a complete person." Her desperate confession, "Suicide is the only thing I can decide for myself" (Norman, 1983, p. 74), marks Jessie's shift from passively enduring silence to actively choosing it. Only when placed in the context of a significant rise in the U.S. suicide rate during the 1970s–1980s can we grasp the weight of this statement. This is by no means a pathological choice of an isolated individual, but rather the sharpest accusation against the "age of silence"—which demanded individuals suppress their true pain—under the dual oppression of family silence and social repression. When neither language nor actions could construct a sense of self, death became Jessie's only "self-narrative."

From the father's emotional neglect of the family, to the mother's concealment of the medical history, to the formation of Jessie's self-silence, and then to the emotional alienation suffered by her son Ritchie, trauma cycles through three generations amid silence. When Jessie finally locks the door and utters her final farewell to her mother—"Good night, Mother" (Norman, 1983, p. 88)—this act is not merely physical spatial isolation, but an ultimate response to the entire family's silence system. Trapped in a predicament where language is powerless to deconstruct trauma, ending her life becomes the only way for her to break free from the existential predicament defined by silence.

4. Conclusion

This study, by analyzing how the "Others' Silence" of Jessie's parents in *'night, Mother* leads Jessie into "Self-Silence" after trauma internalization, reveals the operational mechanism of family silence as a form of structural violence. The father rejects emotional connection through "logical" discourse and estranges himself from the family through behavioral absence; Mother Thelma conceals Jessie's childhood medical history, covers up trauma under the guise of maternal care, and alienates the discourse strategy of "for your own good" into an accomplice in the perpetuation of trauma; Daughter Jessie, in turn, moves from imitating Others' Silence to taking the initiative to embrace Self-Silence, and finally completes her ultimate resistance against silence through suicide. The chain of silence formed by these three parties is essentially the family power structure converting individual suffering into "secrets that must be concealed" by means of "unspeakable" silence.

This study reveals that *'night, Mother* transforms the family sphere into a microcosmic model of social power structures: the father's silent hegemony that terminates dialogue in the name of "divine will" reflects the indifference of real-world authority systems to individual suffering, while the mother's use of positive data—such as the reduced frequency of Jessie's epileptic seizures—to cover up trauma exposes the distortion of truth by "trauma normalization." This phenomenon of suppressing pain in the name of "normality" is prevalent in social issues such as domestic violence and mental illness, and in contemporary society, it carries even more warning significance. The modern society is marked by a fast pace, surging survival pressure, and a trend toward smaller, nuclear families, making the emotional dilemmas and trauma risks faced by individuals within families

increasingly prominent. The continuous heated discussions around the topic of "original family," as well as the interpersonal barriers and emotional regulation difficulties exhibited by individuals who grew up in families lacking communication and emotional connection in numerous psychological counseling cases, all confirm that the intergenerational transmission of family silent violence is by no means a dramatic fiction but a tangible social reality. Jessie's tragedy provides a mirror for us to examine the concealment of family trauma today, reminding us to face up to how unspeakable pain spreads quietly across generations. More alarmingly, the advent of the digital age has spawned new forms of silence: while the Internet seems to have expanded communication channels, it has intensified the spread of "social burnout" and "superficial interactions—family members coexist under the same roof yet immerse themselves in their mobile phone screens respectively, with emotional absence accompanying physical presence, and this "loneliness in coexistence" is exactly a new manifestation of the silence dilemma in contemporary society. The emotional isolation created by the father and daughter in the play through "closed bedroom doors" and "pretended fishing trips" has evolved into an invisible barrier built by electronic devices today, making sincere dialogue within families increasingly scarce, and the "familiar stranger" relationship between Jessie and her mother is precisely a metaphor for the emotional state of many families at present.

By means of literary analysis, this study thus directly addresses the drawbacks of the "culture of silence" and conducts systematic criticism and reflection; the prerequisite for breaking family silence lies in acknowledging the legitimacy of pain and the necessity of speaking out. In the play, silence, as "unspoken lines," constitutes a heavier narrative subject than dialogue—such silent acts as the father's closed bedroom door, the mother's repeatedly wiped hot chocolate pot, and Jessie's neatly arranged candy jars are more impactful than words themselves. This narrative strategy of depicting pain through silence provides a unique aesthetic paradigm for modern trauma narration: when words are unable to bear extreme pain, the ordering of objects and the ritualization of behaviors become alternative narrative languages.

Against the backdrop of increasingly prominent social issues such as domestic violence and mental illness, breaking the violent cycle of family silence requires transcending the limitations of mere verbal expression. As Jessie's tragedy reveals, the mother's distorted discourse—represented by concealing the medical history—is itself a continuation of trauma; the true way to break the deadlock lies in directing actions toward a broader social dimension: by establishing cognitive consensus and institutional support for "the right to speak about pain," dispelling the stigma surrounding trauma, and ensuring that individual suffering is no longer forced to become a "secret that must be hidden." This demands that society establish identification mechanisms for hidden family violence, promote sincere dialogue within families to replace silent avoidance, and make "speaking about pain" an accepted way of life rather than a taboo. The gunshot after Jessie locks the door is not only an individual's desperate resistance against silence, but also a manifestation of the urgency to safeguard the right to speak. Only when the whole society forms a collective awareness of "rejecting silence and facing pain squarely" can the intergenerational cycle of trauma be ended, and tragedies like Jessie's be prevented from recurring in the social context of today.

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