

**FEMALE SURVIVAL IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY
WITHOUT CAUSING FEMINIST POLEMIC AS REFLECTED IN
PAM GEMS' *PIAF*, *CAMILLE*, AND *LOVING WOMEN****

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Abstract: The history of the world has witnessed a permanent process of change in the mutual positions of men and women. A striking thing to note about this process is that at any age there have been discussions concerning the rights of women and equality between the sexes. Our period is no exception as regards women issues. Discussions on equality and difficulty of women's living conditions are still on the agenda. Pam Gems, a contemporary British playwright, a mother of four, is among those individuals proposing ideas on the issue in question. In *Piaf*, *Camille*, and *Loving Women*, which vividly reflect particulars of life in the modern world, she brings to the stage the hardships experienced by modern women, reflects the effort of women to survive in the contemporary society without causing feminist polemic, and maintains that the most acceptable truth to be sought both by men and women is 'equality'.

Key Words: Female survival, feminism, equality.

Discussions about conditions of women have taken a significant place among the most widely analysed issues in the lives of people in the contemporary world. Indeed, it is an issue that seems to attain new and different aspects with the large-scale changes in the world, and accordingly, in the lives of people. It is true that those taking sides in this discussion on the part of women claim that women are at a great disadvantage in many fields of life in today's world are mostly labelled as 'feminists' because of their radical approach to the question of equality and women's liberation. However, there are those who reveal their ideas on the hardships of women, but who at the same time note that, being an issue concerning the whole humanity, it has nothing to do with feminism which, as an idea held by an individual wife, mother, or girlfriend, or as a social movement with leaders and literature, strikes at the very core of family relations. What is at stake here is not who does the laundry but who defines the relationship and how its rules are made. In other words, the issue is joined at the level of second-order change. A stance of "no comment" here can have the same effect as a prohibition to comment, and this, in turn, can function as a constraint against fundamental structural change". (Goldner 1985: 3)

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Pam Gems, a post-war British playwright, tries to approach the conditions of women and their efforts to survive in the contemporary society without causing feminist polemic, in her plays *Piaf*, *Camille*, and *Loving Women*. Like many of those suggesting ideas on the issue of women in the contemporary society, she focuses on “social, economic, and sexual conditions in society” (Reinelt 1996: 38), and brings to the stage the image of women who have traditionally been considered ‘the weaker sex’. The era in which the playwright wrote these plays “saw delayed marriage, decreased birth rates, and a greater rate of participation of women in the labor force” (Cole, Zucker, and Ostrove 1998: 351). Yet, in that period, “most academic feminists accepted that a real biological differentiation existed between women and men in all societies, which operated in similar ways to distinguish the male and the female”. (Silva 2005: 91)

Trying not to cause feminist polemic does not necessarily mean that Gems’ plays lack the true interest in the conditions of women. The characteristic theme which runs through most of her plays is “the way individual women develop and sustain their tactics for survival” (Wandor 1981: 64). Her characters can be defined as the representatives of modern women who emerged literally around the world in the first half of the twentieth century and in time the concept has become a global phenomenon. The peculiarities observed in her plays reveal that she also conforms to the global viewpoint which puts the modern girl in “a valuable heuristic category that enables us to analyze how global processes intersected with and were reconfigured by gendered and racialised social hierarchies and political and economic inequalities in specific locales”. (Barlow and Colleagues 2005: 246)

Gems is totally aware of the difficulties in women’s lives, resulting from a variety of causes like economic conditions and social restrictions, not to mention those which are the consequences of greed and passion of some men. In fact, being a woman who experienced the conditions in her society as a citizen of the modern world, she developed a personal view of the role of women which was at first feminist. Yet, even though she was once among those who were involved in the development of feminist theatre, “Gems has distanced herself from feminism, which she sees as polemic, preferring instead drama’s role of subversion... Her basic concern is the way women survive and assert their own identity in the face of male and class pressures. (Chambers and Prior 1987: 120)

Approaching the issue from this kind of a viewpoint enables the playwright to convey her message concerning “the texture of women’s worlds” (Kruger 1996: 49) in an appropriate way. Besides, for Gems, who “has rejected the label ‘feminist playwright’” (Keyssar 1984: 129), it is an effective way to make her message persuasive enough and to show that she focuses on the events in the lives of women as equal members of the modern world impartially. Like her contemporary playwright Caryl Churchill, she is of the opinion that progress

in the living conditions of modern women is essential first and foremost for the wellbeing of countries in particular and for the whole world in general (Takkaç 2003: 102). Viewed from this perspective, it will be obvious that Gems' effort is to contribute to the formation of acceptable standards for both sexes, as understood from her thoughts inserted in her plays.

Piaf (1978) reveals the playwright's views directed towards the hardships and aspirations of women, making us see the persistent struggle of a woman to attain her goals. The play gives an account of the main character, Piaf's relationship with those men around her, and her effort to earn money while she is still young and able to do some things to secure her future life. Even a superficial evaluation of the play will show, without doubt, that women are kept under pressure more than men due to the factors experienced in the contemporary society. Gems, not coincidentally, reflects the life of a singer, who has suffered a lot because of the class to which she belongs. Piaf is completely aware of the limitations imposed on her by her social class. Yet, she does not accuse men of her present near-helpless condition. Moreover, she is presented as a woman who can get help from a man when she is in need of it. Gems has elected to tell Piaf's story not just through a distorted mirror but through a glass so cracked that it amounts to shattered dramatic license. For reasons that escape reason Piaf, for all her quintessential low-life Gallic reality, is characterized as a raging Cockney. So are the friends around her, particularly her sister of the streets Toine. (Kelly 1981: 1)

While attracting the attention of the audience to the role of some factors such as 'money' in the lives of women, as the source of most of the problems, Gems stresses the fact that it is never an instance caused only by men. However, she purposely establishes a close correlation between the leading role of men and the unchanging importance of money in the lives of contemporary women, which is presented as a factor proving male domination. The author is in the opinion that women cannot lead lives totally free from the effects of the factors dominant in the society unless they are free from male dominance.

Piaf, who is "always shown as having a real resilience to the attempts of various men to exploit her" (Wandor 1987: 146) notes that economic status of women is not the only factor determining whether they will have a fulfilling life or not. But she also knows that it "reduces women's dependence on increasingly fragile marriages" (Pascall 1997: 299). The playwright also includes the undeniable influence "of unhappiness... of being made helpless... of being alone" (43) in the list of effective factors responsible for the undesirable conditions of women. Gems does not approve the fact that women have to bear the burden of life alone; but distinguishes 'sharing something' from 'being under someone else's control'. She openly states that members of both sexes must be able to understand the true nature of life, and share the burden of life equally.

Another point to focus on about the playwright's way of presenting the struggle of women to exist in the contemporary society is closely related with the social status. For *Gems*, it is so indispensable a point in women's lives that ignoring this side of the issue will unquestionably cause the meaning of the play to lack something very crucial. Because, it is closely related with how effective a woman can be in her environment. The following dialogue between Lucien and Piaf indicates the validity of this:

LUCIAN: Piaf, let's not get a fight...

PIAF: Who said you could call me Piaf? Who said you could call me Piaf?

LUCIAN:[totally confused]: What do you want me to call you?

PIAF: It's Madame to you, and don't forget it. (44)

This way of bringing out the will of a woman who has to live in conditions she does not prefer in contemporary society reveals the importance of the quest by women for holding power in their control. Yet, this struggle for the social status is not reflected as characteristics peculiar to women only. What is important on the part of women is the nature and the consequence of the struggle. The author wants this effort to yield positive changes in the lives of women.

As can be seen from this evaluation of the underlying thought in her creation, Piaf can be said to be a mouthpiece of women who "lived at a neurotic pitch which made lasting relationships virtually impossible to sustain" (Bigsby 1981: 19), suggesting the need to establish a way of life consistent with the expectations of women. But she is totally aware of the fact that women should never give up their struggle for the kind of life that, they think, fits them best.

Camille (1984), a play revealing the story of Armand and Marguerite, investigates the psychological condition of a woman who underwent misbehaviours attributable to her class, and who has, since then, directed her life in a way that could make it possible for her to be a member of the fortunate class. The play's distinctive feature lies in its superb presentation of the conditions Marguerite has had to bear till the end of her life. In this play, *Gems* wants to point out a number of important elements responsible for the deterioration of the relation between men and women. Among these, greed, hypocrisy, class distinction, poverty, loveless marriages are of primary importance causing destruction in the lives of women.

Gems places 'confidence' at the centre of her effort to tell about the significance of female survival in *Camille*. For her confidence is the most important factor in the lives of women. Thus, she knows that its absence will inevitably cause suffering and destruction. That's why, she continuously stresses the significance and indispensability of trust in the approaches of the members of either sex to the other.

Aiming at obtaining a conclusive definition about the case of women who are not in an ideal state for various reasons, the playwright wants to add another dimension related with confidence to the message of the play: the significance of the struggle for the better. To Gems, it is especially important to establish 'basic trust' in order to make it possible for women to maintain their equilibrium in a better world. She is concerned about the conditions of women owing to the fact that the last quarter of the twentieth century brought about circumstances which have caused the existence of basic trust to worsen. When Gems raises the issue of confidence through Marguerite, saying "For what?" (111), she has already ascertained her answer: for living together, and for making the world a more inhabitable place. For her, the causes of the lack of mutual reliance may vary in content, but what is important is its consequence. Because, Gems believes that without basic trust in relations between a man and a woman, nobody will be the winner, and that women will be deprived of many advantages in the male dominated society as observed in the modern world. As the following dialogue between Prudence and Armand shows,

PRUDENCE [apart] : Armand, why must you be so cruel?

ARMAND: Cruel?

PRUDENCE: With women. Why?

ARMAND: They disappoint. (84)

The relations between a man and a woman are thought to reflect the extent of the need to introduce the necessary means that will help to improve the existing conditions. In Gems' view, such means will undeniably help much to eliminate the barriers in the way to attain ideal conditions as regards the relationships between the sexes. Besides, introduction of such means will also contribute to the establishment of sound relations also among women themselves, an issue to which Gems really attaches importance. After all, Gems thinks that being "gripped by the qualities of female survival at the bottom of social heap" (Wandor 1981: 64), women should reappraise the validity and vitality of this issue.

Gems is of the opinion that the quest for happiness is an important factor determining the degree of relevance of women's effort to survive in the contemporary society. She suggests that a woman in search of happiness should overcome the difficulties she faces in her environment. In fact, Gems is certain that no matter how difficult the circumstances are, women must do their very best to tackle their problems and feel the fulfilment resulting from their efforts. That's why, her view is that they should behave reasonably, but not in a way ignoring the sensitivity which suits them.

Pointing out the fact that the greatest pleasure in the world is living in peace and solidarity, Gems adds a peculiar dimension to the issue of women's struggle to survive. She claims that the struggle of women must be of a nature

making the opposite sex conceive how right it is. What is indispensable in this matter is 'honour', as witnessed in the scene between Marguerite and Armand:

MARGUERITE: What I should require from you is not, I think, yours to bestow.

ARMAND: And what is that?

MARGUERITE: Respect.

[He laughs aloud]

I mean, towards yourself.

ARMAND [Slight pause] : Myself?

MARGUERITE: And a little honour.

ARMAND [cold] : You accuse me of lack of honour?

MARGUERITE: Oh, I dare say you keep faith with those of your sort. I'm talking of another kind of honour.

ARMAND: And what kind is that?

MARGUERITE: Between a man and a woman. (102)

This issue is so absorbing that the playwright feels obliged to dwell on it for conveying her message in the way she wants. Gems' message is that a man and a woman should be able to understand each other. Armand is in love with Marguerite at the expense of losing everything to be left to him by his family, and wants to live with her during the rest of his and her life. This is an indication of the necessity for assigning love a proper meaning, which also has to do with the issue of female survival in that it criticizes loveless marriages. It is a purposeful attempt to make people feel the worthiness of real love. Armand's expression of his love, saying "I love it here. Everything in this room. Everything you see... everything you touch... I love the mirror because it sees your face" (105) defines the extent of Gems' understanding of love as a factor making men and women have intimate lives, and at the same time making survival significant for women. But, Gems never considers this to be a way to survive under the shadow of men. She believes that it should be the result of equality.

Camille shows that although love is an important source of power, the struggle of women who feel that they are loved is in no way an easy one. The conditions of life presented as factors determining the nature of the problems faced by women are thought not to be completely solved only by love. Only love never solves problems. Marguerite, who is loved by Armand with affection, had to leave her son to a farmer's wife because she thought that the child would prevent her from attaining her goals. This is an important case revealing the effect of the difficulty originating from poverty on the lives of women. Gems believes that effect of poverty is felt more heavily by women. It is poverty that makes Marguerite live far from her child; again, it is poverty that makes Marguerite treat her own child as if she were an aunt. Therefore, the

thought that she has to earn money in order to get rid of the life she had to bear for many years starting from her childhood does not let her give up her attempt. And this makes her obliged to lead a life away from her child for an uncertain period in the future, too.

Another dimension to note in Marguerite's decision is related with the meaning of innocence. It is true that while Marguerite is on her own way to a better, self-fulfilled life, she has to bear an awful lot of difficulties, and has to sacrifice a number of things which are very dear to her. This is a characteristic situation purposely presented by the playwright. Gems is of the opinion that in the contemporary world, women have to face so many difficulties in order to attain their goals. Even leaving their children is a point which is never an unusual event in the lives of women. The significant thing here is that the playwright does not claim that it is women only who are suffering from a variety of difficulties. Adding the hardships of some men, too, as seen in Armand's case, to the problems existing in the society, she appropriately moves away from partiality.

Gems establishes a correlation between the freedom of women and the need for the freedom of a man and a woman to lead their lives together, without the pressure possibly to come from those around. Gems feels it is absolutely necessary for women to struggle for this purpose. She is certain that it is neither fruitless nor meaningless because the majority of men accept the fact that they also have to share life with women, and that they need the "right woman, a woman of understanding, sympathy... experience" (121). This also makes the efforts of women hopeful because it proves that a man and a woman are not to be far from each other if they are in love whatever pressure may come from those around. This evaluation is especially important in that the aim of the playwright is not to cause feminist polemic in her presenting the issue, but to note that it is not fair to put the blame on men without any discrimination and that it is mostly the individual approach that must be taken into account. The dimension of 'hope' resulting from love in women's survival gains an even more proper meaning when Armand and Marguerite do not give up their determination to live together despite all the threats of Armand's father. This reflects a peculiar feature indicating the fact that Marguerite is not a submissive woman, but a person capable of appreciating what is right and what is wrong for her life. Marguerite's words to Armand's father, with whom she had to have an affair at an early age, who turns out to be the father of her child, and who wants to prevent their marriage, are indicative of the playwright's response to the issue:

You think because I am a woman you can come here and bully and threaten? You think I am nothing? Something to be pulled out of the way like a piece of wood on the road? We don't need you. You pollute the air you breathe, the ground you walk on. You have no control, no influence over us. (133)

Loving Women (1984) focuses on the relations between the sexes, and their possible outcome in the lives of women. In the play, Gems seems to believe in the use of convincing people of the necessity to solve some problems through dialogue. She knows that the struggle of women in the contemporary society to attain some goals would be fruitless if it weren't for their collaboration with men. This is of special significance, attaching the play a quality that helps to classify it not in a feminist category. The author believes that women cannot ignore the fact that they have to share the same world with men. Thus, she thinks that they must be able to evaluate their very conditions in such a way that no one can ignore the existence of men and women in the same world.

Evaluated from this viewpoint, Gems presupposes that there must be an information process that will enable women to make clear their existing conditions. This information process must include a number of points ranging from child-raising to working conditions and to personal lives of women. Therefore, the aspirations of women are supposed to be considered within a scale including the evaluation of the side represented by men. Gems' way of dwelling on the issue with a critical eye is intended to serve the true understanding of the issue: only after this is achieved can it be possible to take steps for the improvement of the conditions of women.

Loving Women makes it clear that the overall change in the world for the worse will inevitably affect men as well as women. Thus, due to the fact that a dissatisfied generation of men will most probably cause dissatisfaction to women, the playwright thinks that problems of one sex cannot be taken into account separately from those of the other's. Therefore, this idea of approaching the issue also calls for avoidance from taking a feminist stance. For Gems both women and men agree that they "suck the life out" (183). The confession in the play by Frank, "we change things. We are the Changemakers all right. We take the magic out of life, and what do we give them? Who needs books on cows and rabbits, are they real life?" (183), is a critical viewpoint by a man pointing out the playwright's idea that it is not a battle between men and women but one concerning the whole humanity, the well-being and the future of humanity. With this in mind, Gems includes men in the struggle of women to search for the better because she wants to create "a new model for personal relationships". (Innes 1992: 458)

Among the areas of interest Gems tries to consider for female survival in the play is the importance of children for women. As a mother with four children, Gems knows what this means to a woman. Believing in the

constructive role of children in relations between men and women, the author presupposes that having children should be able to bring both sexes closer together. While bringing this to the notice of the audience, Gems does not want to raise questions concerning the role of mothers. Nor is she interested in presenting the difficulties of child-raising women in the society. What she wants to do is to make people see that they have to share life with the opposite sex and thus they have to find ways to make it easier.

Gems believes that it is not so easy “to change the world” (197), as Susannah tells it in *Loving Women*, but it must be possible to improve the existing conditions. This, at least, is a precondition of morality which is “a matter of applying codified rules derived from comprehensive theories as criteria for assessing wrongdoing and making rational choices” (Nelson 2000: 505). She has confidence in women, and wants them to struggle hard for this purpose. When she dwells on this issue, she tries to be especially careful to present the issue in a relevant way. Her argument is that women must be conscious of their duties and responsibilities as well as their rights. Having children is an issue related also with this understanding of duties. Yet, Gems is careful not to make it a point meaningful for women only. Susannah’s evaluation of the issue, by saying “They need their father” (198) helps the audience to draw a conclusion about the significance of the unity in the family. Were it not for this kind of an approach, the play would mainly be based on the price paid only “for individual survival” (Llewellyn-Jones 1992: 33). Therefore, the need for the father is considered to be a point as important as the need for the mother, which is an indication supporting the playwright’s approach. Although she may have been criticized “for failing to offer a more radical revisioning” (Rudolph 1996: 166), Gems handles the conditions of the modern society with emphasis on the hardships of women in connection with those of men. She claims that women should fight not only for their rights but for all humanity as well. It is not the feminist but “the human reality of women” (Innes 1992: 453-454). Gems believes that the struggle of women to survive as equal partners of the contemporary society will become much more significant with the inclusion of mutual respect, and search for the better within this perspective will be more fruitful. Thus, when she brings to the stage the lives of some women suffering because of some particular problems, she insistently suggests that they must be regarded as problems also faced by men.

It should be noted that the emancipation of women has been a difficult process in England, too, as in any other country in the world. The peculiarities of social structure which are difficult to change are mostly responsible for this. Yet, women have never been satisfied with what has been given to them and they have never withdrawn from their war to obtain a better status within their societies (Takkaç 1997: 7). They have started to exhibit their determination indicating that they are also an equal part of the world.

To ascertain what kind of a perspective the dramatist brings to these plays can best be achieved through her observation of life and female existence in the modern world. Gems “investigates cross-currents of feminism” (Gussow 1984: 5). She is a mother and is fully aware that the ultimate purpose between the sexes must be equality. Allen’s ideas on the issue may be said to express Gems’ view almost entirely:

the postmodern challenge requires us to be more honest and realistic about where our ideas and analyses come from. Otherwise, we create false oppositions (e.g., feminine-masculine, qualitative-quantitative, scholar-practitioner, secular-religious) and sustain these constructions as if they were real things that could be categorized and prioritized, as in male is better than female, White is better than Black, quantitative is better than qualitative, and so on. (2000: 6)

In today’s modern world, social evolution is felt with all its gravity. This process of change and improvement will, without doubt, serve the well-being of humanity. Gems is of the opinion that if every individual makes his/her contribution to the course of action to contribute to human happiness, there will be no issue challenging the co-existence of men and women in the world.

Gems sees the struggle of women in the contemporary society not as a fight against men but as an effort to survive without causing sex war, and thus feminist polemic.

Özet: Dünya tarihi kadınlarla erkeklerin karşılıklı konumlarında sürekli bir değişim sürecine tanık olmuştur. Bu sürecin çarpıcı bir noktası kadın hakları ve cinsler arasındaki eşitlik konusundaki tartışmaların her zaman varlığını sürdürmesidir. Kadınlar konusundaki tartışmalar bugün de güncelliğini korumaktadır. Eşitlik ve kadınların yaşam koşullarının zorluğu gündemdeki yerlerini korumaktadır. Çağdaş İngiliz oyun yazarlarından, dört çocuk annesi Pam Gems de bu konuda görüşler ortaya koyan kişiler arasındadır. Günümüz dünyasındaki kadın yaşamından canlı kesitler sunduğu *Piaf*, *Camille*, ve *Loving Women* adlı oyunlarında çağdaş kadınların yaşadıkları zorlukları sahneye getirmekte, kadınların feminist polemiğe neden olmadan verdikleri hayatta kalma çabasını yansıtmakta ve hem erkekler hem de kadınlar için ulaşılması gereken en kabul edilebilir doğrunun ‘eşitlik’ olduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın yaşamı, feminizm, eşitlik.

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