

CHAPTER FOUR

STRANGE INTERLUDE

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Nina Leeds was related to four men, her father, husband, lover and son. Her experience <sup>with</sup> life with was in terms of these four men. She is the protagonist of this play as O'Neill himself has called it a 'Woman Play'.

Placing Nina at the centre, O'Neill described his men.

In short, Mr. Leeds - Professor ; Charlie Marsden - Writer ; Ned Darrell - Scientist ; Sam Evans - advertising man and Nina Leeds - WOMAN.

Nina Leeds is the only character in this play, which initiates action. For her need she acted and the men reacted. Her father, a professor, hated her, Ned Darrell ran away to avoid sexual meeting, Marsden spent his life, waiting, Sam kept himself away from her.

Nina was always ready to welcome any man. She was not able to control her emotions and passions. After her son's marriage she was ready to live a neutral life. The stages in her life are not intellectual, they are physical

as O'Neill defines his women biologically.

She was sexually repressed by the sudden death of her lover, Gordon. The sexual role of Nina was not that of a prostitute, but it was just her quest for spiritual fulfilment. She learnt ethics from her father and her dead sweetheart ( Gordon ).

She gradually developed the dimensions of a cosmic figure - an Earth Mother, as she says,

NINA. I am living the dream with the great dream of the tide .... breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my dream into the tide .... suspended in the movement of the tide, I feel life move in me suspended in me .... no why matter .. there is no why ... I am a mother .... God is a Mother.<sup>32</sup>

Giving birth to a son, she supposed herself to be the Godly Figure, a creator, Earth Mother.

With her Charles Marsden's behaviour was chaste. When he looked into the eyes of Nina he felt that she was a prostitute. He felt every man must have fallen in love with her. Marsden says ;

MARSDEN. ... ( in strange agony )  
She's hard \ ..... like a whore! .. tearing your heart with dirty finger nails! .... my Nina \ ..... Cruel Bitch! ... Some day I won't bear it \ ..... I'll scream out the truth

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32 The Plays of Eugene O'Neill  
(Random House ; NewYork, 1949 ) p.91-92.

about every woman! no kinder at  
heart that dollar tarts!<sup>33</sup>

He disliked the very prostitute in Nina ...

Nina seduced Ned Darrell into a sexual affair that gave birth to a healthy child named Gordon. She liked Ned too much, she desired to have a baby from him. A purposeful abortion was done by Nina, when she was about to give birth to Sam Evan's baby, as she knew in advance the history of Evans family madness. Throwing to the winds all the conventions of society, Nina obeying the dictates of her own need, made her way in life. She was in need of a baby, but certainly not of one from the lunatic Sam Evans. She had it from a scientist Ned Darrell.

She loved her son so much that she could not bear separation from him, due to his marriage, with Madeline. Gordon was not only her son but one of the life long comforters. Nina says ;

NINA. The sons of the Father have all been failures!  
Failing they died for us, they flew away  
to other lives, they could not stay with  
us, they could not give us happiness!<sup>34</sup>

She felt that her son being 'possessed' by his wife forever, was gradually getting estranged from her.

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33 Ibid, p.40.

34 Ibid, p.199.

Nina always used to be with the three men around her, Ned, Sam and Marsden as she observes;

NINA. My three men!... I feel their desires converge in me!... to form one complete beautiful made desire which I absorb .... and am whole.... They dissolve in me, their life is my life.... I am pregnant with the three!... husband!.... lover!.... father!... and the fourth man!... Little man!.... little Gordon!.... he is mine too!.... that makes it perfect<sup>35</sup>

She was the pivotal figure among them. She had the desire of having them all; for her self satisfaction, She has developed the habit of being in the company of men.

As she was satisfied to the utmost in this regard by son, the little man, Gordon, his marriage to Madeline perturbed her most.

Actions moved round Nina. She was the central figure in every action. Being the protagonist of the play, Nina was everywhere. As Louis Sheaffer says,

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Step by step strange Interlude carefully rationalises her development from idealistic virgin to self sacrificing wanton to dutiful wife to a devouring kind of Earth Mother and so forth. Yet she becomes increasingly less plausible for no amount of elucidation can disguise that she is acting out a succession of role design to exhibit the major aspects of woman. By the end, after contending with so many problems and woes, she seems like nothing so much as prototype of the beleaguered heroines of soap opera.<sup>36</sup>

While playing the role of woman, she faced many a problem but still she remained steadfast in the midst of them all. Her tragedy gradually went on mounting as Doris Falk says ;

Nina Leeds, heroine of strange interlude, is one of these father dominated mothers. Poetically as well as literally, life begins for her with her father, in whose gigantic shadow the entire play is acted. From him she inherits, the passionately selfish hunger for love which determines her fate. His egotism sets the play in motion when, because of his desire to keep Nina near him, professor Leeds has persuaded her avitor lover not to marry

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36 Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill ; Son and Artist

(Boston : Little, Brown, 1978 ), p.241.

Nina, until he returns from the war. The lover Gordon is killed and Nina is left with agonising regret and a sense of guilt that she did not insist upon marriage or did not at least give herself to him before he left.<sup>37</sup>

She was shocked by the death of her lover, Gordon shaw. She was now living aimless life. She blamed and hated her father. She decided to give herself to the happiness of man. She says ....

NINA.            Gordon is dead ! What use is my life to me or anyone ? But I must make it of use - by giving it ! I must learn to give myself, do you hear, give and give until I can make that gift of myself for a man's happiness without scruple, without fear, without joy except in his joy ! when I have accomplished this I'll have found myself, I'll know to start in living my own life again<sup>33</sup>

Not only for her happiness, but for the happiness of men, she decided to live on hence forward Charlie Marsden

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37        Doris Falk, Eugene O'Neill and The Tragic Tension,  
          (New Brunswick, W.J.: Rutgers Uni., Press,  
          1958 ), p.122.

38        The Plays of Eugene O'Neill.  
          ( Random House ; NewYork 1949 ), p.18.

is the only man to realize her sensuality in loving every man. He says,

MARSDEN. I suppose every single damned inmate has fallen in love with her!... her eyes seemed cynical .. sick with men ... as though I'd looked into the eyes of a prostitute.<sup>39</sup>

She was notorious in her behaviour. Her eyes were always in search of men, betraying the lust for more and more men.

The strange fascination of her face, her 'unchangeably mysterious eyes'<sup>40</sup> attracted Marsden and Sam despite their jealousy to each other. Marsden recognizes her as 'her power to enslave men's Senses'<sup>41</sup>

Nina was not what she appeared to be. Both Sam and Ned supposed themselves to be the father of Gordon. She played a clever trick with them. About Charlie Marsden she says ;

NINA . Charlie sits beside the fierce river, immaculately timid, cool and clothed, watching the burning, frozen naked swimmers drown at last..<sup>42</sup>

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39 Ibid, p. 25

40 Ibid, p. 48

41 Ibid, p. 74

42 Ibid, p. 13

The swimmers are burning with the desire in the river of life's flow.

The lives, relationships and personalities are constantly in continuous succession of changes. Nina was in search of peace as she says ;

NINA .            I want to rot away in peace !  
                      I am sick of the fight for happiness<sup>43</sup>!

She needed peace but she was tired of the pursuit of it. She considered charlie Marsden as a perennial fountain of peace for her and it<sup>is</sup> as if for that she started loving him. Nina defines love by her experiences, she says to charlie.

NINA .            For playing the silly slut, charlie.  
                      For giving my cool clean body to men with hot hands and greedy eyes which<sup>they</sup> called love ! Ugh ! ( A shiver runs over her body )<sup>44</sup>

Eventhough she herself knew the bitterness of love, she couldn't remain away from it. The act of love she analysed like anything.

She accepted sam Evans as her husband and Ned Darrell as her lover. Ned confessed that he desired her sexually. She needed them both for her happiness. Her son, Gordon hated Ned

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43        Ibid, p.138

44        Ibid, p.44.

Darrell and Ned also hated him. This pained her much. One couldn't tell Gordon that his real father was Ned Darrell. The game she played for her fulfilling<sup>her</sup> purpose, now turned into boomerang. As a result Ned has to live a lonely life. Everyman needs a little feminine encouragement to help him going on in life. In other words a female company is very essential to a man in making a success of his life.

As she already finding it difficult to reconcile to the fact of her son's estrangement from her, she received another crushing blow from her knowledge that her son was getting interested in some woman. All this made her quite restless as she reveals it to us in her own words;

NINA .            If he marries her, It means he'll  
forget me He'll forget me as completely  
as Sam forgot his mother! She'll keep  
him away from me! Oh, I know what wives  
can do! She'll use his body until  
she persuades him to forget me!<sup>45</sup>

She objected to the marriage of her son only out of her petty selfish interests. It is thus that she told Madeline Arnold not to marry Gordon. She also told her to break her engagement with him at once. But Ned Darrell told her not to pay any attention to Nina's saying.

At last she somehow consented to the marriage of Gordon and Madeline. Madeline also considered all the facts

and she resolved to love Gordon. And that is because Gordon was not actually involved in all these family problems. Nor even was he responsible for them.

Though Nina conceded to Gordon's marriage, it was too much for her to bear. When he came to say goodbye to her. So heavily did it tell upon her troubled mind as she reveals it to us here;

NINA .            He sent for me to say goodbye  
                  ... really goodbye forever this time ...  
                  he's not my son now, nor Gordon's son,  
                  nor Sam's nor Ned's .... he has become  
                  that stranger, another woman's lover...<sup>46</sup>

Certainly she could not reconcile to it all .

Nina is the centre of focus for four men, three of whom were her sexual partners, she is one of O'Neill's 'romantic idealist' who spends her adult life trying to replace Gordon's love. But her horizons were inevitably limited by the nature of her goal. The cast of this play might very well read; Mr. Leeds - Professor; Charlie Marsden - Writer; Ned Darrell - Scientist ; Sam Evans - advertising man and Nina Leeds - WOMAN. Suppose she had been a writer, a scientist, a professor ( at least she would have had twenty more

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46        Ibid, p. 190.

years before retirement : what kind of play would that have been ? Could O'Neill have written it ? Or was his need for love and support so great that he had to view women only in their elemental nature ? If so, the result was not necessarily misogyny, but certainly a somewhat limited view a half the human race.<sup>47</sup>

What it all means is that but for Nina the play itself would have been just noneritity, of course . As a woman she had to suffer much.

Gary A. - Vena puts Nina's role in his writing ;

In strange interlude, O'Neills development of the sexual role of the female, through the character of Nina Leads, reaches a high point of achievement. In the tradition already established by earlier female counterparts, Nina is not a prostitute. Nevertheless, prostitution enters briefly but importantly in her life time quest for spiritual fulfilment.

For Nina prostitution is the expression of parhological tendencies. She has been raised within the rigid code of ethics held by her father, an aging professor in a New England University. Following the death of her sweet heart, Gordon, suddenly in action, however, her sexual

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47 Doris Nelson, 'O'Neill's Women: A special Section,' The Engene O'Neill News Letter, (Summer fall, 1982)

repressions are released and it is in pathological and neurotic behaviour, in the form of prostitution, that this release is manifested.<sup>48</sup>

Right from the beginning of her life she has always cherished the ideal of chastity and good character as it was all inculcated on her by her professor father. But later on she was willynilly forced to renounce her fixed way of life.

Finally, she confessed to the fact that lives are strange interludes. They are merely " a strange dark interlude in the electrical display of God the Father!"<sup>49</sup>

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48 Gary A.Vena, "The Role of the Prostitutes in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill", Drama Critique - Vol.II, Year(1968) p.13.

49 Ibid, p.199.