

MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S TRIFLES

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Abstract- *This paper will study the issues of marriage, motherhood and the shaping of female identity by situating these ideas within the era of the Roaring Twenties. The idea is to understand the characteristics of this age of change and progress and its impact upon women's lives as reflected in the play Trifles by Glaspell. The purpose behind this kind of study is to show how the play deals with the women's question for representing feminist consciousness, perceptions and reflections related to a female character's identity as a woman. Given the nature of my proposed subject, I have taken recourse to feminist perspectives along with historical, socio-cultural and political aspects to aid my reading. A deliberate attempt has been made to arrive at my prospective argument and conclusion via the works of theorists like Gilbert and Gubar whose observation that rage and frustration of a woman who inhabits the misogynist world can often lead to the state of madness is also central to the analysis of the play.*

Keyword: Marriage, motherhood, identity, new woman, true woman, femininity

One of the most interesting periods in the history of America is the 1920s referred to as the Roaring Twenties. This period was characterised by a number of distinctive social and political changes. The period is referred to as roaring due to the revolution seen in the fields of fashion, industry, commerce, education, culture and so on. The most important change witnessed in the early twentieth century was the 1920s presidential election in which women voted for the first time. Although few women voted in the beginning but with the Nineteenth Amendment women could take the first step towards emancipation. In the post war decades

women wanted to liberate themselves from the constraints of the Victorian age. Young, educated and independent women in the 1920s rejected the earlier conventions and this caused upheaval and outbursts from the older generation who considered these women as impudent. The most striking image of the women of 1920s was the flapper. The flapper who was the new woman took great interest in the fashion of that age and represented free spirit heralding the modernist era of the 1920s. The women incorporated dress and style that were unprecedented and fashion for women became symbolic of their effort to free themselves from the bonds of Victorian ideal.

Although there was social, economic and sexual revolution in the 1920s the traditional concept of the American woman was intertwined with home and family. In spite of the prevalence of the new woman, there was this traditional woman known as the true woman, a concept that had emerged during the nineteenth century that idealised woman as a devoted wife and mother. This was basically the ideal of Victorian femininity and the stereotype of the nineteenth century woman. Historian Barbara Welter discusses various aspects of a true woman in her essay *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*. She observes,

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and the spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (153)

The ideals of the nineteenth century true woman of America were believed to be constant in an age where everything else was rapidly changing. Religion played an important part in shaping a woman's life as it always supported the idea that a woman's proper sphere is her home.

The traditional male perception continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century that it was best for women to stay within the purview of the home which she could nurture and build so well with her feminine qualities of perseverance and endurance. Although

the twentieth century was a period when much attention was given to the idea of the new woman the lives of hundreds of women who maintained their role inside the domestic space struggling with the ideals of the true woman that was quite challenging to uphold should also be studied in detail. The idea of the true woman of the nineteenth century evolved into the new woman of the twentieth century. But the earlier ideal prevailed in the society since not all women of America were new women.

This paper will analyze how the idea of the true woman as a contented wife or mother was self-contradictory and discuss the ideas of marriage and motherhood in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. Glaspell, in this play, is concerned with the subordination of women in their marriage and mothering role and has depicted challenging and contradictory ways of representing the same. One of the salient features of the plays written by the women of America during the Roaring Twenties is the confinement that women experience in their marriage and mothering role. Most of the female protagonists find themselves unhappy in their marriages and their roles in the society are repressive ones. These women are often victimised which turns them rebellious as a result of which society finds them unacceptable due to their transgressed behaviour. Many plays of the early twentieth century have been written on these issues and the idea of marriage has been dealt with from a variety of perspectives. The dramatists suggest various solutions to these problems but the female protagonists mostly end up in a tragic reconciliation and the consequence is one of violent behaviour.

The most glaring example of such a treatment in a play is Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. First performed for the Provincetown Players in 1916, the play presents the stifling experiences of a lonely housewife in a farm in Iowa. The characters of Minnie Wright and John Wright are absent characters, physically not present in the stage but their presence is overarching as the main events revolve around the murder of John Wright by his wife, Minnie who has been taken to the prison. The other characters in the play are set against the background of the two central characters, Minnie and John Wright. The female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters realise the prison house that patriarchy has constructed of marriage (Ozieblo, 18). The play portrays the tensions and frustrations of being a woman in a place where she remains isolated and invisible to her husband and the society.

According to C. W. E. Bigsby, the play is a well-observed study of male arrogance and insensitivity ; a play which works by understatement. The melodrama inherent in the scene is rigorously excluded. It is an ensemble piece, lyrical but spare (25-26). Gilbert and Gubar comment that *Trifles* is a play which concerns two central ideas. The play is first a study of the confining environments that frustrate the full development of human potential , and second a study of the impact of gender on the complex process by which we read and interpret not only literary texts but also social texts. (1351)

In the play, the County Attorney, the Sheriff and a farmer named Mr. Hale arrive on the murder scene to examine what had happened. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, Sheriff's wife, also appear on the scene to collect certain things for Minnie who is in jail. While investigating the crime scene, these women who were in the kitchen onstage, find out the motive behind the murder but they do not disclose their discovery to the men who were busy finding evidence offstage. From the beginning of the play, the men comment on women's observation and their tendency of worrying about trifles . However it is these women who had actually understood the reason behind the murder. Mrs Hale and Mrs. Peters knew that Minnie lived in an abusive relationship; the strangled canary is symbolic of the repression and frustration that Minnie went through in her life. Mrs. Hale was aware of the kind of relationship that Minnie shared with her husband but she was reluctant to speak out loud. But at several occasions she suggested that their marriage was not a happy one and that it was John Wright who was responsible for the same.

MRS. HALE: It never seemed a very cheerful place.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.

MRS. HALE: Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn't get on very well?

MRS. HALE: No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it (11).

Till this point of time, these women had not yet found out the evidence but Mrs. Hale's statement can be seen one that supports Minnie's homemaking skills. The reason behind her

hesitation to speak of their marriage as dysfunctional was that she knew that it would turn against Minnie when the men perceive it from their viewpoint. Later, Mrs. Hale discusses with Mrs. Peters how Minnie's life was different before her marriage:

Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid . . . She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that oh, that was thirty years ago (12-13).

This comment suggests that after her marriage, Minnie was no more a lively woman rather she was alienated from the society of which she was an active member when she was a girl. Even though Mrs. Hale never directly states that John Wright had abused Minnie but she hints that their marital life was devoid of love when she says. But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him like a raw wind that gets to the bone (16). After the dead canary was discovered, Mrs. Hale was sure that John was responsible for whatever had happened. No, Wright wouldn't like the bird a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too (18). Mrs. Peters didn't know Minnie personally but she identifies her situation with that of Minnie's when she remembers about her past as a girl and that the kitten she had was attacked by a boy with a hatchet. She says she would have killed him if she was not stopped by others. She also talks of the death of her two years old baby and how she led a lonely life being childless thereafter, a situation which Minnie experienced too; she was childless. Mrs. Hale, who knew Minnie's situation, repents that she should have visited Minnie,

I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things it's all just a different kind of the same thing (19).

These above comments are glimpses into the lives of these women who also experience a sense of isolation in their community as well as their own marriages. Linda Ben-Zvi asserts that Glaspell concretizes the conditions under which these women live and circumstances that

might cause them to kill . . . in doing so, she stages one of the first modern arguments for justifiable homicide (38-39). Karen Alkalay-Gut echoes this conclusion, arguing that in the play *Women*. . . are trapped by a social system that may lead them into crime and punish them when they are forced to commit it (72).

The men and women in this play are involved in reading Minnie's text; the crime scene which serves as a text to read and understand the motive behind such a crime. Annette Kolodny states that if Minnie is the sender of messages, it is only the women who are receptors of her messages. The women can successfully read her texts as they share the same experience of her life spent in the kitchen which is dismissed as an insignificant place and moreover they understand the important patterns that consists her world. Mrs. Hale knew that rural life in a farm was always oppressive and it condemns women. The moment was crucial when the women discovered her sewing basket and the quilt. Minnie's disordered patterns on her quilt was an attempt to burst out her frustrations of being in a marriage that is repressive and it is only the women who could understand the patterns that were made on the quilt; they could break the codes of messages that were drawn in a chaotic pattern. Minnie's quilt patterns symbolise that she could not control her own feelings which she poured out in the quilt but the messy patterns and her knots that she stitched also indicate her knotting of John Wright who was tied with a rope around his neck while he was asleep. Mrs. Hale recognises that the chaotic patterns on the quilt are not just representative of the repressive marriage of Minnie but they also signify the abuse and exploitation of gender relation.

The central issue of the play revolves around knotting -the murder by knotting and the quilt knotting. These two issues can further be related to the idea of the knotting of marriage. This knotting implies the strictures within which a woman is bounded and the silence she has to maintain being a part of the patriarchal structures of the society. Minnie's irregular patterns are signs of her attempt to break free from the bond or knot to which she was tied to her husband. The subversion of an established pattern is reflective of the creation of a new order for women which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decodes after seeing the log cabin pattern of the quilt. These two women decide to hide the truth from the men since they knew that these evidences would certainly hold Minnie as a convict. Their perspectives not only helped them to gain

knowledge but more importantly led them how to act on that knowledge. Their discretion about the findings of the murder was a deliberate attempt to save Minnie from the punishment of law as they were enlightened about Minnie's failed marriage and insensitivity of her husband which rendered Minnie isolated; her repression was the reason of her crime. Ben-Zvi's observation is noteworthy here, Not waiting to be given the right to vote or to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves (39).

It should be considered that the women in this play remained within the strictures of patriarchy by maintaining silence about the evidence of the murder and not revolting outright. However, it is the silence that ultimately rescued Minnie from condemnation. Hence, the play becomes more of "an awakening to the dilemmas of womanhood than a radical tackling of them (Ozieblo, 19). *Trifles* is a commentary on the institution of marriage and reflect on how certain relationships can be repressive for a woman who might take recourse to violent acts at the end. Glaspell, as a reporter, witnessed various violent activities that were often the consequence of repressive marriages and in this play she suggests that women must be support each other as belonging to the same community and foster sisterhood to fight for their rights against social divisions made by gender roles within marriage.

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