

The Awakening and Rebellion of the Voiceless: An Interpretation of Glaspell's Trifles

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Abstract: *Trifles*, written by Pioneering feminist writer Susan Glaspell, is frequently acknowledged as one of the greatest works of American theater. Loosely based on the murder case of John Hossack, this play is widely acknowledged as an example of feminism drama and lots of researches interpret and explore it from feminist perspective. What the play demonstrates is the predicament of womanhood under patriarchy society and female's awakening and rebellion through the murder case. Glaspell satirizes on the ignorant of patriarchy dominance and appreciate female's wisdom and power. Susan Glaspell provides female a chance to find justice for themselves through care for themselves and people of the same gender. The setting of not revealing the ending of Minnie Foster's future also suggests Glaspell's sincere hope for the better future of the awakened women.

Keywords: *Awakening, Rebellion, Women, Patriarchy*

1. Susan Glaspell and Trifles

Susan Glaspell is a pioneering feminist writer and America's first important modern female playwright who together with her husband co-founds the first modern American theater company, the Provincetown Players. She has created fifteen plays, and her 1930 play *Alison's House* has won her Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Her one-act play *Trifles* (1916) is frequently acknowledged as one of the greatest works of American theater. Loosely based on the murder case of John Hossack, *Trifles* premiered by Provincetown Players at the Wharf Theater in Provincetown Massachusetts in 1916. The story begins with George Henderson (county attorney), Henry Peters (sheriff), Lewis Hale, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale entering into John Wright's kitchen looking for evidence to convict John Wright's wife Minnie Foster for murdering her husband. This play is widely acknowledged as an example of feminism drama and lots of researches interpret and explore it from feminist perspective. Suzy believes that it is a "deceptive play" [1]. He interprets the conflicts of the play from the perspectives of different modes of perception and behavior. The men fail to find the evidence because they only inquiry and "ignore the context" of female but women succeed because they own the common "context" of female. He believes that women's silence at the ending is no longer "a silence of powerlessness" but a sign of their "solidarity". Al-Khalili claims that it is more suitable to be read as "political theme" [2] which fits the historical setting of rural American women in the early 20th century. Huda Jassam Obead argues that under patriarch dominance, women's works are "belittled and trivialized" and the title *Trifles* suggests the "diminishing status of the women's world" [3]. However, what the play demonstrates is the awakening and realization of the silenced women under the oppressive force of patriarchy society as well as female rebellion against it for justice.

2. Patriarchy dominance on female characters

Power is a combination of various social relations which is ubiquitous and unperceivable originating from the very grain of individuals. In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault analyzes and examines how power operates in the hospital, the army, the school, and the prison by controlling and manipulating on human body. He points out that power "made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assure the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility" [3] to create docile individuals and useful objects. Patriarchy is a "social and ideological construct which considers men as patriarchs to be intrinsically superior to women" [4]. Kate Miller states in her book *Sexual Politics* that it "granted the father nearly total ownership over wives" [5]. In patriarchy society, except domestic place, men dominate all sphere of society such as economy, education, and law which leaves no room for women to participate in. The patriarchy ideology and values are all preferable with male which guarantee the absolute power of men to dominate, oppress, and exploit

women. That is to say, in such society, men are centered while women are marginalized whose voices and needs are ignored or not be heard.

The beginning time of 20th century witnessed American women's movement for pursuing suffrage and economic independence as well as the rights for social activities. Under such circumstance, Susan Glaspell as a radical feminist, based on true story creates the work.

In the play, the three female characters Minnie Foster, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Peters are all undergone the experience of being voiceless in front of men and being undervalued by men. Throughout the play, men are in dominance and have absolute power in expressing themselves while women are under the command of men and are almost deprived of voice. For one-third of the drama, only men's voices of talking about the crime are heard, and there are only one sentence coming from Mrs. Peters. Male dominant and lead the conversation while women have no place to join in. When Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are commanded to the fire, Mrs. Peters answers "I'm not-cold" [6] which arouse no attention from men. Without hearing Mrs. Peters words, the attorney directly begins his investigation. The two women hardly can utter a word in front of men, and the only expression of Mrs. Peters is ignored. Female's voice is muted because their status demanding them to be quiet. They cannot speak for themselves, even if they can, man never listen to their opinions or appeals. Mrs. Peters though not cold, unconsciously following attorney's order and takes a step forward to the fire. Clearly, men's words have absolute authority and power that women have to obey their instructions regardless of their will. Minnie Foster, as the core in the murder case, should have right to plead for herself. However, throughout the play, she is never seen on the stage. Readers knowledge on her comes from the conversation of other characters. She cannot even utter a word to defend for herself. The "missing" character Minnie indicates that the women's voices are silenced and female rights are of no importance; while, what matters is men's investigation and their findings. Female is being marginalized and has little position in front of man. When talking about the jury, attorney says "But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show- something to make a story about-a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it--". The incomplete words imply the crucial judicial rules against woman, and it also indicates the possible misery ending of Minnie Wright when men find out a motive of the murder against her. Just a reason would sentence Minnie's crime without further investigation. No one cares about her sufferings before, all they want is sentencing her. In front of the law and man, women are of no value, and their lives are of no importance. The men left the kitchen for barn and farm to investigate because kitchen has "nothing important... that would point to any motive". Kitchen is female's domain and the men believe it is not important. Mr. Hale adds "well, women are used to worrying over trifles". Domestic things in male's eyes are trivial because they are prejudiced in women's work. They belittle the function and importance of domestic sphere and devalue female's works and contribution. When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find that the motive of the murder is a dead canary, Mrs. Peters says: "My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with- with-wouldn't they laugh!" Such an important evident is believed as a little thing because it's just a pet bird of a women for entertainment. For men, only places of men like farm and barn are significant and of great value. Though finding no clue, the male never ask women's opinion on the case because they believe their superiority towards significant events. It also indicates male's doubt toward women's ability of reasoning and conducting. They believe women only worrying about "trifles", and their efforts and contributions are unworthy and conducting such a big case like murder would be far beyond their capability. However, devaluing female is the main reason for their failing of finding evidence against Minnie Foster. When the men hear about the quilt, the sheriff even scorn about their conversation. "They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it. The men laugh, the women look abashed". The male believes that such little things as quilting is not worth mentioning while women talks about it sincerely. They laugh at both the trivial things as well as women's concern on such things. When sheriff asks attorney to check things the two ladies brought to Minnie, he "picks up the apron, laughs". He laughs because it's a woman's thing, a domestic thing of no importance while women choose to take it to Minnie into prison. Compared to their big and essential investigation, such a little apron of Minnie seems ridiculous. Another example of female's dominance is the names of female. Among all the three females, only Minnie Foster has her full name, the other two are called by their husband's surname which show their subordinating place to men and the losing of self-identity. In patriarch society, power and authority belong to man, and so does female. "A sheriff's wife is married to the law". Men represent the law and own everything include women. Female's identity is just wives of men not an independent person. By showing this, Glaspell intend to ironize the arrogance and the ignorance of men and also to contrast to women's intelligence and courage.

3. Females' awakening and rebellion

Females' voices have been long ignored and neglected. Their works and contributions have been prejudiced. Women's needs have been undervalued. Their rights for pursuing justice and their identity as an independent person have been deprived. The meaning of their existence is only to serve the family and men. However, "where there is power, there is resistance" [7]; as the investigation ongoing, the female characters gradually piece together the murder. In the process, they gradually realize the oppression male brought to Minnie and themselves as well as the awakening and the rebellion of Minnie. Finally, they decide revolt against it to win justices both for Minnie and themselves.

3.1 Minnie' awakening and rebellion

Minnie was once a girl "wear pretty clothes and be lively" and "singing in the choir". But after she married John Wright, everything changed. John isolates her from out world and is not willing to take a party telephone because he prefers "peace and quiet". John is so selfish that in order to enjoy his peace, he deprived Minnie's only hobby of sing. He grabs Minnie's most interest in life. He is the reason for Minnie's changes. "Minnie was close" and "feels shabby". What's worse, he killed the singing canary which is Minnie's sole consolation in her dark life. To some extent, the canary is the symbol of Minnie and the cage represents her marriage. Minnie is caged in her marriage with John and loses her freedom and pleasure the same as the bird. Minnie who once sung is killed by John like the canary that once sung but which neck was wrung by John. The death of the canary represents the spiritual death of Minnie. It is the last straw that breaks Minnie and inspires Minnie to choose the most violent way---wrung John's neck-as he did to her bird to revolt against the man who oppressed her for so long. When she is questioned about the murder, she says "I didn't wake up...I sleep sound". She "didn't wake up" because she didn't realize the oppression John brought to her. She "sleep sound" because she got used to be treated that way. However, now she is awake. The canary's death awakens her from numbness and allows her to be aware of her sufferings and misery. It also encourages her to fight against John's oppression. What Minnie did is to free herself from the control of John and revenge him for what he did on her bird which symbolizes Minnie. What Minnie shows is not only woman's intelligence and endurance but also their power and determination.

3.2 Minnie' awakening and rebellion

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are two female who firstly seem to be of no importance in this case given that it was man's duty to take care of the murder case. However, the two females are actually the most significant factors in solving this murder case. During the process, the two females shows their different rebellious spirit to some extent, realizes what both Minnie and themselves suffer and at last unite together to protect Minnie showing their care for themselves and for people of the same gender.

Mrs. Hale from the beginning has the sense of rebellion, but it was still repressed in front of men. When attorney remarks Minnie "not much of the housekeeper" because of the dirty towel, Mrs. Hale refutes him that "there's a great deal of work to be done on a farm...those towels get dirty awful quick. Mann's hands aren't always as cleaned as they always be". She dares to speak for her inner thoughts. She speaks not only for Minnie but also for all women of the society whose works and contribution are devalued by men. She also has strong realization of sphere and thinks highly of women's work. "I hate men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing". She can also sympathize Minnie's experience. John was regarded as good man, but he was a "hard man" and "like a raw wind that gets to the bone". She is clearly aware of Minnie solitary of being childless and the hardness of being together with John. She holds sympathy towards Minnie and feels regret for not giving her any care. She comprehends the suffering of Minnie. However, she cannot see the patriarchy oppression upon other females. So does Mr. Peters. From the start, she cooperates together with the men's value. When Ms. Hale narrates Minnie's situation to her trying to gain her sympathy, she insists "the law is the law". However, men's devaluation upon them and their mutual experience draws the female together. As men scorn the kitchen work by woman, the two females first "drawer nearer". The scorn from different sex makes them feel close to each other because they are the same sex and undergone the same experience. When Hale talking about female's concern on trifles, the two again "move a little closer together". The two woman little by little are joined together to find strength before male dominance and devaluation. But the tie or the connection is not strong enough to unite the two women to revolt against patriarch. As they find the box with dead canary in it, which neck is wrung just the same like the neck of John. Piece

by piece, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter like making a quilt piece together the murder and find out Minnie is the murderer.

They are astonished but soon calm down after realizing what John has done to Minnie. They both are aware of Minnie's ending when men find evidence for her murder. However, the two women realize John is also a murderer who kills Minnie spiritually like he once killed the bird. To kill John is Minnie's last struggle in her life. Minnie's tragedy causes Mrs. Hale's guilt for not helping Minnie and reminds Mrs. Peters of the death of her kitten and the situation of not having a child at home for a woman. It arouses female's common sense. "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". Minnie's experience reminds them that like Minnie they both are the victims of the men and of male dominance. They empathize with Minnie because they share the same experience with her. Their voices have been deprived; their needs have been ignored, and their works and contributions have been belittled and devalued. Minnie's violent rebellion against male dominance awakens them for female sufferings and endows them courage to fight against oppression. When the men enter into the kitchen, Mrs. Hale "slips a box under the quilt". When they were asked about how Minnie was going to make the quilt, Mrs. Peters answers "knot it". In western culture, quilting is a traditional activity for women and an obvious sign for them. On one hand, by using quilt, Glaspell satirizes man's arrogance toward women's duty and contribution and implies and upholds women's intelligence as well as their works. On the other hand, the quilt represents solidarity of the three women, and covering the bird under the quilt indicates that their common decision to cover the murder to protect their fellow Minnie. It is an action for women's union and rebellion against man. Therefore, "Knot" is not only a way to make the quilt, but also the choice they made to "not" tell the truth to the men. It's their choice of rebelling against patriarchal society.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Susan Glaspell depicts the predicament of womanhood under patriarchal society and female's realization and rebellion through the murder case. The three female characters have gone through oppression of male dominance. They cannot speak for themselves; their works and contributions have been belittled and they have been marginalized. Minnie's desperate rebellion against man evokes the sympathy and resonance of the two females. It makes the two women realize their condition and sufferings. With their sympathy for Minnie and themselves, the two women unite together to hide the evidence. It is not only for the protection of Minnie; it is also a rebellion action against the law and male dominance. It is an action for winning justice for female. By bonding female together, Susan Glaspell provides female a chance to find justice for themselves---to care for themselves and people of the same gender. The setting of the two females finding and hiding the truth is Glaspell's satirizing on the ignorant of patriarchal dominance as well as approval of female's wisdom and power. The setting of not revealing the ending of Minnie Foster's future also suggests Glaspell's sincere hope for the better future of the awakened women.

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