

# AN ANALYSIS OF PATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S TRIFLES

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## Abstract

Patriarchal dominance is the common problem that every women faces. Patriarchy is a social system in which powerful men rule over women, children and as well as nature. *Trifles* is one such play by Susan Glaspell which brings out the male chauvinistic society that prevailed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper focuses on the patriarchal dominance portrayed in *Trifles*. The female characters such as Mrs.Peter, Mrs.Hale, Mrs.Wright faces the same suffering and inequality shown by the men folk. This research paper also focuses on the mental trauma and depression faced by women. The attempt is made to reveal the fact that women are more capable.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchal Dominance, Depression, Identity Crisis.

Patriarchy literally means the rule of male. It refers to the male domination in public and private spheres. The concept of patriarchy is defined by feminist in different ways. Mitchell, a feminist defines patriarchy as “to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women” (Mitchell, 24). Walby defines “patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 20). According to Lerner, patriarchy was not one event but a process developing over a period of 2500 years and a number of factors were responsible for the establishment of male supremacy.

Patriarchy dominates in a position of authority is claimed by men in all spheres of life. In other words patriarchy means male centered world view. The dominance of father in American family is a fact. He owned the land and it was passed over to his sons which make them economically possible to marry. Men as the family breadwinner started to dominate women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This was due to the Industrialisation.

Women are the care takers and nurtures in the marital relationship. This resulted in the patriarchal dominance in American society.

Susan Glaspell was a prominent twentieth century American playwright, novelist and journalist. Glaspell won the Pulitzer Prize for her play, *Alison's House* (1931). Provincetown players the first modern company was founded by Susan Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook. Her play's and fiction's portrays feminist issues such as struggles of women in patriarchal society, identity crisis and female friendship as an essential part of women's growth.

*Suppressed Desires* is a short play by Glaspell, which satirizes the Freudian views of their Greenwich Village peer. *The Outside* discusses the values of life through the interaction of two old women. The two long-form plays were *Inheritors* which deals with issues of free speech at Midwestern University and *The Verge* that deals with the inner state of Claire an intelligent woman who rejects the limits of everyday life. Her most popular play *Trifles* is based on true events. Glaspell as a reporter covered a murder case in a small town in Iowa. Later she wrote *Trifles* inspired by her experiences and observations.

In the beginning of the play, Mrs. Peters is portrayed as "a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face" (Glaspell,1) and Mrs.Hale as "a larger woman"(Glaspell, 1). This shows that women are only recognized as a physical being. These women have been close to each other and they restrict themselves from the company of men folks. This shows that women are always suppressed and maybe the cause for their hesitation to mingle with men folks.

The conversation is started only by men, and women rarely get a chance to speak. And often women are mocked when they speak. They are not given true recognition.

In the course of the play, the men investigate the crime and start looking for evidence. They point out that there is no use in searching in a kitchen since it is of less importance. This reveals the mentality that men have over the chores of women. They regard females and their surroundings as trifles. But ironically women find that Mrs.Wright has murdered her husband at they find the evidence at the kitchen.

Both men regard that women usually worry only over trifles. Hale remarks that "women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell, 2). This shows that men disregard women and they are considered only as trifles.

In the early 1900's women were deprived of their rights. They were deprived of their freedom and their whole life was centered on domestic duties. Most women suffered from loneliness, depression and yearned for affection. Similarly in the play all women have shared this common problem.

The state of loneliness of Mrs. Wright is portrayed by the statement of Mrs. Hale. She says that it has been more than a year since she met Mrs. Wright. This shows that Mrs. Wright would have undergone mental loneliness. This underlies the fact that men restrict women from mingling with the society. They consider women only as a household machine whose prime duty is to take care of the household chores.

Mr. Hale demonstrates the pre-marital life of Mr. Wright who was known as Minnie Foster. Mrs. Hale remembers Mrs. Wright as a happy girl who enjoyed her life. She says that "Mrs. Wright used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir" (Glaspell, 6). This reflects that the bond of marriage has forced her to be in the state of loneliness.

The male dominance is brought out by Mrs. Peter when she says that Mr. Henderson is sarcastic in speech and he would make fun of Mrs. Wright when she didn't wake up. This shows that men have the tendency to criticize and mock women. In the later part of the play when the women were discussing about the piecing a quilt they were mocked by Sheriff and County Attorney. "The men laugh, the women look abashed" (Glaspell, 7).

Mrs. Wright's mental trauma and instability is reflected in the sewing of the quilt. Mrs. Hale points out that the other part of sewing is nice and even but one part of the quilt reflects the instability of her mind. She was very nervous when she was sewing that part of the quilt. This acts as evidence for the women to uncover the truth. This reveals the reasoning capacity of women.

The bird cage in the house symbolizes that Mrs. Wright was like a bird held in the cage of wedding bond. The ladies say that John Wright was a good man in the outer world but a hard man to live with. "But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him – (shivers) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone (Glaspell, 9). This symbolizes that Mrs. Wright had tough time to move on with him. The cage limits the canary of its freedom; similarly Minnie's freedom is also restricted. It represents that females were prevented from becoming independent and achieving their goals. John Wright had killed the bird which represents his brutal power and it also illustrates the power that men have over women's dreams and actions.

The power of men over their wives is demonstrated by the relationship between John and Minnie Wright. John isolates his wife in the house and refuses to install a telephone. The broken door hinge of the cage reveals the fact that it is the expression of anger and hostility.

The fact that all women undergo such sufferings but in different degrees and array is brought out by Mr. Hale. She claims that they live close together but they are far apart and they undergo same sufferings. “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.”(Glaspell, 11)

The other instance which demonstrates the aspect of power and dominance is the name assigned to the characters. The male characters are represented with their full name. But on the other hand females are referred only by their surnames. They are recognizable only by their second name which reflects the male centered society. Minnie Foster is the only character who is identified with her full name. But eventually her name has been identified as Mrs. Wright after her marriage. It presents the fact that her identity is lost after her marriage. Thus all women have lost their own identity in their married life.

The men folk in *Trifles* follow the traditional role of superiority. They dominate women in every sphere of life. They consider women only as trifles. This makes the title of the play more apt to the plot. They consider that women are fit only to worry about trifles but these trifles equipped women uncover the truth. Susan portrays the patriarchal dominance in a subtle manner in *Trifles*.

## References

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