

Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" in the Light of Ecofeminism

Elmira Bazregarzadeh

Islamic Azad University, IRAN
 e-mail: eli.b1988@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Throughout historical decades the unfair lifestyle in patriarchal societies and the oppression of women by men have always been key concepts in the literature of the world that have given rise to hot topics of discussion among different nations, questioning the real motive behind such trends. Hence, by examining Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" through the lens of Ecofeminism the present paper aims to show how it can be considered as an ecofeminist work of literature doing away with the notions that pertain to the oppression of women and Nature by men.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Nature; Oppression; "Trifles"; Women.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1916, Susan Glaspell's one-act play, "Trifles", centers around a murder mystery that sheds light on power imbalances and gender differences in a society where males are the oppressors and women are the oppressed. The story opens with the death of Mr. Wright, following which the attorney, George Henderson, is called to look through the case. It shows the life of the murdered Mr. Wright's wife, Mrs. Wright, as an oppressed woman who is tyrannized and subjugated by her patriarchal husband. When Mrs. Wright finds her only heartwarming force of maintenance, the caged bird, killed by her husband with its neck wrung, she resolves to kill her husband the same way and thus strangles him to death in sleep. However, the two other women in the play, Mrs. Hale-a neighbor- and Mrs. Peters-the sheriff's wife-sympathize with Mrs. Wright in that they have been affected by the same issues imposed on them by their society and husbands in their married life, due to which they hide the only evidence, the dead canary, from the males who have always disregarded their abilities.

Generally, Ecofeminism as a new critical approach can be applied to various works of art. The reason for focusing on Susan Glaspell and her selected play is that, until now, the researcher has not found any studies that have been written based on an ecofeminist examination of the chosen play. Similarly, among the conducted researches, the focus has been on the examination of such feminist issues as gender, class, womanhood, etc. in particular and there has been no reference to the interdependency between women and

Nature, showing how the oppression of one is linked with the other. As such, mention can be made of R. A. Gazzaz's "Suppressed Voices: Women and Class in the Fiction of Susan Glaspell" (2015), Y. Shih's "Palce & Gender in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and *Woman Honor*" (2013), and C. Manuel's "Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916): Women's Conspiracy of Silence beyond the Melodrama of Beset Womanhood" (2000). Though this play can be examined through the framework of such critical approaches as Feminism or Womanism, the researcher believes that Ecofeminism suits this study best regarding the fact that it [Ecofeminism] is about "interconnections among *all* systems of unjustified human domination" (Warren, 2000, p. 2). As a result, what is worthy of notice here is the fact that with the application of this approach to the play we come to realize that "Ecofeminism uses a feminist approach when exploring women-other human Others-nature interconnections" (ibid). Read in the light of Ecofeminism, the aim of this short research paper is to concentrate on the interconnection of Environmentalism and Feminism to reach the point that discrimination and oppression of gender and class are linked to the exploitation and destruction of Nature. Thus, in the following paragraphs a short history of Ecofeminism will be put forward. Then, the writer of these lines will examine the aforementioned play from an ecofeminist perspective.

METHOD

Throughout this paper the author intends to examine Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" (1916) in the lens of Ecofeminism. To do so, the writer will bring instances

and quotations from key ecofeminist thinkers in general and will focus on Sandilands and Gaard as the major theorists in particular to pave the way for "understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns" (Gaard, 1993, p. 4).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

As a novel critical standpoint Ecofeminism was coined by the French writer *Françoise d' Eaubonne* in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) as a "warning that human being cannot survive patriarchy's ecological consequences" (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 12). Ecofeminist critics reject the liberal feminists who view human beings as superior to Nature due to their reason and "unite in a central belief in the essential convergence between women and nature" (Pepper, 1996, p. 106). They also advocate their standpoint by focusing on the "reproduction and nurturing" functions of women and Nature on the one hand and the exploitation of women and Nature by men "both economically and in being objectified and politically marginalized" on the other hand in an effort to deny the "differences that imply superiority or justify domination" (ibid). Likewise, the opponents of Ecofeminism look for collaborative relations between men and women in the effect that the notion of power dynamic is shattered, the outcome of which is a society absent of any hierarchies and power imbalances.

Mention should here be made of one of the schools of thought in Ecofeminism as cultural/radical Ecofeminism whose advocates draw on the ancient myth concerning Mother Gaia, saying that the current problems on the Mother Earth and the ills inflicted on Nature can be healed through the combination of women and Nature in "a cooperative relationship: caring, nurturing, mutually giving and receiving" (ibid). Considering that women are directly involved in the cycle of production, Pietila claims, "women feel themselves as part of the eternal cycle of birth, growth, maturation and death, which flows through them, not outside them" (qtd. in Pepper, 1996, p. 106). Collard (1988) advocates going back to the Earth goddess-worshipping, non-hierarchical matriarchies that supposedly characterised some 'traditional', 'primitive' societies (ibid).

According to Pepper cultural Ecofeminism can be defined as, "liberating nature from the repressive male ethos so that it will be respected as a sustainer of life...which [will] affirm respect for mother nature and the essential interconnectedness of humans and nature" (1996, p.107). The emphasis on the inter-

connectedness of human being and Nature is the key concept of Environmentalism; however, it can be inferred that ecofeminist practices are "characterized by strong emphasis upon definitions of masculinity which deny, ignore, and attempt to suppress the values of the feminine" (Drengson, 1991, p. 41).

The oppression of women on the part of men and the male's inferior looking upon the female as a fragile creature is the main argument in many of the works of literature today that has led to various controversies among nations. As Ruether (1975) believes, "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (qtd. in Glazebrook, 2002, p. 13). In a way we can conclude that she rejects the idea of domination and her aim is to look for a society in which the age-old, conflicting discussions pertaining to the unjust male mastery over female are resolved and there is "reciprocity, harmony, and mutual interdependence" (ibid).

Returning to the main subject of this paper, the play starts with a messy kitchen in which there is no sense of life as the result of Mrs. Wright's imprisonment following the death of her husband. As the play moves on, the two other female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, talk about Mrs. Wright's juvenile life when she was a vigorous girl. Mrs. Hale recalls her memories when "she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1038). But now after thirty years of marriage, Mrs. Wright has undergone a lot of changes, the most eye-catching of which is the change of identity as she transformed from a lively girl to a lonely housewife. This devastating change of identity has affected her so much so that all she worries about in jail are her preserves and her apron "to make her feel more natural" (ibid). This, in a way, shows that "Women's concerns about the environment derive from their experiences of particular problems experienced in private" (Sandilands, 1999, p. xii).

The subservient role of housekeeping was the crucial duty of the women of the time, ignoring any other need and role. In such societies, as Shiva in her "Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation" argues, a woman was "treated as unequal and inferior" (Shiva and Mies, 1993, p. 164). The child bearing, child rearing, and housekeeping roles assigned to women in that society are in fact the proof of ignoring women's mental capabilities to make decisions on their own and think critically for themselves. As the title echoes, women are supposed to worry "over trifles" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1036) while

men's breadwinning role is viewed as the weighty task. In objection to Mr. Henderson's remark about Mrs. Wright's kitchen as "a nice mess," Mrs. Hale replies back, "There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm" (ibid). In keeping with that, women's being placed in the kitchen shows that it is "inevitably women's place" (Hernando, 1977, p. 26); thus male presence will not be welcomed because they "invade and spoil the work done in the kitchen" (ibid, p. 36). Not only Mrs. Wright but also the two other women in the play have suffered from the same agony a lot. Following Mr. Henderson's questioning Mrs. Hale about her visits to the Wrights' house she answers, "Farmers' wives have their hands full" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1036). These statements express their busy lives on the farm and in the house. Elsewhere when Mrs. Hale draws attention to Mr. Wright's character as "a raw wind that gets into the bone" (ibid, p. 1041) the county attorney regards the cold atmosphere of their house as Mrs. Wright's fault saying, "I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct" (ibid, p. 1036). Accordingly, women's being forced to the domestic, secondary, role in the house, either willingly or unwillingly, leaves a negative mark on their character, turning them to helpless creatures who seek refuge in anything that can make for their loss. This issue is evident in the case of Mrs. Wright who lives a monotonous, childless life in which the caged canary and its singing are the only ways of survival. Mrs. Wright's singing "real pretty" in her youth (ibid, p. 1040) and her lively life have been substituted by the unsympathetic life with the hardhearted husband who chokes the life out of her pet bird and reduces her to tears.

When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters converse over the dead bird after Mrs. Peters finds it in Mrs. Wright's sewing box, Mrs. Hale emphasizes Mrs. Wright's love of the bird and hiding it in her little pretty box. She, once more, brings the Wrights' childless life to the light to link the death of the bird to Mr. Wright by saying, "No, Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too" (ibid, p. 1042). As mentioned in "Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation," Shiva claims, "The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity. In this perverted logic of progress, even conservation suffers" (Shiva and Mies, 1993, p. 164).

The oppression imposed on women in that time gives them "no outlets for expression aside from domesticity focusing on children, though Minnie Wright

lacks even that" (Makowsky, 1993, pp. 62-3). As Sharon P. Fried puts it, "If a husband and children are the determinants of most women's lives, then Minnie has nothing; she is nothing" (qtd. in Makowsky, 1993, p. 63). Thus, Mrs. Wright's spiritual breakdown in the male-controlled aura of her house compels her to keep a canary without which life "would be awful-still, after the bird was still" (ibid).

From the beginning of the play Mrs. Hale attempts to stand up for Mrs. Wright, while Mrs. Peters, being the wife of the sheriff, tends to follow the male doctrine. As men set out to find the motive behind the case Mrs. Hale looks down on them by claiming, "You know, it seems kind of *sneaking*. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1038). In contrast to that, Mrs. Peters replies, "But, Mrs. Hale, the law is the law" (ibid, p. 1039). Nonetheless, Mrs. Hale feels guilty for not having stopped by Mrs. Wright's house to help her get over the boredom of her life. She cannot distance herself from her neighbor's anguish and says, "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" (ibid, p. 1043).

Upon hearing Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters' reluctance to hide the evidence from the men and her rigid remark, "The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale" (ibid), remind her of sense of loss following the death of her child and make her a complicit in keeping the information from her husband and other men. Consequently, the two women unite to hide the bird from the men, doing away with the laws of their time. Both women comprehend the loneliness, distress, and grief Mrs. Wright has undergone and sympathize with her. Their sympathy with Mrs. Wright "arises not only from sisterly solidarity but from the two women's self-identification as mothers, in contrast to the childless Minnie" (Makowsky, 1993, p. 62). Maternal feelings, eventually, make "make Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters sympathize with Minnie's childlessness and want to protect her" (ibid, p. 63).

The women's abilities, as seen in the play, cannot be underestimated. Women are the ones whose reunion can shut the males' eyes on the discovery of the truth. It is considered a secret triumph on the part of the women who have long been criticized for paying attention to trifles. They leave the scene without being supervised. Even the attorney who is supposed to be more cautious than any other person thinks the things women have taken "are not very dangerous"

(Glaspell, 2006, p. 1043) and they turn a blind eye to the hidden evidence. Hence, we can infer that throughout the play the male-dominated society humiliates women. Yet, women do not give up and they are the ones who counter the male by backing one another.

Besides the discussed points, we should not overlook the role of the bird as an icon of Nature, whose death is the real motive for the murder in the play. Rural life on the farm is the base of the play where women spend most of their life time doing farm chores. Not only are women "more dependent on forest products" but they also "suffer more than men as a consequence of environmental degradation and destruction of forests" (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 16). Thus, Mrs. Wright's downfall, resulting from the loss of her singing bird, reveals that "women's lives are affected when it comes to these issues more than men's" and the main reason for this difference is the "male-biased" atmosphere (*ibid*).

Moreover, the unity between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in the end is the emblem of "ecofeminist spiritualities" that "is a tool for surviving and overcoming patriarchy" (*ibid*, p.19). Their union is thus an effort to put their lives on the right track and recover from the ills and misfortunes of their unjust life system. The role of ecofeminist spiritualities then, as Warren argues, is to provide women with the power to replace the "unhealthy, life-denying systems and relationships" with "healthy, life-affirming" ones (*qtd. in* Glazebrook, 2002, p. 19). The role of women in the house and their interconnection with Nature account for their survival in the gloomy masculine society; that's why Merchant ties the word ecology to the word house in the following sentences:

The word ecology derives from the Greek word "oikos," meaning house. Ecology, then, is the science of the household—the Earth's household. The connection between the Earth and the house has historically been mediated by women. (*qtd. in* Sandilands, 1999, p. 4)

In the same manner, Mrs. Wright's worries about her preserves and the bird can be described from the ecofeminist angle as follows:

In ecofeminism, the fact of being a woman is understood to lie at the base of one's experience of ecological degradation; of one's interests in ecological protection, preservation, and reconstruction; and of one's "special" ecological consciousness. (Sandilands, 1999, p. 5)

As a woman, Mrs. Wright feels responsible for all that grant meaning to life on the farm, i.e. the animals, the

preserves, and the bird owing to the fact that "women are considered the major providers of food, fuel, and water" in farm life (Gaard, 1993, p. 5); all of which are considered as trifles by men. Frequently Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters refer to her concern over her preserves, reflecting on "all her hard work in the hot weather" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1037). These recurrent images are indeed the sign of Mrs. Wright's lost identity and her longing for renewal. Therefore, "the achievement of the freedom to express that identity without oppression is a key political goal" (Sandilands, 1999, p. 5) that ultimately led her to murder her tyrannizer.

In support of women's right and also in order to provide an answer to the question "Why Is Woman Seen As Closer To Nature," Ortnor ponders on "woman's body and its functions" to juxtapose the connection between the woman's body and Nature, "the social roles," and "psychic structures" of the women with the "cultural" view of being a man to show how they "align woman with nature" (1996, pp. 26-7). The female role in reproduction has been a fundamental issue in all historical decades which illuminates the correlation between women and Nature. In consequence, the psychic structure of women has much to do with Nature. A good case in point in the play is the part Mrs. Peters says, "Oh, her fruit; It did freeze. She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1036). But the sheriff thinks it would be strange if Mrs. Wright is "worryin' about her preserves" now that she is "Held for murder". In line with the sheriff, the attorney declares, "she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about" (*ibid*). Furthermore, the Wrights' neighbor, Mr. Hale, undervalues women's effort and attitude towards their responsibilities as being used to "worrying over trifles" (*ibid*).

Women's affinity with Nature is a means to take care of the forced discrimination and humiliation impressed on them in their androcentric milieu. For this reason we can reckon, "Women would find, or perhaps create, their true identity in spaces carefully separated from the distorting influences of patriarchy" (Sandilands, 1999, p. 10). So, Mrs. Wright's taking revenge on her husband and her subsequent making a fuss over her preserves and fruits act as a mediator that console her tormented soul and wounded heart. Besides that, her laughing and calm manner at the time of her conversation with Mr. Hale and Mr. Hale's doubt about her being really scared or not cast light on another issue as, "what women must do to dis-cover their inherent love for earth is break through the masks of patriarchal dis-ease and reclaim an

inherently female integral identity” (ibid, p. 9). If such an end is met, women can give rise to their long suffocated voice and rehabilitate their age-old deprived rights.

Ecofeminists such as Warren ground their discussion on Ecofeminism on the crucial role of women in that they believe “the focus on “women” reveals important features of interconnected systems of human domination” (2000, p. 2). She, furthermore, throws light on the fact that women, as the active parts of Nature, are touched by “environmental ills” in “direct, immediate ways” (ibid, p. 14). As stated by Cockburn, “Women often play a primary part in community action because it is about things they know best” (qtd. in Hamilton, 1990, p. 3). And when it comes to dealing with domestic and environmental concerns women, “are more likely to take on these issues than men precisely because the home has been defined and prescribed a women’s domain” (Hamilton, 1990, p. 3). These points can justify Mrs. Hale’s being filled with resentment upon hearing the sheriff and attorney’s laughing and mocking Mrs. Hale and Peters’ doubt about Mrs. Wright’s knotting or quilting a quilt, claiming, “I don’t see as it’s anything to laugh about” (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1039).

Following the aims of Ecofeminism in terms of oppression of nonhuman animals and considering the role of justice in life in an effort to reach a concordant life on earth we can examine Mr. Wright’s tragic killing of the canary from two angles; one dealing with his depriving his wife of the only melodious element in her doomed life and the other one indicating his cruel treatment with the bird as the icon of Nature to justify that “Within ecofeminist theory, the place of animals must be addressed” (Gaard, 1993, p. 6). Mr. Wright, as a husband, was supposed to pay much attention to his wife’s interests and try to make her happy. Matheny’s clarification of “The principle of equal consideration of interests” is worth mentioning here since he believes this principle “asks that we put ourselves in the shoes of each person affected by an action and compare the strengths of her or his interests to those of our own” (qtd. in Singer, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, if Mr. Wright had taken his wife’s interest into consideration, he would not have taken such action and wounded his wife’s heart. On the contrary, he could have provided her with “a pleasurable, relatively painless life” (Singer, 2006, p. 14).

Similarly, if we judge Mr. Wright’s strangling the bird from an ecological standpoint, we may wonder whether he is really entitled to do so or not. Once more Matheny’s interpretation gains importance for

he believes “To be fair, just, and benevolent, any ethical rule we adopt should respect this principle ... regardless of *whose* interests they are” (qtd. in Singer, 2006, p. 14). The keyword he uses in this argument is “utilitarianism” which he maintains behooves us to “act in such a way as to maximize the expected satisfaction of interests in the world, equally considered” (ibid). To him, “non-human animals” are “sentient” (ibid 17); so, they have “an interest in a painless, pleasurable life” (ibid, p. 19) just as humans do. As a result, Mr. Wright’s killing of the bird is actually deemed as an anti-ecofeminist action since Ecofeminism “rests on the notion that the liberation of all oppressed groups must be addressed simultaneously” (Gaard, 1993, p. 5).

As thoroughly discussed above, the aim of this short paper was to examine Susan Glaspell’s “Trifles” from an ecofeminist perspective. Though the plot of the play portrays a tragic story on the surface, the identification of the inherent ecofeminist issues lies at the heart of it. A surface reading of the play might bring the notion of brutality to the reader’s mind while a deep analysis of it gives rise to the recent questions dealing with the oppression of women and Nature by men. In “Women’s Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation,” Shiva states, “The patriarchal world view sees man as the measure of all value, with no space for diversity, only for hierarchy” (Shiva and Mies, 1993, p. 164). Throughout the play women are belittled on the part of men since in this patriarchal atmosphere they are treated as “unequal and inferior” creatures (ibid). Women, as seen in the play, are the neglected members of the society, whose being is defined as the ones who should just take care of the house chores and whose expectations do not make much difference to their husbands. While reporting the events to the attorney and talking about the possibility of sharing a telephone line with the Wrights’ family, Mr. Hale draws on John Wright’s negligent behavior toward his wife as, “but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn’t know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John” (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1034). This sentence shows the unfriendly relationship between Mr. Wright and his wife.

Additionally, the killed bird in the play pertains to the tragic life of Mrs. Wright due to the fact that “The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand” (“Women’s Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation” (Shiva and Mies, 1993, p. 164). Shiva’s emphasis on marginalization is vividly expressed in the part Mrs. Hale says, “If there’d been years and years of nothing,

then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful-still, after the bird was still" (Glaspell, 2006, p. 1042). Mrs. Peters, having gone through the grief after losing her only child, approves of Mrs. Hale's sentence, stating, "I know what stillness is" (ibid). Sander clarifies the sense of sympathy shared by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters as follows:

By recollecting the life and experience of an absent friend, Minnie Wright, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover not only the motive of the crime committed the night before, they also find out that, as farmwives, they have much in common with her who is accused of the murder. It is Minnie Wright's absence that occasions the recollection of her life story and produces the women's insight into their own predicament. (qtd. in Carpentier, 2006, p. 30).

CONCLUSION

In order to bring this short research paper to a close, we can say that Susan Glaspell's main attempt in this play has been a call to liberate the tyrannized women on one part and cast light on the fact that human being "is neither master nor slave to it [Nature], but simply one part of an intricate system" (Klue, 2008, p. 1) on the other part. The female characters in her play and their actions "demand that the patriarchal world consider their feelings and situations as something more than domestic trifles" (Makowsky, 1993, p. 61) and the bird's voice is supposed to "displace the silence of a coldly authoritarian husband and replace the sounds of the unborn children" (ibid, p. 62). Also, the recurrent talks over Minnie Wright's belongings, the apron, the preserves, the bird, etc., are, according to Sander, "not trifles but a way of survival" (qtd. in Carpentier, 2006, p. 26). Likewise, Mrs. Wright's concern over her preserves can vindicate that "women's concerns are particular... and that women's awareness can be explained away by their apparently obvious epistemic grounding in specific private relations to natural events" (Sandilands, 1999, p. xiii).

The significance of this study was, as a final point, in part due to its focus on feminist issues and what is more, the ecofeminist ties existing in it. Consequently, the choice of Ecofeminism was an effort to show the unified goal of Feminism and Ecofeminism in eschewing the "privileged and oppressed groups" (Gaard, 1993, p. 1) in favor of the liberation of women and Nature. Donovan argues that in the field of Ecofeminism "the domination of nature" is "the underlying cause of the mistreatment of animals as well as of the exploitation of women and the environment" (qtd. in Gaard, 1993, p. 174). Therefore, Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" is an ecofeminist

work of art for it, as stated by King, lets us see the "connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice" of Ecofeminism through its emphasis on the "special strength and integrity of every living thing" (qtd. in Shiva and Mies, 1993, p. 14). What invites the ecofeminist examination of the play is the fact that it fulfills the task of Ecofeminism by breaking from "the dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth" (Sandilands, 1999, p. 5).

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