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Women and Their Caged Spirit

In the play “*Trifles*” Susan Glaspell uses the US society of 1900s as a backdrop of an intriguing murder mystery. The murder of John Wright is being investigated by County Attorney Mr. Handerson and sheriff Mr. Peters with the help of John’s neighbor Mr. Hale. Joining them are two women Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. Although Glaspell does not give any conclusion as to who killed Mr. Wright but she uses different symbols to connect the reader with Mrs. Wright’s personality who is held for the murder of her husband. The men in the play feel Mrs. Wright as incompetent woman because of her unkempt kitchen and half-done work while the women empathize with her. The author symbolically portrays her situation and her psychological transformation from Minnie Foster to Mrs. Wright. Glaspell uses the symbol of bird cage to show the emptiness in Minnie Foster’s life caused due to restrictive and overpowering temperament of John. The canned fruit that breaks due to chilly weather symbolizes their marriage, which broke because of Mr. Wright’s coldness, despite Minnie Foster’s efforts to keep it for thirty years. In “*Trifles*” the loneliness and lack of freedom in Mrs. Wright’s life is represented by the bird cage while the broken preserve jar symbolizes her broken spirit and marriage.

Glaspell aptly uses the symbol of the bird cage to depict the life and situation of Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Wright who was once Minnie Foster used to sing in the choir and dress up beautifully, as described by Mrs. Hale, “She use to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that- oh was thirty years ago.” (Glaspell 598). Thirty years of marriage had changed her completely. Mrs. Wright, in contrast to Minnie Foster did not sing, nor did she wear pretty clothes anymore. She kept to herself and was not even part of Ladies’ Aid because she felt she left things half done and felt shabby on her part (Glaspell 598). The emptiness of her life caused her psychological deterioration. Although the two ladies describe her husband John to be a good man who kept his word and paid his debts (Glaspell 601), but Mrs. Wright was deeply isolated and lonely. She felt suffocated and exhausted.

This was reflective of the situation of many women during that time. As Mrs. Hale says, “We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things – it’s all just a different kind of same things.” (Glaspell 604). Like Betty Friedan puts it, “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of twentieth century in United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone.” (15). This desperation, dissatisfaction came from the caged spirit of the women. The women had everything to make life comfortable a house, income to survive, family to look after but their respect in the society depended on her performance as a housewife. The definition of a good housewife given by the society restrains a women in chains, “They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices.

They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off.” (Friedan 31). Although there is no formal structure for the work done by a housewife as compared to jobs, but still her performance is open subject to evaluation by all. As Mr. Handerson evaluates Mrs. Wright, “...not much of a housekeeper”, or, “I shouldn’t say she had the homemaking instinct” (Glaspell 597), without even knowing her as a person. Rather, it seems unimportant for him to even know her as a person as he keeps pushing the details of the relationship between John and Minnie, thinking of them as trivial in the investigation, “Let’s talk about that later, Mr. Hale. I do not want to talk about that, but tell now just what happened when you got to the house.” (Glaspell 594).

Surprisingly, none of the men in the play paused for even a moment to think what must have happened, why house was in a mess or why Mrs. Wright’s behaved so queer and done up at Mr. Hale’s visit (Glaspell 595). She just lost her husband, her partner of 30 years, yet there was no empathy in their words. All they were looking to was, to find a sign of anger, a strong motive to prove Mrs. Wright as the murderer. As the county attorney Mr. Handerson says, “No, Peters, its all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. if there was some definite thing.” (Glaspell 604).

“Here lies a poor woman who was always tired

She lived in a house where help wasn’t hired

Her last words on earth were: Dear friends I am going

To where there is no cooking, or washing, or sewing

For everything there is exact to my wishes

For where they don't eat there's no washing of dishes

I'll be where loud anthems will always be ringing

But having no voice I'll quit singing

Don't mourn me now, don't mourn me for never

I am going to do nothing forever and ever. (Oakley, Ann 5)

The long, boring, repetitive, and thankless nature of housework can dampen the creativity of women. In all of this the possibility of woman to lose her self-esteem is very high. The women becomes a housewife, a mother, a care giver, someone who could be called anytime but loses the sense of her own identity in the process. As Friedan says, "The housewife often is reduced to screams and tears....No one, it seems, is appreciative, least of herself, of the kind of person she becomes in the process of turning from a poetess into shrew." (23).

The problem with the system of description of housewife is that it becomes cage like. The cage may be good, may have comforts of different sorts, but is hollow and empty. Because it includes everything except the mind and spirit. Rather, the mind and spirit are crippled for so long that eventually it breaks as in the case of Mrs. Wright. Glaspell demonstrates the broken spirit of Mrs. Wright with her broken preserve as symbol. "Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang" (Glaspell 603) to the detached and close Mrs. Wright was a long journey of deep

isolation. During this long journey Mrs. Wright faces stillness and that too twice. One after her marriage and second after the bird died. As 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 603).

Even though Mrs. Wright worked hard to make that preserve, but the cold weather broke it. Similarly, the cold relationship, the emptiness, and the stillness of her caged life broke her spirit. It made her into a woman who kept pleating her apron, behaved queer, unconcerned about the surroundings- like her dead husband, Mr. Hale’s visit and even when she is held for the murder (Glaspell 595). The spirited Minnie Foster was now broken, Mrs. Wright like the broken preserve.

Glaspell’s “Trifle” mentions four men – John Wright who is murdered, Mr. Hale and Mr. Peters are middle aged, and Mr. Handerson the County Attorney is a young man. About John Wright Mr. Hale says, “I didn’t know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John- “(Glaspell 594). The reader is forced to think as to why Minnie’s wishes did not make any difference to John’s decision making. Mr. Hale and Mr. Peters who are almost the same age as Mr. Wright, were no exception to the scenario of considering women’s wishes. In fact, they ridicule the women. As the sheriff says, “Well you can’t beat the women! Held for murder and worrying about the preserves” (Glaspell 596). Then, “They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it?” (Glaspell 600). These remarks show how the concerns of women were belittled and inconsequential for men, “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell 596). This thought process of men had more to do with the way they were socialized. As Ted Bunch mentions in an interview, “All men in our society are taught

on some level that women have less value than men, that women are property of men, and that women are objects for men. We pass this collective socialization down to our boys.”

(“Rethinking Manhood: An Interview with Ted Bunch”)

Glaspell does not provide any conclusion to the play. Who killed John Wright or who killed the bird? She leaves the readers with various clues in the form of symbols to understand that the situation was grimmer than just finding the murderer(s). A situation in which the youngest of the four men Mr. Handerson, holding a responsible position of County Attorney is most sarcastic in his language towards women and their concerns while handling the case which he feels nothing more than a murder (Glaspell 599). There is no effort from his side to understand the little details which the women can see. If the young men of the society are so restricted in their views about the other equal sex, how is that society going to change its perspective in near future. “Kinder, Kuche, Kirche, the slogan by which Nazis decreed that women must again be confined to their biological role” (Friedan 37), the thoughts that echoed in Betty Friedan’s mind listening to writers and editors were the shared feeling of the women who were limited to “one passion, one role, one occupation” (Friedan 37). This confinement made bird cage around their lives which entraps their mind and soul. This captured spirit one day gives up like the broken preserve.

Works Cited

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