

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Silence- a powerful weapon for Surviving Through Existential Crisis in reference to Susan Glaspell's *Trifles***

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**Dr.Nandita Jain**

Associate Professor in English Literature

Government College, Sanganer

Jaipur, Rajasthan

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**Abstract:**

The power of silence speaks louder than actions in this drama. The role of powerful silence is portrayed through the dynamic between men and women in the play. Patriarchal dominance is a common problem that every woman faces in every nook and corner of the world. This paper focuses on patriarchal dominance, marginalization, and oppression as parts of the male-dominated society portrayed in **Susan Glaspell's Trifles**. A trifle is something that has little value or importance, and there are many seeming "trifles" in Susan Glaspell's one-act play "Trifles." The irony is that these "trifles" carry more weight and significance than first seems to be the case. The play conveys the emasculating experience of being a farmwife in the lonely, bleak landscape of Iowa during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This seemingly masculine domination does not cancel the fact that women have their own way of approaching things. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters furnish the audience with valuable information about Mrs. Wright's character traits. Ultimately, as the men diminish the women's concerns, their 'trifling' concerns are what led to them solving the investigation.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal, dominance, marginalization, oppression, significance, emasculating, masculine, portrayed.

Susan Glaspell (July 1, 1876 – July 28, 1948) was a prominent twentieth-century American playwright, novelist, and journalist who 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 plays and fictions portray feminist issues such as male domination struggles of women in a patriarchal society, identity crisis, and female friendship as an essential part of women's growth. Patriarchal dominance is a common problem that every woman faces in every nook and corner of the world. Patriarchy is a social system in which powerful men rule over women,

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children, and as well as nature. In other words, Patriarchy means a male-centered worldview. Patriarchy literally means the rule of males in public and private spheres. In fact, Patriarchy dominates in a position of authority that is claimed by men in all spheres of life. The concept of Patriarchy is defined by feminists in different ways. Mitchell, a renowned 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).

*Trifles* is one such play by Susan Glaspell, which brings out the male chauvinistic society that prevailed in the 20th century. This paper focuses on patriarchal dominance, marginalization, and oppression as parts of the male-dominated society portrayed in *Trifles*. (Gainor,95) Mrs. Wright is a representative of such undesirable social facets. Mrs. Wright has his long-suffering wife keep her suppressed desires unauthorized. She has multiple capabilities that seem quite alien to the way Mrs. Wright thinks. Her skill at quilting and sewing bears out her domestic nature.

The hallmark of Glaspell's plays and novels is that they discuss feminist issues and concerns in the first place. She is keen on women's affairs and the way to reach self-realization. Her women characters situate themselves in quest of a personality of their own. Her social revolt extended to her literary writings. Such rebelliousness is seen in her heroines, who "lead themselves to the public sphere of demonstration, courts, and prison." (Bourn 58)

Mid-western farming society's attitudes towards women and equality. It is obvious in this story how men discount women's intelligence and their ability to play a man's role as detectives. The men consider that the women only concern themselves with little things and make several condescending comments throughout the play displaying their views. The play is better viewed in terms of gender conflict. It depicts how men and women grasp domestic affairs in entirely different ways.

*Trifles* begins with an eye-catching disorder that dominates the kitchen. The stage direction indicates that "the kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been in order- unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table- and other signs of uncompleted work" (Glaspell 119). The disorganized state of the kitchen is self-explanatory. It displays Mrs. Wright's psychological suffering. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, neighbors to Mrs. Wright, are dumbfounded by this mess.

At 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 physical beings. 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 may be the cause for their hesitation to mingle with men folks.

Mrs. Peter, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Wright face the same suffering and inequality shown by the men folk. This research paper also focuses on the mental trauma and depression faced by women.

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The attempt is made to reveal the fact that women are more capable. They consider that women are fit only to worry about trifles, but these trifles equip women to uncover the truth.

Glaspell's "Trifles" is an ironic indictment not of a murderess but rather of the men who push women to such acts. It reflects patriarchal oppression exercised against women in an era that belittles women's right to independence and freedom. The play is based towards the end of the 19th century during the winter season in a traditional rural American farming town. The setting is "the kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright" where "signs of uncompleted works" (Glaspell 59)

Trifles tackle the issue of Mrs. Wright's heinous murder of her husband; therefore, she is apprehended and put in prison to be punished for her crime. Mrs. Wright, in this play, is a woman who falls victim to the suppression and marginalization of her husband, Mr. Wright. The hard-hearted husband destroys her human feelings out of neglect, a matter that ends in killing her husband. The play illustrates the tensions of simply being a woman. Minnie has been invisible both to her husband and to the community. Mrs. Wright, the chief character, a woman longing for the missing piece of happiness within her marriage with Mr. Wright, is suspected of killing her husband in relation to the canary. Other chief characters in the play are the County Attorney, the Sheriff, and Mr. Hale, who are accompanied by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters into the Wright's home to investigate the murder of Mr. Wright. While the men search for clues upstairs and in the outside barnyard, it is the women who cleverly piece together several clues leading to Mrs. Wright's guilt in the murder mystery.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter, who don't really even know each other, form this connection that makes them more than just associates. When they first hear what happens to Mrs. Wright, they are frantic. Then as they begin their own investigation, Mrs. Hale becomes very sympathetic and guilty because she feels she should have been there when she knew the way that Mr. Wright was treating Mrs. Wright. 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. But ironically, women find that Mrs. Wright has murdered her husband at they find the evidence in 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.

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.As Minnie, Mrs. Wright appears to have lived a happy life. She was a very beautiful girl, accustomed to singing songs that reflected her idyllic life. Still, in Mrs. Wright's house, she has become a withered violet out of deliberate neglect and marginalization of her husband. Mr. Wright is a close-fisted man, a matter that motivates her to work autonomously. Although she is in jail, she gets extremely worried about her own possessions. After thirty years of marriage, they have got irresponsive and unfamiliar with each other.

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Mrs. Hale spoke of how much Mrs. Wright had changed since childhood, "Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Lady's Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. 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" (Glaspell 340); this statement implies to the reader that Mr. Wright was the main cause of Mrs. Wright's solitude and unhappiness. 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 an 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.

On the morning of the crime, Hale was astonished by Mrs. Wright's bizarre behavior: COUNTY ATTORNEY: What—was she doing? HALE: She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of—pleating it. COUNTY ATTORNEY: And how did she—look? HALE: Well, she looked queer. COUNTY ATTORNEY: How do you mean—queer? HALE: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up. COUNTY ATTORNEY: How did she seem to feel about your coming? HALE: Why, I don't think she minded—one way or another. She didn't pay much attention.... (Glaspell, 1120)

While the women continue to gather items, they notice details such as a roughed-up birdcage and an unfinished, poorly stitched quilt which begin to piece together the story leading up to Mr. Wright's murder. The bird cage in the house symbolizes that Mrs. Wright is like a bird held in the cage of a wedding bond. When they find the block of quilting that has stitching askew, she starts to fix it, perhaps to cover for Mrs. Wright's distraught state of mind. Mrs. Wright seems to be in a tense psychological state. She cannot conceal the fact of being "queer." When Hale asks her about her husband, she tells him that he could not see him, simply "cause he's dead" and died of a rope around his neck" (Glaspell 1120). Certainly, she is much disturbed by her perpetrated crime, for she behaves in a strange way.

Mrs. Wright's mental trauma and instability are 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. While Mrs. Hale is finding sympathy for Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Peters offers a counterpoint that tries to justify the men's viewpoints and actions. Her comments to Mrs. Hale's resentful musings on Mrs. Wright's unhappy life and on the actions of men in regard to women, in general, all seem to be rote answers programmed into her by society and a desire not to cause any trouble. This all changes as soon as Mrs. Peters finds the bird. But once the canary is found by Mrs. Hale, she takes it and hides it, revealing that her and Mrs. Hale working together has turned her perception a different way.

The play conveys the emasculating experience of being a farmwife in the lonely, bleak landscape of Iowa during the latter half of the nineteenth century. But eventually, it becomes clear

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how the female characters silently save the life of Mrs. Wright. The main characters -John Wright and his wife, Minnie- are never seen and assume a shadowy presence against which the rest of the characters are pitted, and whose struggle is echoed by the two women figures on stage who realize the prison house that Patriarchy has constructed of marriage» (Ozieblo 18)

Thus, the play *Trifles* has this patriarchal elitism, inasmuch as men take the leading role. Men dominate women; women are ostensibly dismissed from accompanying men in their essential investigation into the crime. They are put aside and eclipsed by the presence of the male element. Anyhow, this seemingly masculine domination does not cancel the fact that women have their own way of approaching things. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters furnish the audience with valuable information about Mrs. Wright's character traits. Ultimately, as the men diminish the women's concerns, their 'trifling' concerns are what led to them solving the investigation.

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