

The Spousal Abuse of Women in Susan Glaspell's Trifles
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Abstract:

This research plans to focus on the spousal abuse of women in Susan Glaspell's Trifles. Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) is one of the remarkable American female playwrights whose main literary concern is focusing on women issues. The drama of Trifles is considered her master piece in which she sympathises with the American abused women and speaks up for them. American woman is still suffering from spousal abuse but in the early 20th century this problem was ignored, excused or denied because women did not have their legal rights and were treated as being inferior than men. The system then gave men the authority over women in all aspects of society even at home. When speaking about abused women, critics' main concern is the physical effects of the abuse ignoring other types of the spousal abuse, their impacts and consequences. Through her realistic drama of Trifles, Glaspell exposes different types of spousal abuse which are important as the physical ones since they have bad impact on the victims. This research will analyse the types of spousal abuse in Susan Glaspell's Trifles, their impact and consequences.

Keywords: the spousal abuse of women, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*.

إساءة معاملة الزوج للمرأة في مسرحية سوزان كلاسبل تفاهات
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المخلص:

يرمي هذا البحث إلى التركيز على الاعتداء الزوجي للمرأة في مسرحية سوزان كلاسبل. تفاهات . سوزان كلاسبل (1876-1948) هي واحدة من الكاتبات المسرحيين الأمريكيات الرائعات التي كان اهتمامها الأدبي الرئيسي يتركز على قضايا المرأة. تعتبر مسرحية تفاهات إحدى أعمالها الرئيسية التي من خلالها تعاطفت مع النساء الأمريكيات المعنفات وتكلمت بالنيابة عنهم . تعاني النساء الأمريكيات من سوء المعاملة الزوجية لكن في أوائل القرن العشرين في أمريكا تم تجاهل هذه المشكلة أو رفضها أو إيجاد عذرا لها لأن النساء لم تكن لديهن حقوقهم القانونية ويعاملن على أنهم أقل شأنًا من الرجال . أعطى النظام آنذاك الرجال السلطة على المرأة في جميع جوانب المجتمع حتى في المنزل. إن الذي أثار قلق النقاد بصورة رئيسية عند الحديث عن العنف اتجاه المرأة هو الآثار الجسدية للإساءة متجاهلين الأنواع الأخرى من الاعتداء على الزوجة ، آثارها ونتائجها. استعرضت كلاسبل عبر مسرحيتها الواقعية تفاهات الأنواع المختلفة من إساءة المعاملة الزوجية التي هي لا تقل أهمية عن النوع البدني بسبب تأثيرها السيئ على الضحايا . هذا البحث سيوضح أنواع العنف الزوجي في مسرحية سوزان كلاسبل تفاهات ويحلل تأثيراتها وعواقبها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إساءة معاملة الزوج للمرأة، مسرحية سوزان كلاسبل تفاهات.

I. Susan Glaspell: Biographical Sketch and Works:

Susan Glaspell (1876 – 1948) is an American journalist, Pulitzer Award-winning dramatist, novelist and actress. She graduated from Drake University in 1899 during a period that was difficult for women not only to vote but also to get a university degree in the early 20th century when women were still fighting for their rights. After her graduation, Glaspell worked as a reporter for the Des Moines Daily News that provided her with a great wealth of knowledge besides inspiring her earliest writing. Glaspell's writings, which were collected in nine novels, fifteen plays and over fifty short stories, were dedicated mainly to portray feminist issues such as woman's struggle for proving her identity in a patriarchal society, the relationships between daughters and mothers, and female friendships as an essential part of women's advance towards independence. She also explores other themes like the compromises of marriage, American identity, and the idealism of youth, individuality versus social conformity, the disillusionments and hopes of aging which remain to be vital and challenging to contemporary readers and scholars as well. Glaspell also focuses on the social problems that threatened the foundations of the American society hoping that her writings could direct the audience's attention towards improving their situations.

(Ben-Zvi 2005; Makowsky 1999).

It was due to Glaspell's and her husband George Cook's great efforts that the first influential modern American theatre of Provincetown Players was founded in 1915. Glaspell's work as a dramatist was widely respected as summarized by Veronica Makowsky (1999:158) : "Glaspell's power of creating human speech which shall be at once concrete and significant, convincing in detail and spiritually cumulative in progression is, of course, the essential gift of the authentic dramatist... Glaspell who has now brought it to a rich and effective maturity." Susan Glaspell gained her outstanding place as the mother of the modern American drama because she rebelled against the gender standards of her society via playing a crucial role in the American theatre that was appreciated by remarkable American and British critics as she was described as "American drama's best kept secret." (Quoted in Stowell, 1992:56)

With the re-emergence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s, Glaspell's *Trifles* and its identical version short story of *A Jury of Her Peers* were republished. The two works became central texts in gender studies that were read all around the world. *Trifles* was re-performed frequently as its timeless issues provided significant document of life in America as seen through the eyes of a pioneering woman in the first half of the twentieth century. In the late 1970s Susan Glaspell's major

achievements in drama, novel, and short fiction had seen republication and since then she has been considered as a leading model of an unnoticed female writer who deserves canonization. Glaspell was certainly a feminist of her era and also a modernist reformer who firmly believed that she could improve her society. Glaspell's popularity as an author was appreciated in *New York Times Journal* as "one of the state's most widely-read novelists". (Ozieblo, 1990:146) and short stories since then were regularly printed in the era's top periodicals.

Glaspell's wrote many remarkable works among them are :The Glory of the Conquered (1909), The Visioning (1911), Lifted Masks (1912), Fidelity (1915) and Suppressed Desires (1915). To most readers Susan Glaspell is still known primarily as being the author of *Trifles*(1916) a one-act play that was appreciated in "Small Things Reconsidered" an essay written by Elaine Hedges who said that:

Women's role or place in society, the confinement and isolation, the psychic violence wrought against them, their power or powerlessness vis a vis man, are not concerns restricted to Glaspell's time and place. But these concerns achieve their imaginative force and conviction in her story by being firmly rooted in, and organically emerging from, the carefully observed, small details of a localized way of life. (1986: 89)

Susan Glaspell is still regarded as one of the most well-known American literary figure. Her on-line Society was established in 2003 with the aim of promoting universal recognition of Susan Glaspell as a major American playwright and fiction writer. Her plays are still performed by American colleges and university theatre departments and henceforth she has become more widely known for her anthologized works especially drama of *Trifles*. (Veronica,1999:51)

II. Spousal Abuse: An Overview

II.i Definition and types:

Spousal abuse can be defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors that occur in any intimate relationship between male and female in which the male partner tries to maintain power and control over his partner. Therefore, the relationship is declined and may become vicious when includes implicate behaviors that indicate intimidations, underestimation, compression, isolation, and a range of other attitudes used to maintain fear, oppression and authority. (Walter,2009 :27) Spousal abuse has different types and frequently more than one type can be traced in the same relationship because all types have compatible impacts. The succeeding types are the main focus of the present paper which are portrayed in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*.

One of the most critical types of spousal abuse is “social isolation” a term that stands to a complete or near-complete deficiency of interaction with people in one’s society. Frequently selfishness and suspicion play a big role in man’s intent to isolate his woman from social communication with her family, friends and other members of community. Isolating the victims socially will increase the power of the abuser and at the same time it protects him legally. The social isolation leads the victim to be disruptive and antisocial person which consequently puts the abuser at the center of the victim’s life and gives the abuser the authority of exploitation. (Baker, 1985:30)

Financial Abuse is another type of spousal abuse in which abusers maintain power and control over their victims through keeping them financially dependent with the inability to make decisions or sustain their self-esteem. Controlling finances, making debt and interfering with employment or education are some examples of economic abuse. Financial abuse is considered as one of the most influential ways of keeping the abused victim trapped as it has extreme diminishes supremacy which forces the victims to rely on their abusive partners absolutely so as to supply them with basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. (Walter, 2009:66)

Another crucial form of spousal abuse is an emotive one which is defined by Beverly Engel (Quoted in Kathryn, 2005:46) as “any nonphysical behavior or attitude that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person.” Most studies agree on that a victim of emotional abuse would go through bad psychological state as well, therefore the psychological abuse is considered as a sub type of emotional abuse. Psychological abuse has a profound damage trauma as its absolute negative impact and social consequences on the abused victims are undeniable because “it damages the psychological well-being of the victim”. (Kathryn, 2005,49)

Mistreatment of the partner can also be considered as a type of spousal abuse which is termed as “physical abuse”. These interchangeable terms are usually used to refer to “an act [that is] carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person” (Straus & Gelles, 1986: 40). Although the physical abuse is the worst type as in severe cases it might lead to death, yet most contemporary studies, that have been carried out on the abused women, come with the following conclusion: “It is the emotional abuse, rather than the physical one, which has much deeper effect on the victims.” (Straus & Gelles, 1986:42) Accordingly, the physical abuse has a consequent emotional impact and in this case the abuse of the victim is doubled.

Finally, sarcasm is also categorized as a type of spousal abuse and it is termed also as "verbal abuse" which is the most public type that can affect any person whether being in abusive relationship or not. Patricia Evans (1996:86) who is a writer of five books on verbal abuse, defines verbal abuse as "a kind of offensive language that has different categories mainly designed to humiliate and control others' actions and feelings so as to submit victims to abusers' demands". Verbal abuse has many categories like: making jokes, trivializing, withholding, judging and criticizing.

II.ii Spousal Abuse of Women in the Early 20th Century:

The spousal abuse of women is a very critical domestic issue but unfortunately it was underestimated in the early 20th despite witnessing the rise of abusing incidents. Reports of spousal abuse type from abused wives were normally rejected and ignored by legal officials. If the abuse was a serious physical one, then the abused woman might have a slow response after indefinite delay for investigating the truth of the reports whereas other types of abusive requests were simply ignored because such issue was considered then as a private one rather than of a public concern. Linda Gordon's (2002:157) study of the abused women's reports confirmed that the abused victims who were seeking help "were responded with shrugs, words of resignation or homilies about female destiny and male violence and authority; others responded with disapproval or even outrage". So it was the responsibility of the abused women to solve such problems even when such problems involve a threat to their lives. The legal part in solving such an issue at that time was done mainly by advisors who would request men to stop the abuse and ask women to submit to their abusers without taking any legal actions against the abuser. Consequently, many women went into a state of emotional withdrawal which obliged them to choose from two alternatives: either to commit suicide or murder the abusers. (Johnson, 1998)

Due to injustice system of that era, abused women were denied of their rights to seek help a matter that sustained abusers' authority. Accordingly, the victimized women started to think practically rather than submitting to man's authority, they decided to take their rights by themselves and the advocacy of women rights movement then helped them in accomplishing that by changing the old feminine social codes. Thus, women were encouraged to "rebel against the unfaithfulness, neglect, brutality of their husbands and stop what the former generation of wives tolerated and expected". (Walter, 2009:58) But encouraging for independency was not welcomed by male dominated society as women's rights were considered as "unreasonable demands ... which in turn poisoned the marriage relationship and led to the disintegration of the family".

The root cause of spousal abuse of women at that era was the focal point of Bell Hooks' (2000: 231) domestic theories in which he concluded that "it was the western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women ...and all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated". Hooks blamed society for giving men the sole authority which was misused and provoked abuse against women not only at home but also concerning the importance of education and employment of women. Martin Seligman (1993:148) in his theory of "Learned Helplessness" analyzed the psychological state of the abused women who killed their abusive husbands. He concluded that "abused women developed new strategies so as to survive and killing the abusers was the preferable one as the act of killing, psychologically, was not seen as a real murder rather it was a way of stopping the abuse". Seligman's theory analyzes the reasons behind increasing the murder incidents of the abusive husbands at the early 20th century as it was documented by the newspapers of 1920s. In her essay "Women Who Kill", Ann Jones (1980: 286) wrote about the impact of the murder of the abusers on society, she noticed that "newspapers started practically paying attention to the abused women who killed their abusers, suggesting that the murders they committed were due to the increased freedom they gained by the feminist movement". Despite focusing on the abused women, the newspapers ignored the reasons that obliged women to murder their abusers and that was due to "the traditional gender codes, the lack of options for women and the institution of marriage were enough to lead an ordinary woman to commit murder". (Johnson, 1998:179) With the rise of feminist movement then, feminist literary critics as well as legal theorists tried to make the justice system understand the term of "Spousal Abuse of Women" as not being restricted to physical assaults rather it covers other types of abuse as well like: the emotional, psychological, verbal, sexual, economical, the abuse of partner's pets and the social isolation of women. With the rise of many voices that called for the rights of women to live normally and safely, the 20th century witnessed a change in the legal system which started considering the psychological condition of women who murder their abusive husbands seriously. The psychological disorder of the abused women was given emphasis and supported the self-defense appeal of the victims. But it was not legally guaranteed especially when the murder is approved to be based on vengeance rather than being a reaction of unbalanced person, a matter that is vividly portrayed in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. (Johnson, 1998)

III. Susan Glaspell's Trifles:

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* was the first play that tackled the issue of spousal abuse of women directly in the early 20th Century by presenting a precise account of the hard living of an American rural married woman. The feminist defense in the play leads many critics to link *Trifles* to Susan Glaspell's ideals of advocating the rights of women then. The first successful performance of *Trifles* in 1916 by the Provincetown Players left a good impact on the critics to the extent it was considered as a "staple play among little theatre companies." (Papke, 1993:24)

Trifles depicts a life of a woman who was extremely trapped by her marriage and awfully abused by her husband. Having no other alternatives to avoid her abuser, she chooses to avenge her right by murdering her husband with a rope while he was sleep. At the early 20th Century, women were often enforced to stay with their husband just to have a roof over their heads as living without male shelter was not a free choice then. But despite its sympathy for the female characters, *Trifles* is not an anti-male play as much as an attempt to arouse audiences' feelings towards the problems of females at a period when women were still considered as second-class citizens without social and economic rights.

Trifles is a realistic play since it was based on a real murder incident that happened in Iowa on December 2, 1900. In *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, Linda Benz-Zvi (2005:143) argues that Glaspell used *Trifles* to react to John Hossack's murder trial when she was working as a reporter with the *Des Moines Daily News*. In *The Road to the Temple* (1927), Glaspell also emphasized the genesis of *Trifles* when she stated that: "Once I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town. I had meant to do it as a short story, but the stage took it for its own." (Quoted by Ben – Zvi, 2005: 49) As a feminist drama, *Trifles* is considered as a call for women's right by exposing the inner life of an abused woman and giving a justification for why a woman may dare to murder her abusive spouse in a patriarchal society that had no sympathy towards women's sufferings. In an attempt to elucidate that, Glaspell created the character of Minnie Wright, a woman who is abused by her husband to the extreme.

The play opens with the coming of two investigators, accompanied by their wives, to carry on an official inquiry about the motifs that lead to the murder of Mr. John Wright by his wife. The troubled marriage of the Wrights has been culminated tragically when Minnie Wright decided to murder her husband after thirty years of marriage. Her neighbors, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter, have accompanied their husbands to take clean clothes to Mrs. Wright who has been arrested earlier by the police as the sole suspected person in that murderer but the murder case needs solid

evidences so as to change the suspicion into a definite accuse against Mrs. Wright who claimed that she was asleep when the murder was done. The men focus their investigation on looking for physical clues that could be used in the case to support the accusation of Mrs. Wright but the women prefer to stay in the kitchen of Mrs. Wright which was more important for them than the murder stage.

Glaspell presents Minnie Wright as an absent character that is analyzed from a feminist point of view represented by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter. The presentation of the protagonist as an absent character was not a theatrical device only because Glaspell's principal aim was to make her audiences pay attention to a type of abused women in their society rather than to a single character in her play and also to represent the denied right of women to defend themselves. The positive response of the audiences after the first performance of *Trifles* asserts Glaspell's accomplished aim as it was stated by Abbotson (2003: 260) "Trifles real genesis stimulated many female as well as male audiences to rethink of their lives once again."

Trifles seems to be a simple play as its title indicates that but indeed it deals with a serious issue that destroyed uncountable lives of women. The play centers on the motifs that lead an abused wife who, after many years of sufferings, has killed her abuser. In fact, a deep analysis of the motifs behind the crime would expose the different types of abuse which Minnie Wright went through and pushed her to put an end to her abuser's life. Although *Trifles* is about a murder case yet the whole play centers on Mrs. Wright's life, to quote Abbotson's words (2003:263): "the audiences are asked to witness Mrs. Wright's life rather than Mr. Wright's death". They are shown that the true crime has been the way she was being dominated and demolished by her marriage.

After murdering her abusive husband, Mrs. Wright looks like being uncertain of what she had done. Her feelings are a mixture of astonishment and distress. Her state reveals how hard her decision was to kill her husband and also arises serious questions concerning the motifs behind the murder by both the characters in the play and the audiences whose role then was no less important than the judges in the courts. A close feminine investigation of the murder case would unveil the different types of spousal abuse that Minnie had experienced in her marriage life which pushed her finally to murder her husband. With the opening of the play, the audience will notice that discovering the motifs behind the crime are of great importance for the women but for the men they are considered as trifling details. The psychological impact of abuse on Mrs. Wright is identified from the beginning of the play upon discovering the murderer of Mr. John Wright by Mr. Hale, "She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of pleating it... she looked queer ... as if she

didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up.” (Glaspell:364)

To start from the beginning, the setting of *Trifles* plays an important role in detecting the social isolation of Minnie as the play is situated in a small village at an “abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen ...left without having been put in order”.(Glaspell:363) The description of the place appears as a background which serves as a device that directs the audiences' attention towards the first type of abuse. While the investigators men; the Sheriff, Mr. Peters, and the Attorney, Mr. Henderson, are busy with searching for logical important clues that can be used in the murder case, they disregard significant details which were the main concern of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. To emphasize the social isolation, the women are introduced as being experiencing the same feeling of isolation and fear which was the daily atmosphere of Mrs. Wright. At the moment they enter her kitchen, as the stage direction indicates that, the two women “have come in slowly and stand close together near the door”.(Glaspell:363) With growing sympathy, the women are able to recognize the signs of quiet desperation under which many women of their time are forced to live like Mrs. Wright. In the following comment on Minnie's dilemma, Mrs. Hale's speech highlights not only physical isolation of the farm but also the emotional isolation that formed her personality:

I could've come. I stayed away because it wasn't cheerful- and that's why I ought to have come.

I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road.

I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie

Forster sometimes. (Glaspell:368)

Mrs. Wright's isolation is due to the isolation of Iowa itself, a place where the farm is situated. Mrs. Hale's rarely visits to Mrs. Wright was because of the place which is not felt as a cheerful place neither for her nor for Mrs. Wright. So living in such isolated farm makes it difficult for the Wrights to be in contact with other members of society. But the isolation of Mrs. Wright's is doubled when her husband refused to install a telephone line which deprived her of having any means of communication with others even her neighbors. Thus, Mrs. Wright's life was turned into a prison-like because her sole means of delight, as any rural housewife, was just when she makes quilts. The unfinished bad quilt therefore may refer to Mrs. Wright's agitation and also stands for her feeling of oppression. Mr. Wright's refusal to have a phone at home was due to his preference of simplicity and quietness which, as he believes, might be disturbed by the installation of a phone as “folks talked too much”. (Glaspell:363) Mr. Wright's decision was

taken with disregard of his wife's concerns which "made no much difference" (Glaspell:363) to him. Mr. Wright's inclination to quietness and his anxieties can be considered also an abuse of a social isolation type which had a profound psychological impact on Mrs. Wright who is deprived of her simple right to live as a social human being.

Glaspell's choice of the names "Minnie" and "Mrs. Wright" for her protagonist was consciously so as to confirm the situation and plight of the women then. Their state in a male dominated society was minimized and they were deprived of their rights and abused at the same time. Describing Minnie Foster's life before and after marriage will demonstrate accurately the transformation that the protagonist undergoes after her marriage. Being an off stage character, Minnie's description is given by Mrs. Hale who knows her in the past. Minnie was described as being a very nice, happy and outgoing young girl who used to wear pretty clothes. She was a very active member within a group of church choir. She had a lovely voice which is still remembered by Mrs. Hale. But Minnie's life was totally changed after her marriage as she was isolated, stopped singing and did not go to church anymore. In short, Minnie's life after marriage can be summarized as being alienated from her husband, powerless and silenced by her marriage. She was an unseen woman long before she murders her husband. According to the cause and effect theory, Minnie's unexpected stop of joining the church choir or Ladies' Aid was due to her psychological state and it also sets the possibility of physical abuse as a victim of such types is usually forced to be alone so as not to expose her sufferings to public eyes. Minnie's isolation leads Holstein (2003:202) to the same possibility which is that "John Wright physically battered Minnie therefore she avoids revealing how she was really suffering from her marriage."

The disorganized kitchen as an expressionistic device is of great significance as the stage direction indicates that: "The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table—other signs of uncompleted work." (Glaspell: 363) The mess in the kitchen highlights Mrs. Wright's psychological anxious state which is vividly comprehended by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter when it was looked upon as being a result of accumulating agonies. But from a male point of view, the mess in the kitchen was considered as a short coming in women's responsibility towards her house as it is a sign of "not much of a housekeeper" (Glaspell:365) a remark that is said by County Attorney which has a deep emotional impact on the two women which can be considered as a verbal abuse that is directed towards their gender. Being loyal to her sisterhood, Mrs. Hale takes the responsibility of giving

justification when she tells the County Attorney that: “Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be.” (Glaspell: 365) The impact of verbal abuse can also be traced when she tells Mrs. Peter: “I’d hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing.”(Glaspell: 363) “Trifles” as a title of the play also emphasizes that as it is quoted in Mr. Hale’s speech when he criticizes the two women for worrying about Mrs. Wright’s plants jars by saying that: “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.”(Glaspell: 365) Accordingly, the verbal abuse encourages the two women to sympathy with Mrs. Wright’s plight as they start to understand the truth behind committing the murder.

To comprehend the motif that pushes Mrs. Wright to kill her husband, the two women take everything in Mrs. Wright’s house into consideration even her simple and old fashion clothes which are associated with her unexpected isolation:

Mrs. Hale (examining the skirt). Wright was close. I think maybe that’s why she kept so much to herself. She didn’t even belong to the Ladies’ 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. (Glaspell: 366)

Mrs. Wright’s clothes are identified by the two women with the lack of financial support from Mr. Wright which enforced Mrs. Wright’s isolation so as to stay away from others rather than feeling embarrassed. Accordingly, Mrs. Wright’s request for her apron can stand for the belongings that used to keep her sane as a normal human being. Sharing the same rural life, Mrs. Peter comes to conclude the significance of the apron for Mrs. Wright when she tells Mrs. Hale that the apron is “just to make [Mrs. Wright] feel more natural”. (Glaspell: 367) Thus the apron becomes a symbol of normal feelings which, in turn, brings out Mrs. Wright’s true self as a good woman who went through a dreadful condition. The women characters play a significant role in the play because they expose both the inner feeling of the protagonist and simultaneously identify themselves with her.

Mrs. Wright’s miserable life can be realized if it is compared to an empty and hidden bird cage of a canary bird which was found by the women in her kitchen. She used to enjoy the singing of her canary bird which was once her sole companion but it was killed as it is found by women with its head been wrung. Keeping the dead bird in a very beautiful box and wrapped with a silk drives the women to take the role of the investigators and a clear look at the bird’s neck drive Mrs. Hale to conclude that the bird did not die out of natural causes but rather it was killed: “But,

Mrs. Peters—look at it. Its neck! Look at its neck! It's all—other side to".(Glaspell: 368)

So if the bird stands for Minnie's lovely voice before marriage then the killing of the pet is considered as a physical abuse that was directed towards Minnie's soul who was in a spiritual contact with the bird and the resemblance is vividly captured in Mrs. Peters's speech: "Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too."(Glaspell: 367)

The bird, as a symbol of a companion, is of a great importance especially for Minnie because her marriage is infertile and "not having children makes less work- but it makes a quiet house and Wright out to work all the day and no company when he did come in."(Glaspell: 368) The sympathy of both women with Mrs. Wright's plight ascends from both; their loyalty to their gender and self-identification with Minnie as the two women know deeply what motherly anguish means:

MRS. HALE (her own feeling not interrupted). 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.

MRS. PETERS (something within her speaking). I know what stillness is. When we Homesteaded

in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then. (Glaspell: 369)

Having a realistic genesis, the dialogue between the two women is truthfully portrayed because the life of the rural women has no outlets apart from domesticity. Their life was totally devoted to "a husband and children who are the determinants of most women's lives". (Makowsky, 1995:148) Accordingly, comparing Minnie's life to that of the two women reveals that "Minnie had nothing to live for therefore she is nothing." (Makowsky, 1999:63) She has nothing as far as maternity is concerned and she is considered as being nothing because her husband ignored her identity and neglected her concerns thus she was a victim to her husband's suppression and marginalisation which ended up in a really bad tragedy. Thus, the women comprehend both the importance of the pet existence to Mrs. Wright and the actual motif that led to the murdering of her husband when Mrs. Peters recalls that: "When I was a girl —my kitten —there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes —and before I could get there —If they hadn't held me back I would have —hurt him". (Glaspell: 369) Consequently, Mrs. Hale blames John Wright for the transformation of Minnie from being a happy, outgoing young girl who was a bird-like into an abused miserable woman because he seemed to be "a hard man.... to pass the time of day with him. (Shivers) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone". (Glaspell: 368)

Glaspell's direct message to the feminine audiences was through the self-identification among the women characters which is confirmed once again by Mrs. Hale "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: 369) The self-identification of the two women with Mrs. Wright leads Makowsky to suggest the following:

The sympathy of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters arises not only from sisterly solidarity but from the two women's self-identification as mothers, in contrast to the childless Minnie. Love, particularly maternal love, is associated with sound and its absence with silence. They realise that the pet was a kind of child-substitute for the solitary Minnie. (1999:63)

The two women connect the murderer Mr. Wright with the dead bird as they conclude that Mr. Wright had persistently wrung the neck of the bird and in turn Mrs. Wright took a revenge upon her husband by killing him by the same way that he killed the bird. But the women decide to vindicate Mrs. Wright by hiding the dead bird and concealing their conclusions. Although Minnie is legally wrong, yet the women choose to protect her and that stems from their sense of injustice which was done to her by her husband. The women realise that all the struggles in their life are determined by one shared source which is the patriarchal society. Further, Glaspell subjects Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale themselves to male oppression. The men repeatedly belittle, patronize, and mock them, trivializing their domestic work, doubting their intelligence and ridiculing their interest in feminine craft. At the beginning of the play, the stage direction indicates that the two women stand away from each other but they move a little closer together as the male characters start laughing and use a sarcastic language for that "women are used to worrying over trifles". (Glaspell: 363) Ironically, it is women's concerns over trifles that lead them to disclose correctly the motifs behind the case murder.

To highlight the theme of spousal abuse, Glaspell presents the characters of women as rebels whereas the protagonist chooses to rebel against her abuser openly "leading herself to the public sphere of demonstration, courts and prison" (Makowsky, 1993:93) so as to end up all her sufferings, the other two women choose the indirect rebellion which is considered by critics as a passive one. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter choose to protect Mrs. Wright secretly from what considered as the injustice of man's law therefore they remain silent and hide the dead bird. Consequently "the play casts all the female figures as protesters but the women are silenced because society offers no solution". (Mael, 1989:282) On women's passive resistance of injustice Barbara Ozieblo (1990:146) states that "Glaspell came to the conclusion that the only available triumph for the silenced

women is through friendship or bonding with their sex” Glaspell presents the supremacy of women through their loyalty to sisterhood disregarding the legal consequences because they do not only sympathize with Mrs. Wright but also identify themselves with her.

To challenge the male authority of her community, Glaspell presents the end of the play in a way to make her audiences realise that justice could be perceived in different ways and not always logically. According to Glaspell justice is done when her women characters display their female solidarity. With the sudden coming of the men, the mutual understanding between the females surpasses their language communication once they exchange eyes hints to hide the dead bird as it was indicated by stage direction:

Mrs. Hale rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at Mrs. Peters, whose eyes take a slow turn, finally meeting Mrs. Hale’s. For a moment Mrs. Hale holds her eyes, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly Mrs. Peters throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens the box, starts to take the bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. Mrs. Hale snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. (Glaspell: 370)

The women in *Trifles* prove that they cannot be trifled, as they have been called by the men characters, and no longer accept the spousal abuse of their sister in gender. The investigation comes into an end as the investigators fail to consider the trifling details which lead to the real motifs behind the crime. By using symbolic language, Mrs. Hale exposes the identity of the killer but the County Attorney cannot understand what a trifle like quilt stitch stands for, “Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what it is you call it, ladies! MRS. HALE (her hand against her pocket). We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson.” (Glaspell: 370)

IV. Conclusion:

Susan Glaspell is one of the most important American playwrights whose drama of *Trifles* integrates the mood of society towards women at a time when their social status is viewed as underneath male status. Glaspell dedicates her theatre for discussing feminine issues at a time near the peak of women’s suffrage, therefore, Glaspell’s play can be considered as a call for women’s rights via exposing one of the most important and banned issues then that is the spousal abuse of women.

Although Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* is about a murder case of Mr. Wright, yet the spousal abuse of women is a central theme in the play as the whole play is centred on an abused woman who is forced to kill her husband after

enduring her sufferings for so long time. *Trifles* focuses on the life of an abused woman who could not escape her abusive marriage, therefore she chooses to kill her abuser so as to stop the prejudice and discriminatory ways of the patriarchal power. Being based on a real story, Glaspell's play is considered as a feminine defence because she took the responsibility of introducing the society to the uneasiness of women's lives, the hard work, the pain, the isolation and the frustration that they go through in their marriage with the absence of their legal rights.

Glaspell chooses the name "Minnie" for her protagonist to show the fact that how a woman is minimized in her society and deprived of her rights by giving Minnie Foster a marriage surname of "Mrs. Wright". Glaspell makes her absent protagonist stand for all the abused and suppressed American housewives who are deprived of their simple rights to live a comfortable life. Indeed, the play had a great impact on the audience as it was the first time a female character is presented as a murderer. The spousal abuse has destroyed Mrs. Wright's life and a simple comparison between her life before and after marriage would show vividly how sad and miserable her marriage was. Actually, one of the dangerous consequences that spousal abuse has is the psychological deterioration of the victim and in the case of Mrs. Wright that pushes her to kill her abuser.

To make the audience realise how important it is to stop the spousal abuse of women and the need for legal response that can support the victims, Glaspell makes the audience feel that they can take part in analysing the motives behind the crime by presenting the characters of the two detectives, with their wives, who come to investigate the house of the Wrights. In fact, the way that male characters explore the murder case and their opinions about the protagonist and their wives may stand for the male audiences who are unable to see the real motifs behind the crime which spring mainly from the spousal abuse of the protagonist. On the other hand, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter may stand for the female audiences who identify themselves with the abused protagonist and feel in sympathy with especially when they choose to defend her by hiding the clues that they find from their husbands so as to give Mrs. Wright the right to live comfortably for the first time since she married her abuser. One of the most shocking speeches of the characters is when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter identified their lives with that of Mrs. Wright, the two women are horrified to realize that it reflects their own and that is why their quiet, hesitant narration focuses on the emotional elements of Mrs. Wright's pain, hardship and disappointment. Faced with this reflection of their muted lives, they share the painful process of seeing themselves confronting the reality of their lives admitting it and acting as a community.

With the emergence of empowered women that can no longer submit to the abuse of male authority and as most of the American women have experienced and suffered from one or all types of spousal abuse, Glaspell closes the play with a scene of brave act of feminine solidarity and resistance when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter hide the clues from the detectives giving themselves the right to resist the masculine oppression. Although their disobedience is a secret one and is not observed by the detectives, yet Glaspell's message touches her audiences deeply specially those who suffer from their abusive husbands.

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