

**Feminism in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal***  
**Instructor: Alia Khleif Nejim**  
**University of Mustansiriyah,**  
**College of Arts/ Department of English Language and**  
**Literature.**

**Abstract:**

Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal*, which was performed on September 7, 1929, can be examined and interpreted within the framework of feminism. Generally speaking, feminism, as a theory, looks for the freedom and the independence of women in society. Besides, it calls for the elimination of differences between man and woman who are involved in social activities. In the play, Sophie Treadwell presented the dilemma of the Young Woman who lives in a society which is witnessing rapid scientific and industrial developments but these developments come at the expense of woman's freedom and her need to achieve her goals and to be treated as an equal partner in society rather than an inferior being in a society which is dominated by males. The mechanical society in which the Young Woman lives imposes its demands on her, therefore, she lives in a conflict between her personal freedom and the necessity to conform to the rules which are set by society. The young Woman submits to society which forces her first to work and to take care of her mother, then, to marry a rich man so that she and her mother will live a comfortable life. This marriage obliterates her personality and ambitions.

After she marries her boss, the Young Woman feels that she is unable to adjust herself to her new marital life. First, because she does not have knowledge about marriage and sex, and second because her husband is a domineering and insensitive person who denies her the right to be alone for sometime in order to be ready for her first night. This can be interpreted within a feminist context as a condemnation of males' domination over women and as a criticism of the marriage institution in which women have no rights to establish themselves as separate and independent beings.

Sophie Treadwell examines and probes the character of the Young Woman depicting her confused understanding about her place in a society ruled by men and by materialistic values. This confusion leads the Young Woman to depression which is reflected in her rejection of her role as a dutiful wife and a mother. After giving birth to her baby, the Young Woman refuses to feed her baby because she is unable to accept her new role as a mother.

Moreover, the Young Woman looks for passion which she finds in an adulterated relationship with a Young Man. After being emotionally involved in this relationship for a period of time, the Young Woman decides to kill her husband, an action which is interpreted by feminist critics as a way to escape from the confines of society and from a domineering husband whom she considered as her chief antagonist because he embodies her acquiescence to the ruling forces of social values and expectations. The play can be considered as a call for women's freedom and a change of the traditional and socially limited view about women. The success of the play can be attributed to the playwright's feminist attitudes which led her to write this play about a woman who looks for freedom and independence in a time of shifting attitudes towards the role of women in society.

### **Feminism in Sophie Treadwell's Machinal**

Sophie Treadwell's Machinal was first performed in 1929 at the Plymouth Theatre. The playwright took the plot of her play from a murder trial which she covered as a journalist.<sup>1</sup> The period in which the play was performed was one of ideological and political changes which came as a result of the Industrial Revolution. One of the ideological stances which spread in American was feminism. As a theory, feminism stresses the fact that there are biological and personal factors which differentiate women from men and that society estimates women who are involved in woman-type social activities less than men who are involved in men type of social activities. Feminists tried to call for the elimination of evaluation between men and women who are involved in these activities. Besides, feminists agree on certain issues such as women's legal rights, the call for equal pay, child care organization and sometimes the issue of rape. These issues are relevant to understand Sophie Treadwell's Machinal as a representation of contemporary feminist drama, therefore, a brief review of feminism is considered a relevant background for the play.

The word "feminism" comes from the French "feminine" which means "the principle that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men."<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary of Current English, published online, defines feminism as "The belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim."<sup>3</sup> The term "feminism" has no definite and absolute definition, the definitions which are given to the word are subjective and relative. In her essay "The Third Wave: The New Definition of Feminism," Beka Smith points out that "Feminism is a lot more than a dictionary definition. It means resisting oppression, freedom of choice and freedom from gender pressures."<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, feminism, as a theory rejects all kinds of domination by males. Helene Cixous pointed out that :

In philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity. every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures, whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question "What is it?"; as soon as there is a will to say something. A will; desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back- to the father. You can even fail to notice that there is no place at all for women in the operation! In the extreme, the world of "being" can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for the mother.<sup>5</sup>

Feminism realizes that women are marginalized in a male-dominated society and calls for a radical transformation of behaviors, mentalities, roles and even political economy.

Beside their call for women's anatomy in a male-defined culture, feminists used the term "woman-identified woman"<sup>6</sup> to describe women's need to affirm selfhood by women. Women must not identify with men, as they do in a male-dominated society.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, feminists criticized severely marriage. They considered it as an oppressive institution in which man is considered as the highest authority and the decision maker while woman is treated as an inferior partner. Therefore, marriage is considered by feminists as a kind of slavery because "slavery implies a lack of freedom, of movement, a condition which also exists in marriage."<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Gerda Lerner pointed out in the introduction to her book The Majority Finds its Past, Placing Women In History that part of the feminists' rejection of male-domination is represented by their belief that since history was written by men, it did not focus on men and women equally, therefore, they call for the re-writing of history because it was written by men in "an andro-centric frame of reference."<sup>9</sup> Gerda Lerner explains the importance of writing women's experience by women saying that :

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness, we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centered inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of women's history. The central question it raises is : What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they defined?<sup>10</sup>

In the light of the previously mentioned issues which feminists raised, Sophie Treadwell's play Machinal will be discussed. The play is divided into nine episodes. It was written in the expressionist style.<sup>11</sup> The first episode opens in an office where the female character who is referred to as the Young Woman, is working as a secretary. The Young Woman lives in a state of monotony and alienation which is expressed symbolically through the rising noise of the typing machines in the office and the repetitive phrase of the office workers. From the opening scene Sophie Treadwell reveals the dilemma of the Young Woman who is unable to adjust herself with the mechanized and mercantile world around her. It is noteworthy that when the play was written there were rapid changes in the American society. These changes came as a result of the scientific and industrial developments which increased during the early decades of the twentieth century. One of these changes was the increased use of machines which, on the one hand, facilitated people's lives, but on the other hand, it brought many negative consequences. Elizabeth Coen pointed out that :

The mechanization of labor and its correlation with war created a sense of impersonal conformity and an intense fear that somehow the machine would consume humanity. Therefore, Expressionist dramatists attempted to emphasize the moral crisis of the collective. They did so by utilizing a number of stylistic devices to underscore the universality of human emotion such as primal gesture (exaggerated emotive movement) or punctuated dialogue (language that emphasizes various words or expressions).<sup>12</sup>

Sophie Treadwell made use of the expressionist style, such as the sound of the typing machines in the office where the Young Woman is working and the repetitive sentences which are said by other characters, to describe a woman who is unable to adjust herself with the mechanized and mercantile world around her. She is innately unsuited to this world. She feels herself squeezed and crushed by the machine-like quality of the world around her.

In the opening scene, the Young woman is thinking of an answer to a marriage proposal by her boss George H. Jones. Her inner conflict is revealed in this scene because on the one hand she does not love him, but on the other hand she thinks that it is better to accept his proposal because marriage will provide her with financial security and it will make her mother live a comfortable life even if that comes at the expense of her happiness. At the end of the first episode, the Young Woman reveals her

inner struggle between her attempts to have control over her life, on the one hand, and the obligations of society which she has to live up to:

Young Woman: He is a fine man. He could give me everything. I could rest. I could sleep mornings...  
But he would come home nights. I should be ashamed.  
When he touches me my blood runs cold, oh, don't!  
Please don't! He is a good man. He loves me. Anything to get away from Ma- Ma and subways and offices and cheap places! If only he wouldn't put his hands on me.  
He makes my flesh curl. I would get used to it-maybe lots of wives' skins curl and they get used to it.<sup>13</sup>

The Young Woman finds herself in a difficult situation. She has to be true to herself, achieve autonomy and fulfill her needs but at the same time she has to care for her mother and to live up to her mother's expectations. Jill Dolan pointed out that

Daunted by urban industrialization, represented here by deafening machine noises, train whistles, and welding and riveting sounds, the "Young Woman" as she is emblematically called, is the centre of a web of social discourses that constrain her choices both as a worker and as a woman, and squelch the more romantic, spiritual impulses of her life.<sup>14</sup>

Thus it is clear that the playwright tried to assert the feminists values through presenting the suffering of the Young Woman in an oppressive society in which the material values dominate people's lives.

The Young Woman resolves her inner conflict by submitting to the obligations which are imposed upon her by society. She complies to her pragmatic mother and she decides to marry her boss. But she does not find happiness with her husband. In the first day of her marriage, the Young Woman finds herself nervous and unresponsive to her husband. She recoils from his jokes and his touches because she does not love him and because she lacks knowledge about sex and love. In the honeymoon scene, the Young Woman tries to have some time for herself in the bathroom under the pretext of preparing herself for her first night while her insensitive husband harasses her to come as quick as possible. Finally she comes out of the bathroom in tears. At the end of the scene the Young Woman calls for her mother, then just for somebody:

Young Woman: Ma! Ma! I want my mother.  
 Husband : I thought you were glad to get away from her.  
 Young Woman: I want her now- I want somebody.<sup>15</sup>

Barbara L. Bywaters remarked that the Young Woman's call for just "somebody" to her " suggests the possibility of a rescue, a revolution against a tradition that requires a woman to submit to a kind of 'legalized rape'"<sup>16</sup> In this scene, Sophie Treadwell criticizes harshly the patriarchal institution of marriage. The Young Woman has married a man whose insensitive character and materialistic ambitions make him unable to understand his wife's needs for understanding and love. He shows a desire to dominate her which is reflected through his insistence that she should come immediately without taking into consideration his wife's situation, her confusion, her lack of knowledge about marital relationship and above all, her need to be alone for sometime.

Sue Ellen comments on the dilemma of the Young Woman that the Young Woman's problems are not the consequences of the gender oppression but they are rather the consequences of "the materialist position"<sup>17</sup> which

underscores the role of class and history in creating the oppression of women. From a materialist perspective, women's experiences cannot be understood outside of their specific historical context, which includes a specific type of economic organization [sic] and specific developments in national history and political organization [sic]<sup>18</sup>

According to this critique, economic institutions contribute to the shaping of the mentality of women and drive them to take certain stances. This is reflected through the Young Woman's search for economic security through marrying her boss even if that comes at the expense of obliterating the spiritual and the emotional sides in her personality. Besides, the importance of the economic factor in the lives of modern women is reflected through the title of the play Machinal which is a French word meaning "mechanical, automatic, or fragmentary."<sup>19</sup> The Young woman lives in a world of industrial progress and machines, this world imposes its demands on women generally and on the Young Woman in particular. Elizabeth Coen linked between the domination of the economic side and the playwright's presentation of the characters without real identities. pointing out that:

Many of the characters are defined by their occupations. This device elucidates the idea that the Young Woman's struggle can be the plight of any woman. Her journey is a series of confrontations in a reality faded by convention. The world of the play is seen through her eyes and she struggles to find enlightenment despite the mechanization of American life : work, marriage, family life, etc,<sup>20</sup>

The values of this mechanical world impose themselves on the Young Woman and she realizes that she has to conform to them even if that comes at the expense of her personal freedom and her basic human values.

The scene in the hospital where the young woman gives birth to a girl is an example of the situations in which men practice their control over women. In this scene, the Young Woman is unable to speak. The husband, nurse and doctor remark that she is doing better in spite of her gestures that she is not. The husband gives her an advice that she must "brace up now! Make an effort."<sup>21</sup> The doctor ignores the information given by the nurse concerning the prescription of a course of treatment for the Young Woman. In this scene, the Young Woman could not release herself from the grip of the male authority represented by the doctor and her husband. Both of them are actually ignorant of her real agony and both of them are unable to help her to recover her health. This leads her to sink into depression which is reflected in her rejection to nurse her baby. Jennifer Jones describes the young woman as "neurotic"<sup>22</sup>because she rejects motherhood.

In the hospital scene, males are taking the lead and women are powerless. Male's domination is presented through the character of the doctor. He refuses to listen to the nurse who suggests a prescription and imposes his own opinion on both the nurse and the young woman. In this scene, the playwright criticizes males domination over women as well as the medical establishments which were run by males who were ignorant of the psychology of women and her basic needs. The hospital scene ends in a monologue in which she refers to her husband, to a dog named Vixen, to religion and ends with a plea to be left a lone. This monologue reflects her confusion which is the result of the pressures that she feels in a male-dominated society.

Doctor: Wait. I'll change the medicine. (Takes a pad and writes a prescription in Latin, hands it to Nurse). After meals.

Bring her baby- (He exits.)

Nurse: Yes, Doctor.(Exit.)

Young Woman: Oh, let me alone! Let me alone! I've submitted to enough. I won't submit anymore. I'm empty....Maybe if you love they don't weigh so heavy.... Love makes them light. I was dead.... I was climbing the golden stairs....I met my baby coming down....All the dead going up to Heaven to rest....All the babies coming down to earth to be born. Dead going up.... babies coming down. I can't go on.<sup>23</sup>

The Young Woman looks for passion and a release from an oppressive husband which she finds in a romantic relationship with a Young Man. In episode five, which is entitled "Prohibited", the Young Woman meets her lover in a speakeasy. Her lover is a young man who recently returned from Mexico. He tells her stories of his adventures in Mexico where he was kidnapped by some bandits up in the hills and he succeeded to escape after killing the bandits with an empty bottle which he filled with stones and hit them over the head. The fact that this man is a killer does not make the Young Woman withdraw from him, on the contrary, she feels that she is attracted to him because he represents the world of freedom and romance which is totally different from the oppressive society she is living in. His personality is totally different from that of her husband, he is adventurous and untraditional. He helps her to live a life in which she feels free from all social restraints. In her relationship with him, she "begins to take a more active role in establishing a life for herself outside of her marriage."<sup>24</sup> In this new life, she feels that she is stronger and more independent than she is in her marital life. Through this relationship between the Young Woman and her lover, Sophie Treadwell "emphasizes the Young Woman's empowerment through sexual liberation."<sup>25</sup>

At the end of episode, the Young Woman and her lover argue about the possibility of going with him to his apartment. Finally, she tells him that she couldn't go with him but, she rises to join him. This reflects the conflict within her between her realization that her decision to go with him is morally wrong and her desire to have a release from the confinements of society.

In episode six, The Young Woman and the man are in bed. It is evident that the man succeeds in seducing her. The Young Woman's relationship with this man is significant in the development of her awareness of the contrast between the "escape fantasies of the West coast and Mexico"<sup>26</sup> which the young man offers to her and her marital life with an oppressive husband. J. Ellen Gainor and Jerry Dickey point out that



this moment of sexual liberation proves emblematic of the Young Woman's desire for the same sort of unencumbered freedom enjoyed by her male lover, as it was his stories of adventures in Mexico, including his murderous and unpunished escape from bandits, that first stimulated her attractions.<sup>27</sup>

The romantic scene in episode six is in contrast with the following scene in episode seven where the Young Woman is at her home talking to her husband who is totally absorbed in thinking and talking about his business, his deals and property. She feels stifled. She wants to open the window but her husband wants them closed which symbolically reveals her desire to break free from the limited world which her husband represents. The freedom which the Young Woman experiences in episode six cannot last. She moves into the prison-like world of her husband who "equates marriage with property acquisition in business."<sup>28</sup> and she has to comply with this world.

The personal freedom which the Young Woman experiences in episode six gives her the motive to commit a crime later on. Episode eight opens in a courtroom. The Young Woman is cross-examined about her husband's death. At the beginning of the trial, she claims that she is not involved in the crime but she breaks down when an affidavit from her lover is read. Her lover confesses that he had an affair with her. She stops the prosecution while he reads the affidavit to confess that she killed her husband. When the judge asks her about the reasons behind the crime she said that she wanted to "put him out of the way"<sup>27</sup> and "to be free."<sup>28</sup> The Young Woman's confusion and lack of mental equilibrium is revealed when the judge asks her why she did not ask for a divorce, she answers "Oh, I couldn't do that! I couldn't hurt him like that."<sup>29</sup> Her answer leads the people who attend the court to burst into laughter.

The Young Woman finds herself lonely facing the accusations of murder in a court whose members are all men. They cannot understand the real motive behind her action and they did not give her time to talk about her marital life with a husband who did not care for her feelings. The defense attorney concludes the trial by saying that the Young Woman's marriage was a happy one simply because the married couple did not quarrel when they lived together "She was married to him for six years. She had never quarreled with him. In six years they had never had a quarrel."<sup>30</sup> The court as a male-dominated institution fails to realize that the Young Woman's state of mental confusion comes as a result of living in a society which is witnessing rapid changes which in its turn brought new values to the

society. These values lead people, including the Young Woman, to search for economic security. The Young Woman believes that economic security outweighs personal and emotional fulfillment and this leads her to marry her boss and to the deterioration in her life. Her descent into madness at the end of the play reflects her inability to confront the pressures of society. Sophie Treadwell succeeded in depicting the main trends in feminism through delving into the thoughts and the feelings of the Young Woman whose suffering represents the suffering of all women who live in a male-dominated society.

## **References:**

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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., P.217.
9. Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds its Past,Placing Women in History, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), Introduction, P.XVII.
10. Ibid., P.52.
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23. Treadwell, Machinal, pp.235-236.  
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24. Ozieblo and Dickey, P.147.
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28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, pp.248-249.
30. Ibid., P.245.

## افكار نظرية المساواة النسائية في مسرحية سوفي تريديويل ميكانيكي

م. عالية خليف نجم

الجامعة المستنصرية/ كلية الآداب

### الملخص:

يمكن تفسير مسرحية سوفي تريديويل ميكانيكي والتي تم عرضها في السابع من ايلول عام ١٩٢٩ ضمن اطار حركة المساواة النسائية. وبشكل عام، تهدف حركة المساواة النسائية الى تحقيق حرية واستقلال النساء في المجتمع فضلاً عن ذلك فان الحركة تهدف الى تقليل الفوارق بين الرجال والنساء الذين يمارسون نشاطات اجتماعية. وتطرح سوفي تريديويل في هذه المسرحية مأزق امرأة شابة تعيش في مجتمع يشهد تطورات علمية وصناعية ولكن هذه التطورات تأتي على حساب حرية النساء وحاجتهن الى تحقيق اهدافهن الاساسية المتمثلة في معاملتهن على قدم المساواة مع الرجل في المجتمع وليس في ان يُعاملن كشخص ذي منزلة ادنى في مجتمع يسيطر عليه الرجل. ان المجتمع الميكانيكي الذي تعيش في المرأة الشابة يفرض متطلباته عليها، لذلك فهي تعيش في صراع بين حريتها الشخصية وضرورة الامتثال الى القوانين التي يضعها المجتمع. وتخضع المرأة الشابة الى المجتمع الذي يُجبرها أولاً على العمل والعناية بوالدتها ، ومن ثم يدفعها الى الزواج من رجل غني وذلك حتى تعيش هي ووالدتها حياة مريحة وخالية من القيود الاجتماعية ولكن بذات الوقت يُلغي هذا الزواج شخصيتها وطموحها.

وبعد زواجها من رئيسها في العمل، تشعر المرأة الشابة بعدم قدرتها على التكيف مع حياتها الزوجية الجديدة، أولاً لعدم امتلاكها المعرفة حول الزواج والجنس وثانياً لأن زوجها رجل متسلط ينفذ الى الإحساس ويحرم زوجته من ان تكون لوحدها بعض الوقت حتى تستعد لليلتها معه. ويمكن تفسير ذلك ضمن سياق نظرية المساواة النسائية بأنه أدانة لسيطرة الرجل على المرأة وكنقد لمؤسسة الزواج التي تُحرّم فيها المرأة من حقها بان تفرض وجودها كشخص مستقل ومنفصل عن الرجل.

وقد قامت سوفي تريديويل بتفحص وسبر اغوار شخصية المرأة الشابة واصفةً فهمها المرتبك لمكانها في مجتمع يحكمه الرجل والقيم المادية. ويقودها هذا الارتباك الى الاحباط والذي ينعكس في رفضها لدورها كزوجة مطيعة وأم. فبعد ولادتها لطفلها ترفض المرأة الشابة ارضاع طفلها لأنها غير قادرة على تقبل دورها الجديد كأم.

فضلاً عن ذلك تسعى المرأة الشابة الى العاطفة والتي تجدها في علاقة غير شرعية مع رجل شاب. فبعد انسياقها في علاقتها العاطفية لبعض الوقت ، تقرر المرأة الشابة قتل زوجها وهذا العمل يُفسر من قبل نظرية المساواة بين الجنسين على انه طريقة للهروب من قيود المجتمع ومن الزوج المتسلط الذي تعتبره خصمها الرئيسي لأنه يُجسد خضوعها الى القوة الحامة للقيم والتوقعات الاجتماعية. وتُعتبر المسرحية دعوة الى حرية المرأة والى تغيير النظرة التقليدية والمحدودة اجتماعياً للنساء. ويُعزى نجاح المسرحية الى الافكار المتعلقة بالمساواة بين الجنسين والتي تعتقها الكاتبة والتي قادتها الى كتابة هذه المسرحية حول امرأة تبحث عن الحرية والاستقلال في وقت يشهد اراء متغيرة حول دور النساء في المجتمع.