

# The Dialectics of Patriarchal Chauvinism in Susan Glaspell's Trifles: A Feminist Study

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## **Abstract**

*Feminist critics always champion and cherish their freedom, equality and justice in social status against patriarchal domination. In many societies, males consider themselves superior to females in terms of social, economic, cultural, physical and political status. They are engaged in social activities leaving the women to content themselves with household chores, children and other frivolous activities. This paper explores, how females get dominated in the play Trifles. The dramatic tension in the play arises when men have legal interest whereas the women only collect the trivial things to unravel the murder mystery of Mr. Wright. Men do not care about the trivial things that females always focus in the play. Instead, they mock and laugh at the females' interest on trivial things. This research employs the feminist criticism proposed by Helen Pankhurst as the conceptual frame work to invigorate the study. She supports women's rights on the grounds of equality between the genders, meaning that women should receive the same opportunities, rights, authority and treatment as men. It answers the questions: "How are female characters dominated in the play Trifles? and what might be the ultimate consequences of utter male domination in the family?" Overtly or covertly, females always intend to subvert the patriarchal chauvinism through their rebellious activities in the family and society.*

**Key Words:** feminism, patriarchy, subjugation, ideology, domination, homicide.

## **Subjugation of females**

Patriarchal domination has become the remarkable part of social protest in many societies. Poverty, lack of education, backwardness and superstitions have impeded the progress of the women in many societies. Since women in many societies are economically backward, they have to be the victim of male domination. As a result, they are confined to domestic chores whereas males go out for social and familial functions. Feminist criticism is a criticism advocating equal rights for women in a political, economic, social, psychological, personal and aesthetic sense. On the thematic level, the feminist reader should identify with female characters and their concerns. The object is to provide a critique of phallogocentric assumptions and an analysis of patriarchal visions or ideologies inscribed

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in a literature that is male-centered and maledominated. Feminism and feminist criticism is a concreted and self-conscious approach to literature. Toril Moi presents it as a movement for women's social, economic and cultural freedom and equality:

Feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical, practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature, at least not if the latter is presented as no more than another interesting critical approach on a par with a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry. It is my view that, provided they are compatible with her politics, a feminist critic can use whichever methods or theories she likes. There are, of course, different political views within the feminist camp . . . (115)

Feminists feel that females are in fact made inferior not by nature but by social mechanism. Most thinkers, philosophers, scientists, leaders and prophets including gods being male, they have always given undue advantage to males over females. Aristotle holds that "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" and St. Thomas views that a woman is "an imperfect man. (qtd. in Selden 134).

Feminism questions such long – standing dominant, male, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. It attacks the male notions of value in literature and criticism. To subvert the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture, it offers critiques of male authors and representations of men in literature and also privileges women writers. Many points between feminist criticism and Marxism come together in that they are both opposed to social oppression. When feminism joins hands with Marxism or anti-racist movement or the like it acquires a political position. Catharine R. Stimpson comments on feminism :

Accepting such a theory as axiomatic, feminist critics have exerted their energies in three fields. They have first unraveled the thick tapestries of male hegemony, and unknotted networks of conscious assumptions and unconscious presumptions about women. . . ., Feminist critics have decomposed the representation of women in culture: the images, stereotypes, and archetypes. They have found woman as beautiful other, as aesthetic object whose power is that of eros, glamour, and fashion. They have found woman as mother, whose will and power, if checked and directed, will succor. . . (273)

Kate Millet as a feminist, in *Sexual Politics*, examines how power relations work and how men manipulate and perpetuate male dominance over women. She argues that patriarchy is the cause of women's oppression. She states: "Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male" (qtd. in Selden 137). In her analysis of social science, she says that sex is a matter of biology, while gender is a culturally acquired sexual identity. In social practice, for example, the boy is supposed to be brave and courageous while the girl is identified as meek, timid and obedient. These attributes are held as universal virtues and taken for granted owing to the male dominated power structures in the society.

The one scene play *Trifles* centers on a mystery of homicide and the relationship between men and women at the time. The males' perceptions toward the females' roles and activities draw the major concerns of the critics in the play.

### **Patriarchal Domination**

The play presents the scene of a gloomy kitchen of an abandoned farmhouse. The various activities such as dishes and pans left unwashed, things left scattered and bread prepared but not yet baked indicate the house in disarray. John Wright, a farm owner, has recently been murdered at night in his bed, strangled by rope. His wife, Minnie Wright, the only person confirmed present at the time of, is accused of the homicide. Both males and females- neighboring people go to the Wright home the day after the murder in order to find the mystery of relentless murder. Five people arrive at the house to investigate the scene of a crime, including the county attorney, George Henderson, the local sheriff, Henry Peters, and the neighbor, Lewis Hale, who discovers a murdered man, John Wright, strangles with a rope in his bed.

The men are accompanied by two of their wives, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. Mr. Hale describes for the country attorney the experience of finding John Wright's dead body the previous day. He stops by his neighbors' house to ask if they want to install a party line telephone. He encounters Minnie Wright sitting in her rocking chair, and she calmly announces that her husband is dead. Mr. Hale goes upstairs to find the body, and leaves everything in place for the inspection of the attorney and the sheriff. Minnie claims that she does not wake up when her husband gets strangled in their bed:

HALE. Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked...[stops; his face twitches]... but Harry, he went out up to him, and he said, "No, he is dead all right and we'd better not touch anything." So we went back downstairs. She was still sitting that same way. "Has anybody been notified?" I asked. "no, says she, unconcerned. "Who did this, Mrs. Wright?" said Harry. He said it business like- and she stopped pleating of her apron. "I don't know," she says. "You don't know?" says Harry. "no," says she. "Weren't you sleeping in the bed with him?" says Harry. "Yes," says she, "but I was on the inside." "Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?" says Harry. "I didn't wake up," she said after him. We must a looked as if we didn't see how that could be for after a minute she said." I sleep sound." (104)

Mrs. Wright (Minnie) has been arrested for the crime and is being held until her trial. The men do not look closely around the kitchen for evidence of a motive, but discover Minnie's frozen and broken canning jars of fruits. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale know that Minnie is worried about her canning jars, and the sheriff jokes that a woman will worry about such things while held for murder. The men criticize Minnie's poor housekeeping, as evidenced by the mess in the kitchen and a dirty towel. This shows the male superiority over females reflected in the males' voices, "Country Attorney: Here is a nice mess. The women draw nearer (104)".

The men go upstairs to inspect the bedroom and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale collect items from the kitchen that Minnie requested be brought to her at the jail, including clothes and an apron. The women comment on the strangeness of strangling a man to death when the men had pointed out that there was a gun in the house, “Mrs. Hale: That is just what Mr. Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that is what he can’t understand (106)”. The women admire a quilt that Minnie was working on, and are wondering if she was going to finish it by “quilting” or “knotting” when the men reenter and, overhearing the women talking, joke about the women’s trivial concerns at a time like this. As a result, the men belittle the women, mocking their character, intelligence, and subservience. Such mocking and laughing at them indicate the subordination of males over females. The men laugh at the women for their emphasis on “trifles,” the small needs of housekeeping and comfort, even when those things are all the men allow the women to have :

MRS. PETERS. She was piecing a quilt. [ she brings the large sewing basket and they look at the bright pieces.]

MRS. HALE. It is a log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn’t it ? I wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it.[Footsteps have been heard coming down the stairs.....]

SHERIFF. They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it ! [The men laugh, the women look abashed. (107)

The men have not only oppressed the women, they also blame the women for enjoying the only things their oppression allows them to have. Once again left alone by the men, the women notice that some of the stitching of the quilt is very poor, as if Minnie were nervous or upset. The women then find a birdcage without any bird in it. Mrs. Hale expresses strong regrets having not come to visit Minnie more often, acknowledging that John Wright was a hard man and that it must have been very difficult for Minnie to be alone at her house. She compares Mrs. Wright with the bird they find in a cage , “ Mrs. Hale : She –come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself- real sweet and pretty , but kind of timid and – fluttery. How- she- did- change silence....]” (109). It shows that Mrs. Wright like the imprisoned bird lacks freedom being loaded with domestic chores. She has been confined within the four walls of the house like a caged bird. It is a striking instance of patriarchal subjugation in which males carry out their business in society leaving the women inside the four walls to accomplish the household chores including nurturing the children. Helen Pankhurst refutes patriarchal supremacy in society advocating gender equality, “The first thing you can do is call yourself a feminist, because if you don’t even have the courage to do that, then you’re already shying away from speaking up against inequality. So for me, it’s a really important first step about saying, ‘I believe that there is gender [inequality] and there is still something we need to do, that we need to address ( qtd. in Gibbs ).”

Mrs. Hale calls Minnie before her marriage and how cheerfully she sings in the choir. The women then uncover a beautiful red box, and in it, the dead bird that was missing from the birdcage, its neck broken. When the men return, Mrs. Hale hides the box with the

body of the bird. Once the men leave again, Mrs. Peters remembers a boy who killed her childhood pet kitten, and her certainty that she would have hurt him in return if she could have, “[in a whisper]: When I was a girl- my kitten- there was a boy took a hatchet and before my eyes- and before I could get there- [Covers her face an instant] If they hadn’t held me back I would have- [catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly] – hurt him(109).” This also indicates the male arrogant and aggressive nature against the innocent pet. The men return, and the sheriff asks if the county attorney wants to take a look at the items Mrs. Peters is bringing to Minnie at the jail. He says that Mrs. Peters does not need supervising and assumes the things she is taking are not harmful. The women hide the box with the body of the bird. The county attorney jokes that at least they discover the fate of Minnie’s quilt project.

At the beginning of the play, the women too seem to accept the gender roles that oppress them as something of a natural world order. However, as the play progresses, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to recognize that, as women, they are being .In Minnie’s dead bird , a bird strangled by her husband , they see their own strangled hopes, perhaps even their own strangled lives. And in this joint recognition they find a connection between themselves and with other women, and begin, in their own quiet yet profound way, to rebel. Mrs Wright’s homicide indicates a radical rebellion against her husband’s domination in the family. The loneliness and boredom that emanate from her joyless and repressed life might have motivated her to murder her husband.

## Conclusion

The play presents a world of strict gender roles, in which the men occupy the sphere of work while the women exist solely in the home. Yet the separation of men’s and women’s spheres is not merely one of a division of labor. Rather, *Trifles* portrays a world, dominated by men, in which social expectations and restrictions have essentially confined women to the home and bound them to their husbands, with little control or identity of their own. For instance, the county attorney, George Henderson and the sheriff, Henry Peters emphasize Minnie Wright’s role as a housekeeper, and feel free to judge her shortcomings in this area. The main characters of the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, are identified solely by their husbands’ last names. Minnie is the only woman in the play to get a first name, but this name only emphasizes how she is transformed by marriage, losing possession of her very self, when she marries and goes from Minnie Foster to Minnie Wright. Minnie’s situation is an extreme one, completely isolated at home and without children, but her isolation is merely a difference of degree from that of other women. Both of the other women in the play can understand Minnie’s situation because it is just an amplification of their own. While the men socialize through their work and in the world, the women are stuck at home by themselves.

At the same time, the title of the play highlights the trifling concerns that the men mock, and in doing so emphasizes that the “trifles” that the men overlook the feminine

concerns. Ironically, it is these “trifles” that lead the women to uncover true evidence concerning the crime, while the men are unsuccessful in finding a motive during their search of the Wrights’ house. The importance of the trifles demonstrates the way that the men, in their power and self-importance, completely overlook the importance of women and their domestic activities. This shows that the patriarchal chauvinism is crystal clear in the play.

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