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Imprisoned Woman in Traditional Roles and Convictions in Glaspell's Play "The Verge"

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Abstract

During the Victorian era many women begin to voice dissatisfaction with their lack of opportunities and not only try but decide confront and change the bad situation. Other women rebel by retreating into misery, depression and sometimes madness. It is clearly that the period after WW1 was the age of the suffragettes that caused the emergence of many feminist movements; one of them was suffragette movement which created the idea of the new an independent woman.

America particularly witnesses a great change at the beginning of 20th century. Despite the WW1 was ended, still its influence affects society as people feels restless due to war's stress; looking for a release. New modernity that less restrictive are replaced the old Victorian sever principles. The people begin to adopt new beliefs, morals and attitudes. Women have new position in society, wider variety of jobs, and more freedom and equal rights.

Many dramatists shed light on the suffering of woman and the obstacles that hinder her from achieving her personality and freeing herself from the prison of Victorian traditional convictions. Suzan Glaspell (1876–1948) was one of them, an American Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, novelist, journalist and actress who play a significant role in 20th century American literature in general. Her plays concentrate on revealing how Victorian society obliged some women to be imprisoned in roles that might be unfitted for them as wives and mothers.

Keywords: suffering, equality, identity, madness, new woman, convictions, instability

Introduction:

One of man/ woman basic needs is freedom that play vital role in social process as their development means to increase their choices which required freedom. Hence, man/ woman development is the most significant factor of welfare development where the freedom is an indispensable element to accomplish it.

Lynn Dumenil asserts that after the end of WW1 everything is changed in society specifically woman's view and idea about her personality, identity and freedom that leads to have new intelligent woman who rejects all traditional convictions that hinder her progress in life and express her thoughts freely. She refuses to be imprisoned woman in the role of being a wife and mother only; stating that: "new woman was, and still is, often associated with flappers, short hair, short dresses, and a party lifestyle where deeper analysis points towards changes in the family, and sexual mores, women's participation in the work force, and political activism of these newly enfranchised citizens" (Dumenil, 2016: 22).

Obviously, it was a time when differences and inequalities between man / woman started questioned.

Regarded as the mother of American drama, Glaspell in her three acts play, *The Verge* (1921) portrayed a woman imprisoned in a condition that gradually drives her to insanity. This play takes place during the time of prevention. Expressionistic in literature that appeared in 20th century depends on using techniques of distortion and symbolism to reflect inner human experience "it can be thought of seeing the world through a particular character's eyes" (Costsell, 2005: 10).

In his study of modern drama, Isaac Goldberg avers that "The Verge a portrait of manic depressive psychosis and possibly the most original and probing play that has been written in America by 1921" (Goldberg, 1922: 477). Then he adds that this play is "focusing on its theoretical agenda, there is more than rebellious womanhood in these dramas; there is consciousness of valid self, or of a passion for freedom, of dynamic personality; there is craving for life in its innermost meaning" (Golding, 1922: 490). Through concentrating on woman and her spiritual situation; using outdated roles and normal language, Glaspell shows the importance of individual/woman's freedom. Her language emphasizes restrictions and borders that Claire Archer the main protagonist of the play wishes to exceed.

The Freedom's Concept:

Freedom is defined as the man/ woman right to act according to his/ her desires without causing any harm to others. So, it is a fundamental right in human rights, because without it a person cannot carry out his work (Friedman, 1990: 12). More specifically, freedom means that an individual doing all the things he wants to do without harming others in order to develop his personality and enhance his skills and creative potential. Moreover, freedom helps him to develop his relationship with others and society that making him bears responsibility for all the decisions that he made freely.

According to Sen (1999: 25), freedom means to be free from the restrictions that limit a person's energies and production, whether they are physical or moral restrictions. It includes getting rid of slavery to a person, a group, or oneself, and of the pressures imposed on a person to carry out a purpose. It is obvious that the concept of freedom as a word is for a person to be able to make the decision that suits him, of his own free will, without coercion or influence from any external factors.

Freedom enables individuals to live with each other in harmony and respect. It also allows them to realize the importance of the rights of others, and that controlling and using them as a means to achieve "an end discourages their creativity and potential and is considered a failure to respect human dignity" (Sen: 33). Also, one of the conditions for free will is the existence of the moral aspect in it that upgrading individuals and societies and supporting the renaissance of nations. Therefore, the failure of considering the moral interest in freedom means there is a defect in understanding of moral obligation in general.

Freedom expresses everything that a person does without harming others. So, freedom is necessary for the development of the person and strengthening his relationship with society. In other words, every member of a free society should possess complete freedom for enhancing and supporting creative capabilities in society

The progress of society depends on cooperation between individuals to reach creativity and discover the special capabilities of each of them, which can only be available when societal restrictions are reduced. All members of a free society can develop their skills and potential with only minimal societal constraints.

Imprisoned Woman:

Glaspell's play *The Verge* represents Claire wishes to breed a single herbal whereas her husband, sister, daughter and friends fear that her obsessive tries causes her madness and futilely effort to divert her attention. As expressionistic drama, *The Verge* concentrates on certain distorted and hyperbole elements to reveal Claire's behavior, situation, inner suffering and to help seeing the world through the character's manner and ideas.

As a woman imprisoned in situations beyond her control, Claire attempts to free from the prison in which she lived and to seek otherness in herself; she creates a new unusual forms of plants. This creation can help her to escape from the controlled forms that compel her from creating a new life; considering it as the only salvation "We need not be held in forms molded for us. There is outness and otherness" (Glaspell, 1921: 15). She believes that through this creation, she can recreate herself as she is unhappy and frustrated due to her inability of real communication with others.

Unlike Claire, her sister Adelaide who has five children and raised Elizabeth, Claire's daughter from her first marriage, is a suitable Victorian woman who used to rebuke Claire for not taking her responsibility as obedient wife and good mother. She calls Claire unnatural for not showing an outmoded mother's affection for her daughter. It is obvious that Adelaide is so content with the role society has given for her "I go about in the world—free, busy, happy, among people, I have no time to think of myself" (Glaspell: 45).

Throughout the play, we notice that Claire fails to convey her emotions and remains imprisoned woman of no ability to be free. For her, it is so difficult to break the forms that imprison her. This increases her frustration and disappointment that pushes her to madness "Things that take a sporting chance go mad" (Glaspell: 61). In fact, she does not believe that madness is an awful thing but it is her only chance to be free "Madness that is the only chance for sanity" (Glaspell: 65).

Harry, Claire's husband is a pilot who used to restrain Claire's abnormal conduct in order to make her behave according to the outdated Victorian life because he believes that a normal woman should be perfectly homemaker, mother and wife. He never tries to understand her behavior and the meaning of plant to her "Well, I don't want to see it get you—it's not important enough for that" (Glaspell: 70); believing that she suffers from hysteria. Harry tries to revert Claire back to her normal self. He calls Dr. Charlie Emmons to help her. The Dr. does not believe in new Freudian theories of psychoanalysis on the contrary he believes that relaxation and isolation can be a suitable treatment for hysterical persons. Even her old friend Tom, a poet and philosopher who loves her and is the most sensitive to her feeling fails to understand her agony. His failure to make Claire lives in her real world ultimately is regarded as an indication to the play's highpoint.

Elizabeth, Claire's daughter from her first marriage is graceful and self-assured yet does not see her mother about one year. She tries to be close to her mother but the latter discards her since Elizabeth symbolizes everything that keep woman imprisoned in the traditional role. Unlike others, Elizabeth is aware that nothing stays forever; in other words things are changed in society very quickly despite her unbelieving in the change; "I'm not going to teach or preach or be a stuffy person. But now that values have shifted and such sensitive new things have been liberated in the world" (Glaspell: 50). From her words, we notice that Elizabeth is a creation of her background and is suitable to accomplish the role that society supposes of her.

Claire does not have the ability to reunite her inside wishes with the beliefs that society has entrenched in woman for long time and makes her suffers from internal struggle that is passionately overwhelming for many. According to Freud, the repression of memories and experiences causes mental illness that can be cured if the causes are discovered (Sievers, 1955: 22). But, Claire makes every person protected from her sentiments and life.

WW I had great effect upon American society and people's lives. As Harry said "I'd like to have Charlie Emmons see her—he's fixed up a lot of people shot to pieces in the war" (Glaspell: 82); war signaled a kind of virtue's defeat. On the contrary to Harry, Claire sees war as a missed opportunity for society to remake itself, "The war. There was another gorgeous chance.... But the war didn't help. Oh, it was a stunning chance! But fast as we could—scuttled right back to the trim little thing we'd been shocked out of" (Glaspell: 86). For her, war symbolizes the opportunity for the conception of a different world. She explains her idea about war by saying " We were shut in with what wasn't so" (Glaspell: 91) this reveals her hope that war might help society to destroy all bonds and chains that hinder man/ woman to find better means of communication with each other. When Harry asks Claire the reason for referring to WW1 as a "gorgeous chance" she answers in factual Socratic style, "I don't know—precisely. If I did—there'd be no use in saying it" (Glaspell: 95). Unfortunately, this is only a dream or illusion since woman is still imprisoned in unchanged awful conditions. Claire insists to free herself from what she sees to be her prison and her last word before sinking of the song is 'out'. She emphasizes that in war death "could have led the human spirit to break through to a new form in the same way that plants explode their species" (Glaspell: 99).

In this play, Glaspell used various symbols and images to shed light on the inevitable reality in this world that is life and death; one of these, the plants through which Claire can create life and destroy it at the same time when she destroys the Edge Vine. She never frightens death on the contrary she considers it as relief from her awful reality "Why should we mind lying under the earth?" Claire believes that if people are planted in the earth, they might sprout forth anew into a better world" (Glaspell: 98). Her killing Tom at the end of the play is not out of hatred but love as she considers death a gift given to Tom. Death according to her idiosyncratic mind is greatest possibility for life. In addition, the window symbolizes an obstacle "trapping Claire and yet keeping her safe and Claire's desire to push out, her yearning to break free" (Ben-Zvi, 1995:6).

The visual and social patterns are used to reveal the chains that trapped Claire and to reveal the unchangeable nature of Claire's domain; especially the portrayal of the greenhouse "The frost has made patterns on the glass as if as Plato would have it—the patterns inherent in abstract nature and behind all life had to come out.... And the wind makes patterns of sound around the glass house" (Ozieblo, 1995: 80). Claire feels that community patterns imprisoned her, therefore she decides to release from them; starting from the patterns of her words but unfortunately she never succeeded. Her failure makes her gradually nervous, "Stop doing that!—words going into patterns; they do it sometimes when I let come what's there. Thoughts take pattern—then pattern is the thing" (Glaspell: 110). Clearly, for Glaspell, the patterns symbolize the means Victorian society imprisoned woman into restricted and unchanged character.

Other images are of shattering and exploding through which Claire tries to rearrange old concepts and means of being through exploding what already exists. This is shown clearly when she wishes to shatter conventions saying "I want to break it up! If it were all in pieces, we'd be shocked to aliveness" (Glaspell: 40). Claire focuses on exploding through her

speech about in what way plants can detonate species; something she regards so attractive and valiant as well. Later on and specifically at the end of the play, she tells Tom "Perhaps the madness that gave you birth will burst again" (Glaspell: 120). Here, she exactly shatters first the smell of life plant by hitting Tom into it, second the greenhouse when she sprouts through the roof.

When Claire in the tower through a bulging window might seem pushed on from the inside just to express her emotive loneliness and her yearning to get rid of this terrible world and be a free woman. Moreover, those distorted elements can convey Claire's physical expression and her inner emotional state. They are shown in a strong light comes from the trap door to lighten the plant that appears as a optimistic spot in this dim world; "The plant itself is described as having a greater transparency than plants have had and it is in a hidden place within the greenhouse" (Kattelman, 2003: 6) to emphasize the sole and strange living thing like Claire herself.

Claire's words are strange, broken, incomplete and unusual to mirror her powerlessness for finding words that can express her feelings and thoughts; trying to communicate but find traditional speech insufficient. Hence, she restores to poetry to convey her deeper meaning and the sentences' shattered construction

signifies her desire to destroy the social structure "Claire breaks away from sentences into verse, in the hope that she will come closer to what she wants to express, but she finds poetry equally confining" as Gainor comments (2001: 144). Even, Tom's speech becomes broken when they discuss their relationship, "You—you brave flower of all our knowing" and "You rare thing untouched—not—not into this—not back into this—by me—lover of your apartness" (Glaspell: 123). He tries to understand her but in vain.

The connections between the characters expose the social elements as everyman has a specific relationship with Claire that shows the several means of how men treated women at that period. Harry, her husband, just wants to dominate her, "be decent", 'don't take it so seriously', 'be amusing', and 'snap out of it' (Glaspell: 75) as a man of the house exerts power over woman. Dick concentrates only on his physical relationship with her, not care about her behavior. On the other hand, despite of Tom's seeking to apprehend her; he desperately cannot transmit woman's behavior.

Only Tom gropes toward an understanding of her disjointed utterances. Tom ultimately fails in his efforts, however. He cannot break through to Claire any more than can the other characters (Stanton, 1969: 22).

Here, he shows his real colors and tells Claire, "You are mine, and you will stay with me! [Roughly.] You hear me? You will stay with me! (Glaspell: 190). After returning to the corner, Tom begins to give instructions. This clarifies that all men have the same thoughts about Claire's behavior and without any restrictions they suggest their views.

The relationships of the female characters also reveal the social elements. Elizabeth is regarded as apt new Victorian woman that is modest, well-mannered, frisky, and educated. Claire cannot tolerate her daughter Elizabeth for being a conventional woman and her existence reminds her of a role she wants to deny but cannot. The same with her sister, Adelaide who embodies everything Claire is rebelling against. Claire is neither a good sister nor a good mother; she seeks to be her own terms.

Claire is upset due to the traditional choices of both her sister and her daughter. Adelaide confesses that Claire has done nothing exciting and mannerly, therefore she suggests that Claire must try to behave like her, "free, busy, and happy. Among people, I have no time to think of myself"(Glaspell: 100). This conventional choice attacks Claire as a conspiracy in

which people try to be alike "in order to assure one another that we're all just all right"(Glaspell: 131). Claire blames Adelaide of "staying in one place because she hasn't the energy to go anywhere else through a creative venue of her own" (Glaspell: 134). Claire hates to be similar to those people around her living in the cave. Hence, she exerts all her efforts to escape for she believes that there are many good choices outside, but not sure.

The ignoring, misunderstanding and ill-treating consequently push Claire to become more frantic woman. Obsessed by her own innermost need to achieve a new female identity and irritated by her plant's failure to practice their own essential forms, she kills Tom, the only one who tries to comprehend her and sings insanely against the background of warped biological freaks. She has driven mad because of the people around her who refuse to consider her realism seriously; "Sometimes—from my lowest moments—beauty has opened as the sea. From a cave I saw immensity" (Glaspell: 138).

Her instability is revealed through her following words:

Let me tell you how it is with me. I do not want to work, I want to be; Do not want to make a rose or make a poem—want to lie upon the earth and know. (Closes her eyes) Stop doing that!— words going into patterns. They do it sometimes when I let come what's there (Glaspell: 151).

These words clearly show an unusual burden on her psych suffering from everything that makes her nervous and fidgety woman.

As a matter of fact, Claire is surrounded by five people, two women and three men through whom Glaspell shows how Claire's feminism is different from others. Her relation with those men affects her passively. First, with her husband, Harry is completely paying no attention to Claire's strange behavior with others. Dick, Claire's lover as an artist can feel something of what she is striving for but refuses her attempt to destroy her un growing plants. He loses her due to his objection against the ripping out her latest creation the edge vine. Tom, the third man is closest to Claire in dream and fondness for being her lover who has moved beyond physical passion to spiritual contemplation deciding to be her protector. With him, Claire feels safe, a lover who is the only one understands her. But she stifles him when she realizes that he prevents her to go beyond love and trust. Being a tempter who draws her back from otherness causes his death as in a rage of love and out of desperate she kills him; crying "It is you puts out the breath of life" (Glaspell: 161). So, at the end of the play, she becomes alone accepting only the identity given to her by Tom. In other words, she refuses to be like her conventional daughter and her sister for inability to understand her.

Despite, Claire is an intelligent woman who seeks to achieve her personality, identity and education, man on the other side considers woman's education is a dangerous thing. In his book, *Hysteria, Feminism and Gender*, Showalter states that:

Edward Clarke in the United States and Henry Maudsley in England drew on new theories of the conservation of energy to argue that mental and physical energy were finite and competing. Women's energy, post-Darwinian scientists believed, was naturally intended for reproductive specialization. Thus women were heavily handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in intellectual competition with men. (Showalter, 1985:297)

In this view, because Claire's energy was not being used for maternal pursuits, it could be displaced onto work in the sciences: a masculine endeavor. Harry and Dick show signs that they have grown tired of Claire's work. In Act One, she directs all of the house's heat into the greenhouse in order to protect her plants. When the men enter that space, they destabilize the temperature. Claire pays no attention to anyone whether her husband, relatives or guests. For Harry, the greenhouse is of no significance; whereas, Tom, her soul mate, regards her greenhouse as something of great values.

Claire is not a victim of man domination but of a closed society that confines her identity through forcing on her role of wife and mother "that insists on dulling her brilliance as a woman and a scientist, and that twists her desire for otherness into something depraved and crazy" (Waterman, 1979: 17–23). As a different woman and biologist, she feels exiled for finding no room in the normal world as her both places, the greenhouse and the tower are frequently occupied by others. Claire, like the freed prisoner, compares her escape to a liberating destruction:

You think I can't smash anything? You think life can't break up, and go outside what it was? Because you have gone dead in the form in which you found yourself, you think that's all there is to the whole adventure? And that is called sanity. And made a virtue to lock one in (Glaspell: 166).

In the final scene, Claire pushes Tom through a glass greenhouse wall while trying to stifle him. In fact, Tom represents a temptation to abandon her project when he offers to keep her safe, and therefore he is her most dangerous threat. She eradicates the temptation to be with him, wishing "not to stop it by seeming to have it, where it represents her pursuit of knowledge and happiness through her experiments" (Tasca, 2012: 110). She considers Tom's death as a gift given to him to be in another world that she seeks to live in. Moreover, his death makes her lost the security her family can offer her. Through the tragic ending, Glaspell focuses on questioning the sanity of ending and creating systems. To subvert the false restrictions on woman's role in society, Glaspell portrayed Claire as woman scientist who refuses wife and motherhood when no place for her priorities. She is a brave woman since her character reveals "frustration, absorption, and excitement of developing a new form" (Hapgood, 1972: 377). Her project succeeds only to be uncontrolled as she loses her psychological strengths and becomes possessed by a transcendent vision.

living in a time of great social and theatrical change, Glaspell focuses on feminism, socialism and idealism to enhance her beliefs in not only woman's freedom of speech and choice but individual in general; "Glaspell's feminism, socialism, and realism were always controlled by the tensions that arose from the inevitable clash of her convictions "(2008: 139) as Ozieblo and etal. state. Unfortunately, Claire's objections to social norms oppressive to woman cause her mental health. Hence, words like "disturbed, queer and hysterical" (Ozieblo: 115) are used to define Claire's recent attitudes.

Conclusion:

Susan Glaspell is one of the first great American woman playwrights. Most of her plays concentrate on feminist themes that expose the consequences of woman's oppression for they have been written during the first movement of feminism; a time that encourages

woman to have jobs, rights, opportunity and personality. Her plays concentrate on the struggle of being a woman in a time woman tries to form her identity.

The time in which Glaspell lived is of great social change for that she focuses on revealing woman's role in society that imprisons her and makes her live in hard and old traditions that hinder her from achieving her identity and expressing her ideas, wishes and hopes freely. Therefore, through discussing woman's role in society, Glaspell criticizes the relationship between man/woman and the restricted rules imposed on woman that forced her to play roles in society she dislikes or unconvinced to do.

Claire is frustrated because of the traditional choices imposed on her. She is a victim of a closed society that limits her identity through forcing on her only role of wife and mother. Feeling imprisoned in the traditional convictions and finding no one to understand her cause the instability and mental illness; pushing her to be a killer at the end.

As a matter of fact, the development of any society is closely linked to scientific, political and intellectual development alike, and measuring the levels of this development is by the extent to which the margin of freedom is felt in the exercise of creativity and expression. The shrinking margin of freedom prevents this development and stands as a stumbling block in the way of intellectual growth just what happen to Claire as the price she has paid to be free is her life.

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