



**Department of Humanities**

**Undoing Trifles: (De) Construction of Female  
Identity in Susan Glaspell's Selected Plays**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Of  
Master of Arts in English Literature**

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**January 2013**



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**In the Name of God**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 General Overview

Glaspell, then, as a serious dramatist—one of the few Americans whose progress is worth watching with the same eyes that follow notable European effort— is largely the playwright of woman's selfhood (Goldberg 474).

Susan Glaspell, still obscured in public literary and historical memory is one of the most influential female dramatists of American literature. Glaspell was a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, a best-selling novelist, and the co-founder of the Provincetown Players, the little theatre did most to promote American dramatists. It was Glaspell who began “the entrance of the United States drama into the deeper currents of continental waters” (Goldberg 471). She was also an early supporter of Eugene O’Neill earning a higher reputation; however, Glaspell proved her superiority over him in various aspects. Isaac Goldberg makes a comparison between Glaspell and O’Neil stating “Glaspell is the woman of thought [...] Glaspell’s intensity of thought [...] induces a straining toward wit, an eminently intellectual process” (472). In terms of their plays’ characters, Goldberg approves of Glaspell’s rebellious female characters who speak of their “otherness” and “outness” as no character in O’Neil’s ones. It is not only Goldberg who has viewed Glaspell with favor; many critics such as Andrew Malone, Peters and Bigsby have remarked her superiority over O’Neil. Not long after her theatrical success, in 1925, James Agate and R. Ellis Roberts spoke highly of her and called her “as heir to Ibsen and Shaw” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* ix). Indeed, she was a pioneer in every sense of the

word; both in her life and on theatrical stage, she pushed back the finite boundaries as Ben-Zvi depicted her “breaking with anything that was too comfortable, just as she broke with any writing style that seemed too patterned and predictable” (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* xiii). Considering her “the playwright of woman’s selfhood” (Goldberg 474), most of her plays concern female protagonists who are representing their desired identity by opposing the constructed notions of gender. Although her feminism is evident, complex social and political forces exist in her work to make her a modernist reformer too. By challenging the hegemony, she seems to aim at awakening the audience to the need of this change as she believes “repeating old forms” is of no use (qtd. in Rohe 18).

The existing themes of deconstruction, nonconformity and resistance to any hegemony locate Glaspell’s works in the area of post-structural feminism in spite of the temporal gap between post-structuralism and her. Post-structural feminists have given prominence to the construction of identities in the context of discursive power structures. In the like manner, Glaspell tried to reexamine female identities and roles within patriarchal framework in order to destabilize the very framework. This study is then concerned to utilize Glaspell’s drama as a case study through which to explore the cultural meanings that are constructed and circulated regarding the terms ‘woman’, ‘female’ and ‘femininity’; those which offer positions to women to take up and from which they can diverge.

All the same, the mother of American drama was not constantly eulogized throughout her life. Despite her early reputation, she was excluded from American canonization due to some social and political reasons, namely “the bias of the canon and the critical scholarship which surrounds it” (Goodman and de Gay 38). Even Ben-Zvi claims that she discovered Glaspell through O’Neil studies (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* ix). It was not until late 60s that her name reappeared by feminist movements and her *Trifles* turned to the central text in gender studies. It is

fortunate that owing to the recent interest in recovering women writers who have been marginalized, Glaspell's name is resurrected. And this study is a part of this effort which focuses on the concept of female identity. In the present study, the researcher attempts to shed critical light on Glaspell's plays in terms of their simultaneous construction and deconstruction of female identity.

## **1.2 Argument**

The present study aims to explore the questions of identity and gender in Glaspell's selected plays including *Trifles*, *The Outside*, *The Verge*, and *Bernice*. This study offers the analysis of Glaspell's efforts to dismantle the normative constructions of female identity resulting in putting any conventional social system into a state of flux. This analysis is applied in the light of post-structural feminist theories of Butler concerning performance and performativity. In order to gain this purpose, the researcher attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What aspects of female identity are depicted in Susan Glaspell's plays?
- 2) How do Glaspell's selected plays unsettle the discursive constructions of female identity in theatrical space?
- 3) Where and how do the modes of resistance and queerness lead to the new figurations of identity?
- 4) How does Glaspell's experimental drama relate to post-structural theories of Butler in gender studies?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

The paramount concern for the purposes of this study is Glaspell herself who is one of the most prominent female voices in twentieth century of American theater. It was not only feminist theater of America in 1960s-1980s that was rooted in her experimental dramas; she was also among those who brought modernism to America. “Experimental in form and content, her plays brought expressionism and social criticism to the American stage”, Barbara Ozieblo asserted in her article, "Susan Glaspell's Contributions to Contemporary Women Playwrights" (149). In spite of her accomplishments as a novelist, the present study has brought her plays into consideration due to special features of drama. Theatre has historically been regarded as a space for challenging the dominant modes of thought and social structures. In this respect, drama is selected as the examined genre on account of the subversive possibilities of performance which is accentuated since it is governed by a female point of view. To Dick Hebdige, a British media theorist, women’s performance art is marked with disruption and subversion since it “poses an actual woman as a speaking subject, throwing that position into process, into doubt, opposing the traditional conception of the single, unified (male)” (Goodman and de Gay 237). Considering that Glaspell’s plays are female-centered texts, the researcher tries to review how these female depictions reflect, create, and subvert social constructions of femininity.

Delving deeper into this issue, particular attention is given to Butler’s notion of performance as a process in which gender identities are constituted. Butler’s groundbreaking theories, which lead to breaking down the limiting well-defined concepts of femininity, are the second reason for writing this thesis.

Butler emphasizes the need to rethink gender categories outside the metaphysical concept of substance. Indeed, this thesis goes to one of the core elements of Butlerian critique which is performativity. In this context, the term performativity designates the understanding of gender

(and identity in consequence) as being constructed. However, Glaspell so artistically subjects these constructs to ingenious deconstructions promising a potential for dislocating the structures of representation. In the course of the study, the researcher examines the construction and deconstruction of female identity pervading Glaspell's selected plays leading to the unsettlement of women's ascribed roles.

But even more important is the novelty of the research. The under-representation of female dramatists could not pass Glaspell by, so she has been effaced from plenty of canonical considerations in spite of her artistic genius. Although she has come to critics' attention in recent decades, she is still unknown in Iran. Consequently, restoring her former reputation is of a greater significance which makes this research substantial.

#### **1.4 Approach and Methodology**

The general approach of this thesis is guided by post-structural feminist theories which have been widely adopted by both critics and practitioners since the 1980s. Post-structural feminism emphasizes the discursive nature of gender identities and in particular the social construction of gendered identities. While ultimately preferring a selective pluralism rather than choosing a rigid approach, this study is underpinned by Judith Butler's tenets through which she explores the constricting nature of social norms imposing certain identities on women. Drawing on Butler's use of the critical concept of performativity as the source of gender identity constructs, the researcher explores how Glaspell's plays negotiate the regulatory discourses of female entities which have historically informed women's identity to secure their inferior social position.

To carry out this library based research, the researcher has adopted the method of close analysis of each play in terms of gender and performance theories. The required information is,

directly or indirectly, sought through different books, essays, electronic and other relevant sources in order to meet the objectives of the research.

### **1.5 Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited to four of Glaspell's plays including *Trifles*, *The Verge*, *Bernice and The Outside*. Though Glaspell did well in her novels too, her plays were selected in order to suit the purposes of the study owing to the applied approach which is post-structural feminism. Among the leading figures of post-structural feminism who share a particular emphasis on the contingent nature of identities, Butler's theories are given prominence by virtue of their novelty and recency. The researcher explores Glaspell's efforts to dismantle the normative constructions of female identity in her plays. Female identity is studied from different aspects such as its interaction with others as presented in motherhood and marriage patterns, the concept of resistance and the subversion of authority which is clarified in light of feminist theories like performance and queer theory.

### **1.6 Review of Literature**

In respect of the theme of the thesis, the sources used are twofold: on the one hand, there are some concerning feminist theories of gender construction and performance. Rejecting femininity as a derivative of biology has long been stated by several feminists. Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) of Eva Figs both state the artificiality of gender positions which culminates in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1988) in which she claims "A woman is not born". *The Second Sex* which marks the beginning of the second-wave feminism is a vital impressive text in feminist thought. Weaving together feminism and history, de Beauvoir offers a historical exploration of inequality and otherness. She

finds roots of women's oppression in history holding "it is not the inferiority of women that has caused their historical insignificance: it is rather their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority" (132). Drawing on Hegel's "master-slave dialectic", she finds the existence of two opposing positions of subject and object inevitable. Through such dialectic, men have objectified women and characterized them as passive and incomplete. She also discusses the impact of "eternal femininity" myth, an illusory concept, on human consciousness which is reinforced by maternity. As an existentialist, De Beauvoir debunks the notion of "eternal femininity" and states that woman is made a woman by society and as a result of certain situations.

However, the main interest remains with the exploration of Judith Butler's theories. Butler, in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) rejecting the concept of femininity as an essence, argues the construction of gender identity through the constant repetition of performance. She explores the dynamics, through which genders are constructed and performed. She also proposes the double-edged nature of performance which can either take up an empowering or a threatening strategy. However, this performance is not of one's own free will. Being profoundly influenced by Michel Foucault, Butler locates the construction of gender within regulative discourses. *The Routledge Reader of Gender and Performance* (1999) edited by Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay provides a couple of scholarly articles on the subject of performance and gender which is used as a frequent reference for its vast array of topics. It explores women's position in theatre history through its initial articles and then discusses gender performance from a theoretical standpoint. The concept of invisibility of women in conventional canon of theater, applied to Glaspell too, is reviewed in some extracts of the book. Feminist semiotics, playing a vital role in the issue of gender construction, is also studied through a number of articles which is later employed in the discussion of language and multiplicity of

Glaspell's plays. Philip Auslander's *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2003) in four volumes provides a comprehensive study of performance whose "Theorizing Political Performance" section is referred to in particular in the third chapter. It is an extensive collection of essays ranging from the foundations of performance to the implications of performance theories for social sciences such as cultural studies. The impact of Brechtian alienation effect on the audience's perception of gender constructions is also discussed through Diamond's article which is embedded in the third volume of this book. In this way, Glaspell's deconstruction of female identity which is a construction itself is discussed in her different plays throughout the third and fourth chapters.

Queer theory is also argued whose most relevant texts include Butler's *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (1993), O'Driscoll's "Outlaw Readings: Beyond Queer Theory" (1996), Sullivan's *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003), and Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer politics and Social Theory* (1993). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler accentuates the role of iterability in performativity, under the influence of Derrida's theory, in order to construct "natural" gendered subjects which can open up possible incoherencies. Sullivan and Halprin, through his *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995), expand the concept of queer theory which is employed in the second and third chapters to discuss Glaspell's queer theater. Furthermore, there are more related scholarly articles such as Cheryl Black's "Making Queer New Things: Queer Identities in the Life and Dramaturgy of Susan Glaspell" (2005), through which she explores Glaspell's queer features in her life, the content of her plays and even their language and form. Finding various strands of queerness in Glaspell's life and works, Black calls her queer not from a homosexual standpoint, but in the context of nonconformity. She considers Glaspell as a "pioneer in queering feminism" who gained a queer identity which is not restricted to gender (61). Owing to the fact that queer theory is rooted in the politics of difference, Chris



Weedon's *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (1999) is used in order to form the basis of queer theory discussion. Weedon denounces liberal feminists' ignorance of women's bodies for the sake of equal rights for women as abstract individuals which lead to women's oppression. Instead, she showed a postmodernist inclination to celebrate differences in class, race and sexual orientations which is conducive to the emergence of queer theory. His discussions of liberal feminism and post-structural bases for queer theory will be employed in the second chapter as a historical preface for the main issues of the study.

In the second chapter of the present thesis which is devoted to theorizing gender identity, Katharine Woodward's *Identity and Difference* (1997) is used as a source to provide contemporary ideas on identity. Following a non-essentialist approach, she negates the fixity of identities through identity politics leading to the development of critical issues in cultural studies. Woodward explores these key issues by discussing identity in different contexts of sexuality, body, health and gender roles.

In terms of the correlation between theatrical performance and feminism, Elaine Aston's *Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (1995) is a source of use. Exploring different ways of gender representation, Aston reviews the main issues of feminist theater both in theoretical and practical terms. She also offers a good introduction to the relationship between feminism and theater. Her comprehensive handbook ranges from the fundamental feminist approaches to the recent ones including Butler's performative theory. Covering leading feminist figures such as Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, she provides various methods of feminist representation including key concepts like "gaze", which is discussed with respect to Glaspell's technique of absent protagonist.

On the other hand, there are few critical essays and books regarding Glaspell's life and works which the researcher uses in order to have a deeper understanding of her dramaturgy. However,

conducting a research on Glaspell is so demanding as a result of her unfortunate obscurity that Martha C. Carpentier described it as unearthing “Tutankhamen’s tomb”( *Susan Glaspell: New Directions* 1) . It was Bigsby’s anthology in 1987 that furthered the succeeding critical works on her. In the introduction, he declares Glaspell’s prominence holding that she “deserves more than a footnote in the history of drama” (3). Judith Fetterley’s article in 1986 was one of the critical essays that made the initial assessments on her plays. She discusses the notion of textuality in her “Reading About Reading: ‘A Jury of Her Peers’”. Discussing Glaspell’s attempts to indicate men how to read women’s narratives, Fetterley critiques men maintaining the control of textuality. Since the themes of women’s stories are mostly male violence against female, men tend to avoid reading women’s texts.

In 1993, Veronica Makowsky provided a comprehensive examination of Glaspell’s cultural life in her book, *Susan Glaspell’s Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work*. Makowsky presents a rich thematic and biographical reading of Glaspell’s novels and dramas in her book. Placing her work in biographical and cultural contexts, Makowsky rescues the literary mother of America from the imposed obscurity. In her introduction, she deals with the reasons of Glaspell’s obscurity which is mainly Glaspell’s focus on women’s experience to Makowsky’s mind. She also tries to challenge the canonical standards which “ha [ve] nothing to do with quality of writing” (5). Calling public attention to the recurrent themes of Glaspell’s works, such as resistance and motherhood, she had a pivotal role in recovering Glaspell’s works.

Later, it was Linda Ben-Zvi who took a decisive step toward enriching Glaspell’s scholarship through her *Susan Glaspell: Essays on her Theater and Fiction* (1995) which is the first collection of studies on her works. Including critical essays by leading scholars, the book can be considered as the first comprehensive bibliography for Glaspell. Providing original reviews on *Trifles*, *The Verge*, *Bernice*, *The Outside* and her novels, Ben-Zvi’s book is frequently cited in the

present thesis. Ben-Zvi also features Glaspell's technique of absent protagonists through Jackie Czerepinski's article which is used in order to justify subverting forces of Glaspell's plays.

The three reliable biographies of Marcia Noe, Barbara Ozieblo, and Linda Ben-Zvi, which verify the growing interest in her works, have been frequently used throughout the thesis. Ozieblo's *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (2000) provides a deep narrative of her life and their impact on her works such as her *Trifles*, which was based on one of the cases which she had covered as a reporter. Ozieblo clarifies Glaspell's relation to Provincetown Players and O'Neil in particular who was later considered to be inferior to Glaspell by some critics. She concludes her book declaring Glaspell's proficiency in manifestation of relations between men and women.

J. Ellen Gainor's *Susan Glaspell in Context* (2004), a novel consideration of Glaspell through cultural studies method, discusses the dramatic work of Glaspell in theatrical, cultural, political, social, historical, and biographical contexts. Presenting a meticulous portrait of Susan Glaspell, Gainor provided a new model for reassessing American drama. Another rich study ever done on Glaspell is Carpentier and Ozieblo's *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays and Susan Glaspell* (2006). Carpentier and Ozieblo look into the concept of intertextuality to put Glaspell in her own cultural moment. They observed the connections between her dramas and novels and enunciated her peerless fluidity between the genres.

In recent decades, a great number of scholars and critics have attempted to reissue Glaspell and rescue her from literary obscurity. Ozieblo, Gainor and Ben-Zvi's fascinating works, the organization of societies<sup>1</sup>, holding conferences and restaging her plays are all the recent endeavors to restore Glaspell to her proper position. Despite the fact that several notable critical

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<sup>1</sup> The International Susan Glaspell Society which was formed in 2003 is aimed at the recognition of Susan Glaspell as a major American dramatist and fiction writer through the ongoing production of high-quality scholarship and critical analysis of all her works, participation in national and international conferences, performances and public readings of her plays, and commitment to reprinting and teaching her plays, stories, and novels. <<http://blogs.shu.edu/glaspellsociety/about-the-susan-glaspell-society>>

works have come out recently, they can not be of any great help still because of their limited availability in Iran.

Although feminine issues in Glaspell's plays have been mentioned by other scholars, it seems that they were not comprehensive enough. Therefore, the researcher tries to use the former perspectives to focus on the not fully discussed issues in order to regain Glaspell's effaced reputation in more recent terms.

### **1.7 Definition of Key Terms**

**Gender Identity:** It is simply defined as the gender that a person self-identifies. The very concept of identity is so complicated that is rarely defined in particular, while it has been studied in terms of its related issues such as race, class, and gender. According to Roz Ivanic, writer of *Writing and Identity* (1998), identity is constituted in a process through personal "choices" which apply most to the multiplicity of identities (11). Taking for granted the multiple nature of identity, its constitution by others' attribution has also been claimed which emphasizes its fluctuating quality (Jaworski and Coupland 412–13). In this regard, Butler's claim is the most original one which considers identity as being "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Thus, the researcher uses the term identity rather than subjectivity since subjectivity refers to an individual's fixed personal views of oneself, while the concept of identity, under-discussion, has nothing to do with fixity and stability.

**Iterability:** Iterability is literally the capacity of being repeated; however, in critical theory, it does not imply repetition simply. Iterability, which is closely associated with Derrida's theories, is a kind of citationality implying alteration and difference. According to Derrida, "iteration in its 'purest' form-and it is always impure-contains in itself the discrepancy of a difference that