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The Murderous Act as a Response to Identity Crisis in *Trifles*

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Abstract

Trifles is one of the revolutionary one act plays dealing with murder in which John Right is murdered by the wife, Minnie Right. She, however, refuses that she was fast asleep when the murder took place. The circumstances, however, evince that she is responsible for the murder. The play does not clearly manifest any such clues except the narrated accounts of other characters regarding her personality and her emotional and psychological. She behaves eccentrically when Mr. Hale, a close neighbor, comes to her house inquiring her husband, John Right. The investigation, then, takes place led by country attorney and other members. They enter the farm house, examining several rooms in course of investigation. On this story backdrop, this article tries to explore the cause of murder due to identity crisis. To make this claim justifiable, the research article is based on identity theory proposed by Peter Bourke, Castelles Manual, and David De Grazia.

Keywords: *casual perspective, efficacy, embryonic, , enigmatic, identity, self - esteem, self- efficacy,*

Introduction

The one act play *Trifle* by Glaspell is one of the critical plays dealing with radical theme of committing murder on part of woman, who is a simple wife living in a modest

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domestic setting. A wife, named Minnie Wright, kills her husband, John Wright. Soon after the publication of this play, several critical thoughts floated across literary domain, terming this play as a radical one. Though this is a short one act play, the central theme is based on investigation of the murder in a farm house where a wife, Minnie Wright. She is alleged to have killed her husband, John Wright. When the play begins, the investigating team starts to find the cause of the murder and witnesses are called on. The team minutely observes clues of murder, inspecting the farm house where the incidence takes place. And the investigation goes on and several clues indicate the wife to be a murderer. On the backdrop of this story, the research article tries to look into the cause of murder is due to the personal crisis in Minnie Wright's life.

However, the play does not explicitly hint about the cause of the murder. As there are several standpoints as to how she comes to resort to such merciless act of murder, the play does not show the wife as violent, but timid and weak. And neither does the husband and nor the wife has any such direct conflicting relationships reflected in the play except in the fact that they lack reciprocity and deep conjugal relationship. Based on this limited ground, the murderous act is suspicious in the dramatic portrayal. This is, the problematic where the play leaves its central idea. The pertinent question therefore arises: What prompted to such an act of killing? This can be the thematic component of the play and the research is largely dominated in this quest. As there could be several aspects of the cause of the murder, but this article tries to relate the cause of murder is attributed to identity crisis. In common sense, a person is always God fearing and humble. This is more so in case of woman's case. However, as soon as a person, no matter whether one is a male or female, is at risk of identity crisis, he can go to any extreme. This generic concept is further heightened into the research quest assuming that identity is the sole personal possession of a person as a unique entity of life. A man strives to save his identity, discarding all social, cultural, moral and ethical considerations of life. The research article, thus, is analyzed from perspective of identity crisis, thereby espousing the identity theory.

In the recent times, concept of identity is becoming highly contested term, drawing attention of the philosophers, political activists, and cultural critics. A person, primarily as a being, is the member of the state. However, this is the formal token of identity which cannot completely justify a person's complete being, for a person is beyond that. That is, he possesses emotional, mental, and psychological identity and is a unique creation of this universe. The modern concept of identity, thus, is interrelated to the concept of formation of identity and the quest of identity. Psychologists believe that human beings as conscious creature is always prone to identity quest in a continuous process and any loss to it can cause disturbance in a person's life. Apparently, this diminishing identity and lack of recognition in the family affair could have triggered to the murderous act. Minnie Wright probably did not

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accept the treatment of the irresponsible husband who never accepted her as a wife without dignified identity. David De Grazia explicitly asserts in this line,

If we are essentially persons, then we cannot exist as nonpersons, in which case our identity over time involves criteria closely related to personhood (e.g., psychological continuity). If we are essentially animals, then we can exist despite lacking the sort of psychological life associated with persons; in that case, bodily or biological criteria for our identity over time are appropriate. (12)

De Grazia's point is something of psychological continuity as a person who starts from the concept of personhood, which is unique quality in a person. Based on this foundational idea related to identity, the article would have identity component.

Theoretical Framework

The article will use textual analysis based on the theory of identity crisis based on the concept of psychological motive of identity defense and quest. The concept is defended by a revolt a person undergoes when he is set to establish his personality. Basically, this is a qualitative research perspective adopted in literary and critical writing.

Concept of Identity

Commonly, identity of a person is based on several innate traits. A large number of studies indicate that identity takes root from family, society, culture, personal desires, objectives of life, and so on. Castells asserts:

It is easy to agree on the fact that, from sociological perspective all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what. The construction of identities uses building material from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses, and religious revelations. (7)

Castells indicates rather a large paradigm of personality. He is of the opinion that human identity is based on social, cultural, memory based, institutional, and historical impacts. In some case, identity stands on different roles of personal in the society. According to Burke and Stets, "An identity is the sets of meanings that define individuals as occupants of roles in society, members of groups or social categories or unique persons with characteristics that identify them" (1). Identity formation, according to psychologists, is a lifelong and complex process. They indicate several intrinsic factors that help in the formation of identity contributed by extrinsic factors. That said, identity is how a person is conscious of himself. As Garrett rightly explains:

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Persons are self-conscious mental beings. Self-conscious is what distinguishes us from other mental beings, such as cats and rabbits, and from everything else. This is confirmed when we reflect on how much of what matters in our mental life and social interactions presupposes the self-consciousness of ourselves and others. (5)

In this sense, identity of a person is self-possessed entity attached to oneself because identity is purely sentimental, not merely to be justified only through social and cultural nexus. Heise and David further state,

An individual's situational identity is chosen not only to complete a relational nexus, but also ideally to surrogate and actualize the self-sentiment. When authenticities are created by power plays of an institutional relational nature, the individual later seeks out compensating identities that redeem the self. (5)

Concepts of inner traits explain conscious, subconscious, and unconscious process in which a person builds his identity attached to ego and self-existence. According to Carl Jung, identity is a unique image of a person and the image is not that explicit as it is deeply inherent in primordial form and personality formation is both conscious and unconscious phenomenon reflected in behavior and form of expressions. The unconscious desire and image a person can think of him may comprise psychological, emotional, and mental traits which mould human personality (388).

Construction of identity is critical and often contested term associated with philosophical discourse. Theories of identity have been propounded in the modern times. Social, institutional, familial and political roles formulate identity of a person. This, then, formulates identity as catch all terms. Among the theorists, Harold W. Noonan comes with broader perspective of identity in which he discusses identity to be composite of bodily, mental, psychological, emotional, memory-based consciousness. (2-20)

Similarly, Norman Holland has written a famous article entitled, "Human Identity" which is phenomenally insightful. He is of the opinion that human identity is far deep seated than it is thought about. The concept of identity, according to Holland, is part of psychoanalysis in which a person knows the sense of oneself and the sense of others. (451-469).

From several of these ideas and explanations, it is obviously clear that identity is a constituent of several psychological, physical, emotional, cultural, history-based perceptions, memory based perceptions, continued aspirations of life. And theories of identities are based on identity theory and social identity theory. Many of these theories rely on self-efficacy, authenticity, life continuation, and self-esteem and so on. However, self-esteem and self-worth are most dominant elements that shape human personality without which a

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person becomes victim of identity crisis, undergoing severe emotional and psychological turbulence and mental unrest. And for the defense of his personality, he comes out any action disregarding moral, social, and cultural stigma.

Self-Esteem

A large number of studies indicate that identity is created by self-esteem in which a person feels himself worth. This is one of the motives that helps in developing personality in both micro and macro level. Some philosophers hold notions that self-esteem is how one is evaluated by others as per his self-worth and value in society. To this end, it is one of the aspects of external aspect of self-esteem. At the same time, many psychologists tend to believe that for the continued self-esteem: how one feels himself is of greater importance because it is the instinctive drive that matters in a person's life. The more one has good opinion or value of oneself, his self-esteem is heightened and he becomes influential in expanding his identity. Precisely then, self-esteem has three important factors to note: self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity. These three elements are interdependent. Self-esteem is considered as the prerequisite for personality growth of a person. In some cases, the self-esteem is not the objectively defined term as it is value-based entity whose value and worth differ from one person to another. And there is similarity among many social and personal psychologists regarding the concept of identity and self-esteem. They agree that identity is self-belief of oneself and self-esteem is worth and validation of oneself.

In his epoch-making book by E Erickson called *Identity, Youth and Crisis* published in 1968 propounds self-esteem as function of identity development that results from successful addressing the tasks associated with each development of life. This phenomenal idea indicates that self-esteem is the basic constituent for the identity development of a person.

Identity Crisis

It is commonly believed that a man, barring gender and class, is a rational animal with free will. This, however, does not exclude a woman who equally possesses the same free will, life of dignity, and rationality. In this sense, quest of identity is taken as one of the primal instincts in human beings. It breeds from the very moment as soon as a person has his birth. If a person lacks his personal identity, he can have some mental and psychological impacts like personality disorder and other psychological complexes.

From anthropological and sociological perspective, identity is categorized into two fundamental forms: the technical identity and the deeply rooted identity of a person. The technical identity, in this sense, refers to the identity given by others, whereas, deeply rooted

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identity is self-creation of a person. Human civilizations have witnessed several phases of wars in the name of identity quest. Establishing, religious, cultural, religious, and political identities, people have sacrificed their lives. In the same vein, establishing one's self identity is the most turbulent struggle one faces in his life and to safeguard it, he or she can pay any cost without bothering about social, moral, cultural, and even ethical obligations. In some case, a person undergoes a situation of depression and psychic problems and he acts with violence and aggression. This becomes so painful when a person thinks that he can achieve his full-fledged identity in domestic and family setting. Mrs. Right 's case is purely analogical to this case. In this light, Morris points out:

Personality disorders are disorders which are unchangeable from an individual and inappropriate ways of thinking and believing which cause distress and conflicts. These disorders are various and divided into a group of disorders as enduring, inflexible patters of inner experiences and deviating behavior which can cause distress and impairment. (546)

The personality disorder, thus, seems to be an accumulated emotional and psychological problem a person faces in life that is often dormant. More often, these disorders are not clearly explicit and cannot be calculated. In the one act play, *Trifles*, Mrs. Right is quite unpredictable because the narrated positions of the stories of the characters are just tip of the icebergs. Even psychologists cannot predict how a person reacts when he is greatly dismayed and frustrated due to many such disorders. It can result in any sense of aggression like Minnie's murder in the play.

Story Line

The investigation is to begin regarding the murder of John Right in the farm house. Mrs. Minnie Right, the wife, is held responsible for the murder and thus is accused. The country attorney, George Henderson, Henry Peters, the local sheriff, and his wife Mrs. Peters arrive at the farm house. Two more are Lewis Hale and his wife Mrs. Hale. The Hales are close neighbors of the Rights. Lewis is the witness who sees Mr. Right dead. As he asked the cause of murder, Mrs. Right told him that all that happened during the time she was sleeping. The investigating team started to observe the entire house, entering one room to the other. The kitchen looked deserted as pots were not washed. Mrs. Hale contemplated that Mrs. Right was unhappy and liked to sing to which her husband disliked. Mrs. Right was fond of a pet bird canary that she liked so much. The males had different ways to speculate the murder. But the females, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, concentrated on the kitchen. When they came closer to sewing basket, the two women found the bird dead whose neck was wrung. They hid it from the male investigators and imagined that Mrs. Right probably killed

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her husband because he was not reciprocal to her feeling as a husband. She took, as they suspected, this action out of frustration in her life.

Textual Analysis

Mrs. Right, in the one act play *Trifles*, seems to be greatly dismayed in her family life. She is almost like a discarded item in the house. We hardly see any connection between the husband and wife other than the two people living in the farm house. The one act play does not openly manifest a clear reason as to how Mrs. Forester comes to act in such a way. However, we understand her secluded and lonely life entrenched into personal conflict and lack of emotional support. At the same time, she is mentioned as timid and kind like a bird.

MRS. HALE. She-- come to think of it, she was kind o f a like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind timid and ---fluttery. How ---she---did change. (Glaspell 959).

This indicates that Mrs. White is “timid” and “fluttery”. These two words give us a sense of her emotional and psychological tendency in the beginning. At the same time, there could be several conditions for this: her loneliness, lack of reciprocity with her husband, lack of recognition, lack of approval of her singing. These internal conflicting situations could have triggered to psychological disruption. Ironically, the husband and wife live in the gloomy and aloof farm house almost deserted. As Mrs. Hale states further, “ I dunno what it is but it is a lonesome place and always was”(Glaspell 959). From the discussions of the characters, we can find a some insight that Minnie was almost psychologically and emotional disturbed. One of the dominant aspects of the answer can be: her quest for her identity and lack of identity. This claim can be supported by several other succeeding details in the one act play.

Further to penetrate in the play, we also know about John Right as a hard man who could have never compromised with his wife. He is described as stubborn and hard in the play as well. We also perceive some insights in the play that he might not have liked her keeping the bird canary. Neither might he have liked her singing. Moreover, he does not seem to be considerate to her loneliness as he is supposed to be busy whole day. The following conversations give us some clues:

MRS. HALE. But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of the day with him –(Shivers). Like the raw wind that gets to the bone. (Pauses her eye falling on the cage). I should think she would ‘a wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it?

MRS.PETERS. I do not know, unless it got sick and died. (Glaspell 595)

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Mrs. Right's personal problems seem to be worsening each day. As a result, her psychological and emotional states seem to be critical and loneliness breeds in her life. She probably needed self-respect and dignity in the family, especially recognition as a woman with dignity. Her identity was completely lost in the family background. Furthermore, the killing of the bird canary is the climatic situation in the play that could have triggered her into violent agitation. She must have become desperate out of the situation. In the house, the bird is directly attached to her personality because it was the bird with which she could have shared her feelings. When the bird was killed, she had no way out. It also meant that she lost her identity because lost the life force of life. Psychological to put, the libidinal energy of her seemed emaciated but probing towards negative and violent forces. That gradually was being accumulated, yet not explicit until she was acute in terms of psychology. This fact is supported from the play as well. When Mr. Hale, a close neighbor comes to her farm house, he finds her queer:

COUNTRY ATTORNEY." What--- was she doing?"

HALE. She was rockin' back and forth. She has apron in her hand and was kind of -pleating it."

COUNTRY ATTORNEY." And how did she--- look?

HALE. She looked queer. (Glaspell 952)

This conversation between the two major characters of the play hint us about her personal status and conditions of loss of identity. Quest of identity is the first motive that a person wants to exert.

Identity quest is a deep rooted psychological motif in a person. Human beings have a tendency to gratify their personality wishes and if anything goes contrary to this, a person can react in any ways like quarrel, conflicts and aggressions. Psychologists hint that identity has different denotations and connotations. Human being is attached to various identities in life to which he becomes aware and in some cases he is not aware of. According to the psychological studies, it has been found that he is so closely connected with egoistic identity as well. Ego identity germinates even in the unconscious process of life.

Psychologists often contend that identity is implicit and unique element of a person based on several needs of a person and conscious desires. Societies and cultures have different perspective of identities. Self-esteem and self-actualization are very important since the beginning and death of human life. Long time ago, Abraham H. Maslow indicates, "All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based usually high expectation of themselves for self- respect, or self esteem for

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others”(45). Desire for acceptable identity is the deep-rooted quest of human being. Lack of this, then, leads to a great emotional trouble. Albert Bandura, the famous psychologist of the modern age, contends that human psychology is quite enigmatic and difficult to pinpoint. He asserts:

Human behavior cannot be fully understood solely in terms of either social or structural factors or psychological factors. A full understanding requires an integrated causal perspective in which social influences operate through self-processes that produce the actions. (6)

From all these explanations, it can be comfortably deduced that Minnie Wright's actions of murder are resultant of her frustration and psychological turbulence caused by identity crisis.

Conclusion

Trifles by Susan Glaspell can be an example of identity quest and conflicting of identity. The wife, Minnie Forester, is accused of the murder, which is rather shocking thing in the play. In the play, we do not find any explicit trace of her revolting nature. Neither do we have any conflicting relationship with her husband. However, it does not mean to conclude that she was normal and happy with her relationship with her husband. She was becoming emotionally and psychologically emaciated because of her life: lack of recognition and self-respect. The article, in this sense, tries to look into psychological motive of killing. According to the circumstantial evidences in the play, she could have killed her husband because of frustration caused by loss of her identity. Though the crime is severe, the desire and quest for the identity is far more terrible because one can go into any extent if that is not properly sufficed. A number of psycho-emotional facts indicate about this. Hence, this interpretation in this article sounds plausible on this ground.

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