CHAPTER III

Roaring Twenties: Marriage, Motherhood and the Shaping of Female Identity

One of the most interesting periods in the history of America is the 1920s referred to as the ‘Roaring Twenties’. This period was characterized by a number of distinctive social and political changes. The period is referred to as ‘roaring’ due to the revolution seen in the fields of fashion, industry, commerce, education, culture and so on. The most important invention of the 1920s was the automobile which gave people the freedom and luxury to travel around wherever they wanted. Henry Ford and Ransom Olds were making progress in the automobile industry and Fords’ inventions were cheap but reliable that enabled people to have the opportunity of buying automobiles. For example, the Ford roadster cost $260. Motorcars gradually became an object of necessity rather than luxury and it also brought about a new economy as places like service stations and motels were set up to attend to the drivers’ necessities. Another significant invention was the wireless telegraphy through which broadcasting was made possible with the help of television, radio and phonographs. Technological advancements made long distance communication possible that helped to set a network nation-wide and remain connected every time.

Education made a revolutionary leap in the 1920s. Young men and women were expected to remain in schools until their teenage period unlike earlier times when many children and youth were employed in workplace or even worked at home. Professor John Dewey was instrumental in putting forward his theory of education which was based on the ideal of ‘learning by doing’. This was believed to be progressive education
because it was the ‘education for life’. A number of public health programs relating to cleanliness, hygiene, nutrition were organised by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1909 and by the 1920s the sufferings of the people due to hookworms had almost ended. Education had become progressive in various ways; the most notable aspect was the conflict between science and theology. The study of Darwinian evolution was seen as counteracting the traditional beliefs and dismantling faith in God and religion. There was an upheaval in accepting certain ideas since the rift between biology and theology was indecisive. Education was enlightening in many ways but the Bible was still considered as a dominant force in the society.

In addition to this, America witnessed industrial boom in this era due to the growth of a large number of industries mainly steel, petroleum and machinery. Over six million people were employed in various states; people now set out to venture the industrial frontier that provided great scope and possibilities for prosperity. Markets for fresh foodstuffs were increased as the transportation facility was improved to a great extent due to the coming of automobiles. Countless new roads could be connected to each other with the help of new technology that made life easier and comfortable. It was the era of the birth of a mass culture when Americans had enough capital to spend on ready-made garments and various electronic devices like refrigerators, washing machines and toasters. Women need not indulge in the drudgeries of household chores as many technological inventions made their work easier. During the 1920s most Americans moved to urban areas and women sought job opportunities in the towns and cities. The decade was dynamic for women as many movements brought about drastic changes in their lives. Feminist Margaret Sanger initiated a birth control movement and supported the use of contraceptives. Alice Paul, the leader of National Women’s Party championed
equal rights for women. With the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment women could vote, they became confident of their potential to work and be a part of the burgeoning consumer economy.

The most important change witnessed in the early twentieth century was the 1920s presidential election in which women voted for the first time. Although few women voted in the beginning but with the Nineteenth Amendment women could take the first step towards emancipation. In the post war decades women wanted to liberate themselves from the constraints of the Victorian age. Young, educated and independent women in the 1920s rejected the earlier conventions and this caused upheaval and outbursts from the older generation who considered these women as impudent.

The most striking image of the women of 1920s was the “flapper”. The flapper who was the ‘new woman’ took great interest in the fashion of that age and represented free spirit heralding the modernist era of the 1920s. The women incorporated dress and style that were unprecedented and fashion for women became symbolic of their effort to free themselves from the bonds of Victorian ideal. 1920s fashion had a variety of new incorporations into clothing like low-waist dresses, rolled down stockings, camisole, loose fitting innerwear and so on. Women complemented their dresses with scarves, headbands, feather boas, cloche hats most of which were inspired by movie stars and fashion designers. These fashionable women were idolized by most women who tried to follow their fashion styles and wanted to mould themselves according to the style icons. These women challenged the Victorian style by replacing it with unconventional clothes like short skirts, loose fitting clothes rejecting corsets of the previous age and introducing make-up. Famous movie icons such as Colleen Moore commented on the 1920s fashion and referred to the ‘flappers’ as smart and sophisticated. The most
popular fashion designers were Coco Chanel, Florrie Westwood, Norman Hartnell and the Hollywood stars like Norma Shearer, Josephine Baker, Clara Bow made fashion statements that were idealised by the early twentieth century women. Some of the noticeable trends that were symbolic of the fashion of 1920s were the short flapper clothes that enabled the freedom of movement and comfort, graphic designs in scarves and stockings, exuberant silk gowns for evening, bobbed hairstyles, flat-chest male clothes and so on.

The boyish ‘garconne’ look was also a fashion trend during the 1920s. The boyish ‘Garconne’ look and use of male clothing was popularised by Coco Chanel who redefined the feminine form and helped women to break free from the restricting corsets and crinolines and incorporate comfortable and practical clothing. Her designs were appreciated by movie stars like Marlene Dietrich and Chanel became famous for her innovative creations that liberated women from corseted silhouette and launched casual and sporty trends to the women of the 1920s. Coco Chanel’s creations were inspired by male outfits like the sailor’s dress or a mechanic’s denim and women’s clothes were based on male themes with little modification like wearing men’s sweater using a belt around the waist or a complete tailored suit with tie. These dresses gave women a daring and innovative androgynous look. Chanel introduced comfortable clothing for women who enjoyed sports like golf and bicycling.

Bathing costumes or swimsuits were also changed and they became skimpy during the 1920s. Arms were exposed and necklines were low; most Hollywood actresses were pictured in skimpy bikinis with matching stockings. New fabrics were used to make these garments that created a whole lot of new varieties of comfortable swim wears. Another change visible in the women of that age was the use of makeup or cosmetics.
Prior to the 1920s cosmetics were regarded inappropriate for respectable women in the American society but during the Roaring Twenties women wore makeup as millions were influenced by the movie stars who looked gorgeous in their publicized pictures and photographs. Women of the Roaring Twenties understood liberation as having the independence and exercise freewill to dress and behave. They defied all the established norms of feminine behaviour which often seemed outrageous according to the older generation. Unlike modest dressing, the flapper of the 1920s wore shorter clothes and was bold to express herself. These women presented a shocking picture to the society as they were seen smoking, partying, dancing at clubs until early morning, watching movies, enjoying the emerging Jazz music and so on. They regarded themselves as young modern women of America who followed a completely new lifestyle that was unseen before. These women who looked glamorous and whose images were portrayed in magazines were sometimes scandalous as the media pictured these women in bikinis on the beach and also as smoking.

One might refer to this period as one of Sexual Revolution, a term that could be first located in the 1921 book, *Die Sexual Revolution* written by Wilhelm Heinrich. The book was written by taking into account the reforms suggested by health professionals, law experts, feminists and others towards sexual law regarding prostitution and treating venereal diseases. One of the most important factors that worked behind such a revolution were the ideas propagated by Sigmund Freud whose 1899 book on psychoanalysis triggered a lot of speculations. His lectures delivered to American psychologists during the first decade of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a new era of intellectual thoughts among the American public. It appeared that sex was the most important force that controlled mankind. If one had to lead a healthy mental
life then one had to give way to uninhibited sex life. The libido became a pervasive force for a happy and well maintained life. Freudian ideas were imbedded in American minds as numerous readers showed interest in the information about biology and anthropology. It was also suggested that self-control was dangerous and therefore men and women were expected to work on their free will. The flappers talked about how science taught new and challenging things about sex and also discussed that moral codes and behaviour had no real basis and such rules were superstitious.

Besides ideas on sexual revolution, there were other issues that emancipated women from their ignorant and submissive states. The industrial revolution brought about drastic economic changes in the lives of American women. The effects of industrial revolution paved the way for educational and economic revolution for women. This indeed had its influence in other spheres of life and according to the sexual revolutionaries, economic freedom of women led towards greater social emancipation for women. Having achieved some equality in the workforce, women sought to exercise the same in their marriage. The media of the Roaring Twenties portrayed the images of the flappers often showing them as breaking traditions and establishing new sets of codes and behaviour. But these images are not sufficient to understand the true scenario of the 1920s because during the period between the World Wars many American women held different views about their roles in the society. Therefore it would be a limited study if we do not consider the changing roles of American women apart from the flappers of the 1920s. There were significant changes taking place in the domestic sphere and these changes were not just confined to the fashion and sex.

Although there was social, economic and sexual revolution in the 1920s but the traditional concept of the American woman was intertwined with home and family. In
spite of the prevalence of the ‘new woman’, there was this traditional woman known as the ‘true woman’, a concept that had emerged during the nineteenth century that idealised woman as a devoted wife and mother. This was basically the ideal of Victorian femininity and the stereotype of the nineteenth century woman. Historian Barbara Welter discusses various aspects of a true woman in her essay ‘The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860’.

She observes,

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and the spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (153)

The ideals of the nineteenth century true woman of America were believed to be constant in an age where everything else was rapidly changing. Religion played an important part in shaping a woman’s life as it always supported the idea that a woman’s proper sphere is her ‘home’. Instead of participating in any work outside home, it was expected that a woman might work for the church because this would not stray her from the domestic duties. It was suggested that a woman should be sensible enough so as not to clash her domestic duties with her intellectual pursuits. It was essential that a woman must maintain her purity as the loss of innocence was almost similar to death. But men were free from such standards of maintaining their virtue since men, being by nature more sensual than women, might violate it. Thomas Branagan commented in *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated* that men would sin time and again but women who were regarded as pure and virtuous must not indulge in any sinful act.
The traditional male perception continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century that it was best for women to stay within the purview of the ‘home’ which she could nurture and build so well with her feminine qualities of perseverance and endurance. Although the twentieth century was a period when much attention was given to the idea of the ‘new woman’ but the lives of hundreds of women who maintained their role inside the domestic space struggling with the ideals of the true woman that was quite challenging to uphold should also be studied in detail. The idea of the true woman of the nineteenth century evolved into the new woman of the twentieth century. But the earlier ideal prevailed in the society since not all women of America were new women.

This chapter will study the position of women in the early twentieth century America and discuss the ideas of marriage and motherhood. It will also analyze how these concepts were crucial in the shaping of a female identity both for the ‘new woman’ and the ‘true woman’. It is pertinent to know that the idea of the true woman as a contented wife or mother was self-contradictory during this period. This chapter will study the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell in this light and discuss how these playwrights were concerned with the subordination of women in their marriage and mothering role and have depicted challenging and contradictory ways of representing the same.

The women writers of the Provincetown Players dealt with the issues of marriage and motherhood and examined the notion held by patriarchy that women are destined to be mothers and it is the most important role they had to play. Lois Banner, in Women in Modern America, says, “Feminists in all persuasions [in the years before 1920s]…agreed that the chief fulfillment of a woman’s life was motherhood.” But
historians like June Sochen have suggested that the feminists of that period had maternal needs like other women. Along with fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers, they wanted other roles too. Marriage and motherhood are issues that were given importance by the Provincetown Players but these ideas were not satisfactory or sufficient for a woman in her quest of identity.

Historian June Sochen observes that most plays written by women dramatists of Provincetown Players reflected on the problems central to women in modern America. Perhaps the women playwrights might have realised that the problems recognised by the feminists of that period were not just modern but it could be related to a universal problem faced by women at all times. The plays such as *Kurzy of the Sea, The Eldest, Funiculi-Funicula, Winter’s Night* and many more are honest representations of the lives of women most importantly their relationship with men and their consistent negation to romanticise love, marriage and motherhood.

One of the salient features of the plays written by the women of America during the Roaring Twenties is the confinement that women experience in their marriage and mothering role. Most of the female protagonists find themselves unhappy in their marriages and their roles in the society are repressive ones. These women are often victimised which turns them rebellious as a result of which society finds them unacceptable due to their transgressed behaviour. Many plays of the early twentieth century have been written on these issues and the idea of marriage has been dealt with from a variety of perspectives. The dramatists suggest various solutions to these problems but the female protagonists mostly end up in a tragic reconciliation and the consequence is one of violent behaviour. The most glaring example of such a treatment in a play is Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*. First performed for the Provincetown Players in
1916, the play presents the stifling experiences of a lonely housewife in a farm in Iowa. The characters of Minnie Wright and John Wright are ‘absent characters’, physically not present in the stage but their presence is overarching as the main events revolve around the murder of John Wright by his wife, Minnie who has been taken to the prison. The other characters in the play are set against the background of the two central characters, Minnie and John Wright. The female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters realise “the prison house that patriarchy has constructed of marriage” (Ozieblo, 18). The play portrays the tensions and frustrations of being a woman in a place where she remains isolated and ‘invisible’ to her husband and the society.

According to C. W. E. Bigsby, the play is “a well-observed study of male arrogance and insensitivity”; a play which “works by understatement. The melodrama inherent in the scene is rigorously excluded. It is an ensemble piece, lyrical but spare” (25-26). Gilbert and Gubar comment that *Trifles* is a play which concerns two central ideas. The play is first a study of “the confining environments that frustrate the full development of human potential”, and second a study of “the impact of gender on the complex process by which we read and interpret not only literary texts but also social texts.” (1996, 1351)

In the play, the County Attorney, the Sheriff and a farmer named Mr. Hale arrive on the murder scene to examine what had happened. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, Sheriff’s wife, also appear on the scene to collect certain things for Minnie who is in the jail. While investigating the crime scene, these women who were in the kitchen onstage, find out the motive behind the murder but they do not disclose their discovery to the men who were busy finding evidence offstage. From the beginning of the play, the men comment on women’s observation and their tendency of worrying about ‘trifles’. However it is these women who had actually understood the reason behind the murder. Mrs Hale and
Mrs. Peters knew that Minnie lived in an abusive relationship; the strangled canary is symbolic of the repression and frustration that Minnie went through in her life. Mrs. Hale was aware of the kind of relationship that Minnie shared with her husband but she was reluctant to speak out loud. But at several occasions she suggested that their marriage was not a ‘happy’ one and that it was John Wright who was responsible for the same.

MRS. HALE: It never seemed a very cheerful place.
COUNTY ATTORNEY: No—it’s not cheerful. I shouldn’t say she had the homemaking instinct.
MRS. HALE: Well, I don’t know as Wright had, either.
COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn’t get on very well?
MRS. HALE: No, I don’t mean anything. But I don’t think a place’d be any cheerfuller for John Wright’s being in it (Tri, 11).

Till this point of time, these women had not yet found out the evidence but Mrs. Hale’s statement can be seen one that supports Minnie’s homemaking skills. The reason behind her hesitation to speak of their marriage as dysfunctional was that she knew that it would turn against Minnie when the men perceive it from their viewpoint. Later, Mrs. Hale discusses with Mrs. Peters how Minnie’s life was different before her marriage:

Wright was close. I think maybe that’s why she kept so much to herself. She didn’t even belong to the Ladies Aid . . . She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir.
But that—oh, that was thirty years ago (Tri, 12-13).

This comment suggests that after her marriage, Minnie was no more a lively woman rather she was alienated from the society of which she was an active member when she
was a girl. Even though Mrs. Hale never directly states that John Wright had abused Minnie but she hints that their marital life was devoid of love when she says, “But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (Tri, 16). After the dead canary was discovered, Mrs. Hale was sure that John was responsible for whatever had happened, “No, Wright wouldn’t like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too” (Tri, 18). Mrs. Peters didn’t know Minnie personally but she identifies her situation with that of Minnie’s when she remembers about her past as a girl and that the kitten she had was attacked by a boy with a hatchet. She says she would have killed him if she was not stopped by others. She also talks of the death of her two years old baby and how she led a lonely life being childless thereafter, a situation which Minnie experienced too; she was childless. Mrs. Hale, who knew Minnie’s situation, repents that she should have visited Minnie,

I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing… (Tri, 19).

These above comments are glimpses into the lives of these women who also experience a sense of isolation in their community as well as their own marriages. Linda Ben-Zvi asserts that Glaspell “concretizes the conditions under which these women live and circumstances that might cause them to kill . . . in doing so, she stages one of the first modern arguments for justifiable homicide” (38-39). Karen Alkalay-Gut echoes this conclusion, arguing that in the play “Women. . . are trapped by a social system that may lead them into crime and punish them when they are forced to commit it” (72).
The men and women in this play are involved in reading Minnie’s text; the crime scene which serves as a text to read and understand the motive behind such a crime. Many critics of *Trifles* have commented on the incompetency of men to read a woman’s text. Annette Kolodny states that if Minnie is the sender of messages, it is only the women who are receptors of her messages. The women can successfully read her texts as they share the same experience of her life spent in the kitchen which is dismissed as an insignificant place and moreover they understand the important patterns that consists her world. Mrs. Hale knew that rural life in a farm was always oppressive and it condemns women. The moment was crucial when the women discovered her sewing basket and the quilt. Minnie’s disordered patterns on her quilt was an attempt to burst out her frustrations of being in a marriage that is repressive and it is only the women who could understand the patterns that were made on the quilt; they could break the codes of messages that were drawn in a chaotic pattern. Minnie’s quilt patterns symbolise that she could not control her own feelings which she poured out in the quilt but the messy patterns and ‘her knots’ that she stitched also indicate her knotting of John Wright who was tied with a rope around his neck while he was asleep. Mrs. Hale recognises that the chaotic patterns on the quilt are not just representative of the repressive marriage of Minnie but they also signify the abuse and exploitation of gender relation.

The central issue of the play revolves around ‘knotting’-the murder by knotting and the quilt knotting. These two issues can further be related to the idea of the knotting of marriage. This knotting implies the strictures within which a woman is bounded and the silence she has to maintain being a part of the patriarchal structures of the society. Minnie’s irregular patterns are signs of her attempt to break free from the bond or ‘knot’
to which she was tied to her husband. The subversion of an established pattern is reflective of the creation of a new order for women which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decodes after seeing the log cabin pattern of the quilt. These two women decide to hide the truth from the men since they knew that these evidences would certainly hold Minnie as a convict. Their perspectives not only helped them to gain knowledge but more importantly led them how to act on that knowledge. Their discretion about the findings of the murder was a deliberate attempt to save Minnie from the punishment of law as they were enlightened about Minnie’s failed marriage and insensitivity of her husband which rendered Minnie isolated; her repression was the reason of her crime. Ben-Zvi’s observation is noteworthy here, “Not waiting to be given the right to vote or to serve on juries, Glaspell’s women have taken the right for themselves” (39).

It should be considered that the women in this play remained within the strictures of patriarchy by maintaining silence about the evidence of the murder and not revolting outright. However, it is the ‘silence’ that ultimately rescued Minnie from condemnation. Hence, the play becomes more of “an awakening to the dilemmas of womanhood than a radical tackling of them” (Ozieblo, 19). Trifles is a commentary on the institution of marriage and reflect on how certain relationships can be repressive for a woman who might take recourse to violent acts at the end. Glaspell, as a reporter, witnessed various violent activities that were often the consequence of repressive marriages and in this play she suggests that women must support each other as belonging to the same community and foster sisterhood to fight for their rights against social divisions made by gender roles within marriage.

The play Verge by Glaspell is also a keen examination on the issues of marriage and motherhood that was first performed at the Provincetown Players in 1921. The
protagonist of the play is an unconventional woman, a scientist named Claire, who experiments with plants to create new forms of life. Her remarkable successes are the ‘Edge Vine’ and the ‘Breath of Life’, two botanical creations that are totally different from other plants that exist. In the first act we are introduced to Tom, Dick and Harry, three men in Claire’s life. Harry is her second husband; she was married to an artist before and has a daughter with him called Elizabeth but she left him as he was ‘stuck in the mud’ (*TV*, I, 47). Harry, on the other hand, was an aviator and she believed that life would be adventurous with him and that he too would be aligned towards doing ‘new things’ and she thought ‘he would smash something’ (*TV*, I, 46). But Harry too ended up being a conventional man who would not appreciate what Claire was doing—‘changing things into other things-putting things together and making queer new things’ (*TV*, I, 41). He dislikes Claire’s botanical experiments because for him this makes her a ‘strange woman’,

> Oh! I wish Claire wouldn’t be strange like that…That’s an awfully nice thing for a woman to do—raise flowers. But there’s something about this—changing things into other things . . . Give it any name you want it to have—it’s unsettling for a woman. (*TV*, I, 41)

Claire has physical relation with Dick who is an artist and a family friend and she goes to the extent of talking about it openly by cracking jokes. She is least bothered about how Harry would react as he was unaware of it. Tom is an old friend who understands what Claire is experimenting with and her urge for ‘otherness’, not to be moulded in established forms. Tom’s surname is Edgeworthy, a word that signifies his ability to go along with Claire in her process of smashing things, breaking up life, looking for ‘outness and otherness’ and so on. However, Tom is unable to accept Claire’s ideas and
go beyond society’s expectations in the final act. Claire’s views on marriage and divorce are representative of the period of Roaring Twenties when women chose their partners and divorced them whenever they wanted irrespective of what society expected from them. There was no compulsion in being together if a woman realised that her marriage was not working and they could live an independent life provided they were working. Claire, who was a new woman, a scientist of rare talent would not compromise with her life when it comes to marriage and motherhood. She said, “I am the one who has regard for human life. That was why I swiftly divorced my stick-in-mud artist and married—the man of flight.” (TV, I, 47) Claire also feels awful about the birth of Elizabeth, “A daughter is being delivered unto me this morning. I have a feeling it will be more painful than the original delivery.” (TV, I, 47)

Elizabeth has been brought up by her aunt, Claire’s sister, Adelaide ‘who is fitted to rear children’ (TV, I, 55). Claire is disgusted when Elizabeth says she feels good to be an American and be like ‘all the girls’ and ‘do the things one does’ (TV, I, 54). The mother and the daughter possess contrasting ideas about everything and the crucial moment in the play arrives when at the end of the first act, Claire and her daughter, Elizabeth discuss Claire’s experiments:

ELIZABETH: But I want to. Help add to the wealth of the world.

CLAIRE: Will you please get it out of your head that I am adding to the wealth of the world!

ELIZABETH: But, mother—of course you are. To produce a new and better kind of plant—

CLAIRE: They may be new. I don’t give a damn whether they’re better.

ELIZABETH: But—but what are they then?
Claire: They are different… These plants—Perhaps they are less beautiful—less sound—than the plants from which they have diverged. But they have found—otherness . . . they have been shocked out of what they were—into something they were not; they’ve broken from the forms in which they’ve found themselves. They are alien. Outside. That’s it, outside; if you—know what I mean.

ELIZABETH: But of course, the object of it all is to make them better plants. Otherwise, what would be the sense in doing it? (TV, I, 55-57)

This discussion reflects on the difference of each woman’s perspective on the idea of female identity. Claire is irritated at the idea of being useful or beautiful because this is what society has always been aiming at. She wants to break what society has moulded and she believes that it is only by breaking and using fragments of it, that would help in ‘strange new comings together….mad new comings together’ (TV, I, 40). Karen Malpede, in her essay, “Reflections on The Verge”, comments, “If Claire could have made a new species, she would have made a new woman—one capable of life on life’s own terms, a free, unfettered being” (124). Claire is totally dismissive of her role as a wife and a mother which society has inscribed for her. She out rightly rejects her daughter because her daughter is a traditional woman who can’t feel the ‘limitless’. Claire believes that there are no limitations that could bind her and her desire to move beyond all limits make it difficult for others to relate to her.

Her sister, Adelaide, is a traditional woman who values society’s conventions and expectations, “There’s something about being in that main body, having one’s roots in the big common experiences, gives a calm which you have missed” (TV, II, 64). She further adds that a mother should not stay away from her child only because she has no interest in the child. Adelaide calls Claire an ‘unnatural woman’ since she has no love
for her daughter. But Claire seems to be relieved that it saves her from being a natural one like others. In order to make her feel sympathetic towards her daughter, Adelaide comments, “…let me tell you, you’ve missed a great deal! You’ve never known the faintest stirring of a mother’s love” (TV, II, 67). However, Claire vehemently reacts towards Adelaide’s comments, and scornfully calls her “a liar and thief and whore with words!” (TV, II, 65). This vicious remark suggests the extent to which Claire might go to reject traditional gender roles: “Claire’s estrangement from both her sister and her daughter mark her utter rejection of the female world that had privileged motherhood and sisterhood above all other relationships” (Nelligan, 93).

The play was first produced in 1921 and the reviews that it received were mixed ones. Many critics characterise Claire as erotic, neurotic, insane and so on. The presentation of the play was such that most critics and reviewers did not know how to react. Yvonne Shafer comments, “Glaspell created a woman so complex, so different from the conventional wife and mother that many critics were baffled by the play and dismissed it as an ineffectual portrayal of a neurotic feminist” (79). Although the early reviews were full of confusions and not positive ones but recent studies on Glaspell has triggered many feminist readings that reflect on the ideas of what Claire’s character actually portrays. In her essay “The Haunting Beauty from the Life We’ve Left: A Contextual Reading of Trifles and The Verge,” Liza Mauve Nelligan presents Claire as “a heroine who privileges her right to self-development over maternal and wifely devotion, articulately demands satisfying and egalitarian relationships with men, and is committed to exposing and destroying the conventional social boundaries that crush her individuality” (91). She also comments that Glaspell was making a deliberate effort to review the personal dilemmas of feminists who viewed their own lives as experimenting
with the concepts of womanhood with respect to marriage and motherhood. In the play Claire is portrayed as a woman who would go to any extent to retain her sense of identity and this renders her one of the most radical characters presented onstage during the Roaring Twenties.

Glaspell’s *Chains of Dew* written in 1922 deals with a different issue this time that of the birth control movement. Glaspell depicts the resistance of women towards compulsory motherhood and believes in the right of women’s choice whether to have or not to have children. The Comstock Law of 1873 made it illegal to propagate any sort of ideas relating to birth control or abortion. However the movement towards legalizing birth control had started before World War I ended. In America, Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman supported the movement who were sentenced to imprisonment for the radical move. A number of women in New York and other cities joined to facilitate the idea of birth control and demonstrate their conviction in voluntary motherhood. In the play, *Chains of Dew*, Dotty a housewife searches for empowerment once she is befriended by her husband Seymore Standish’s girlfriend named Nora. She is described in the play as,

*Nora has short hair. This does not mean she’s eccentric-It is not that kind of short hair. It curls and is young and vita and charming short hair. Nora is also young and vital and charming. Devotion to a cause really doesn’t hurt her looks...At lights up, Nora, Secretary of the Birth Control League and Leon Whittaker, an Editor of The New Nation, are discovered in the Greenwich Village office of the Birth Control League. (CD, I, i, 8)*

Nora Powers is a committed worker of the birth control movement and she firmly asserts the importance of such a measure to ensure the welfare of a woman and the
child. She is shocked to know the conservative mindset of the Midwestern reflected in Seymore too and she decides to visit the Bluff city to help the people of the Midwest by setting up a birth control league there. When James O’Brien a young writer from Ireland questions about the publicity of a personal issue like birth control, Nora replies:

O’BRIEN: Why all this—demonstration—about so personal a matter?

NORA: I’ll tell you why the demonstration. Because our laws are so benighted and vulgar that they do not permit a personal matter, to be carried on in a personal way. The demonstration is to demonstrate the stupidity of the law. The cruelty. The vulgarity. The brainlessness. (With growing excitement, personally directed against the young man) Do you wish to give birth to seven children you cannot feed? Have you no respect for children? A child has a right to be wanted. You bring into this world and impoverished, defective, degenerate – (CD, I, i, 13)

Having said this, Nora emphasizes the importance of family planning so that children must not suffer once they are brought into this world. It is seen that Nora has put up companion posters in the wall of the Greenwich Village, “One of a mother with two children, one of a mother with nine children. These posters say, in no uncertain terms, that it is more desirable to have two than nine” (CD, I, i, 8). O’ Brien is suddenly reminded about his country, Ireland and remarks, “In Ireland, families are much too large” (CD, I, i, 13). He also mentions that his mother has nine children and Nora comments to it saying that birth control would have saved Ireland. Glaspell highlights the instance of Ireland to show how situations are problematized due to overpopulation and therefore the need of birth control to transform the society.
Nora decides to make Dotty the president of the birth control league in the town and this ambitious project makes her look beyond the role of a submissive wife. Seymore is dissatisfied with Nora’s decision of involving his wife and mother into her project and disrupting the traditional fabric of domestic life.

SEYMORE: Nora, I am not going to stand by and see my mother’s happiness and my wife’s happiness ruined! Mother, you know what Dotty’s life has been… Oh, I know I can’t hope to make you understand, Nora. I know it will only result in your thinking meanly of ME. That’s a thing I will simply have to bear. But Dotty grew up in a world where all the women are like the other women—the other women of their sort, I mean. She’s playing with this because she feels me behind her. She would never in this world do an irrevocable thing. (CD, II, ii, 40)

Glaspell portrays how difficult it is for the society to accept the defence of birth control since women are accorded an elevated position once they achieve motherhood and resisting the same is seen as acting against the norms of the society. To demonstrate the conflict between individual choice and societal expectations, Glaspell uses contrasting pictures that establishes two different perspective of life. On the one hand, Nora has the posters and family exhibits and on the other hand there is the picture of Sistine Madonna in the library of the Standish house. The Sistine Madonna has “exercised an immediate influence on the destiny of the sex” (Fuller, 27) and it is representative of “conventional femininity and idealized motherhood” (Gainor, 180).

At the beginning of the play, Dotty and the Mother appear to be conventional women both willing to submit to the patronizing nature of Seymore. However as the play progresses we find transformation in Dotty as she starts to take literature classes in order
to reflect her intellectual prowess and not be ridiculed by her husband when it comes to reading his works. She also decides to redecorate the house and tries to remove the picture of Sistine Madonna and put something else that would inspire Seymore’s imagination and his writings. The reference to Sistine Madonna “to be lowering herself” (CD, II, i, 24) suggests that it has already become a weak symbol in the house and Dotty’s attempt to ‘put it down’ shows the possibility of a change from a submissive wife to someone who would have her own point of view and this is more clearly reflected in her support of the birth control movement. In fact, Sistine Madonna is “loose at one end” (CD, II, i, 24) because Dotty had weakened her by trying to pull it out:

SEYMORE: Dotty, dear, what have you being doing to weaken the Sistine Madonna? And while I was away!

DOTTY: Well, I was going to take her down. I took this out (reaching back to the screw which holds the wire) to put in another picture – and then – (ruefully) I didn’t know what to put up…

SEYMORE: My dear Dot, you know perfectly well I want you to have the Madonna hanging here. Since you like Madonnas – by all means let her bless our home. (He is all the while making her secure, Dotty steadying)

DOTTY: I’m not crazy about her. But I didn’t know what else to put up. (CD, II, i, 24)

Later in the play we see an entirely different Dotty as “…hair is bobbed. It is extraordinarily becoming. She is young and gay and irresistible. The Dotty that never had a chance is gleaming there” (II, ii, 40). Seeing Dotty’s hair, Seymore is enraged and blames Nora for breaking up his life by cutting his wife’s hair. Interestingly, it is the
Mother who has cut the hair and she feels that she had cut it ‘very well’. Dotty is very contented with her bobbed hair because it makes her ‘feel light’. When Nora arrives, Dotty’s confusion regarding what picture she should have in her library is gone,

*(Dotty turns gaily upstage where, with Nora’s help, she removes the Sistine Madonna to make room for the birth control posters) Now! Down with the Madonna! (over her shoulder, to Mrs. MacIntyre) Aren’t you awfully tired of Madonnas, Mrs. MacIntyre? I’m OFF Madonnas. (She takes up a birth control poster, hammer, and nails)* *(CD, II, ii, 42).*

The Sistine Madonna reference is significant as it also appears in Glaspell’s *The Verge* to bring about a contrast between Claire, the unconventional woman and the symbol of what traditional women are expected to be. Claire, who rejects her daughter because she is traditional, is advised by her sister Adelaide, “You’d better look at the Sistine Madonna” (II, 63-64). The image of Madonna holds significance in order to show how Claire dismissed the traditional role of a mother and deviated from the norms of the society.

In *Chains of Dew*, Glaspell depicts the Mother, the most conventional character in the play as supporting the birth control movement. This is quite unexpected of an aged woman like her who should have regarded birth control as a menace. But on the contrary, she is seen actively engaged with Nora in her campaign and donates her seven hundred dollars for birth control. She realizes that having seven children is ‘too many’ and therefore suggesting that if birth control was possible she would have had fewer children. She argues with Seymore,
MOTHER: (handing NORA the check) Nora, here is seven hundred dollars for birth control. Seven is too many. Children I mean.

SEYMORE: Mother! (She looks up at him) I was the seventh.

MOTHER: So you were, Seymore…

SEYMORE: You are giving seven hundred dollars to a movement which had it existed would have meant my non-existence? … You are willing to give seven hundred dollars to gratify a wish for my non-existence!

MOTHER: Now why must men be so personal? I don’t wish your non-existence. Now that I’m acquainted with you – used to you – I’m reconciled with your existence. But there’s no use talking. You couldn’t understand it. You never had seven children (CD, III, 50).

The comments made by the Mother are quite worth noticing because she had experienced the burden of rearing up seven children in her life and working for the cause of birth control gives her an opportunity to not let other women commit the same blunder. She even wants Seymore to write a hymn on birth control and she sings, “Don’t call them from heaven/ Till earth has a home” (CD, III, 49). She feels that a child should not be brought to life unless parents could afford a proper place for it to live. Nora also shares a similar view as she believes that a child has a right to be wanted in this earth and when asked about if she ever wanted a child she replied, “None yet. But I’m sure I will have, as soon as I can get around to it” (CD, II, i, 34). In this play Glaspell chooses the birth control campaign as the key issue and exposes the problem of the modern American women. She uses the Provincetown stage to voice her concerns of the times when the political and personal scenario was changing and she strove to
highlight the foibles of modern society and study the impact of these changes upon the women of the twentieth century.

Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* produced in 1928 also offers one of the best examples of plays written on the issues of marriage and motherhood during the Roaring Twenties. The play depicts the life of Young Woman who is referred to as “an ordinary young woman, any woman” (*Mac*, xi) by Treadwell. The protagonist, Young Woman, is compelled to marry her boss, George H. Jones resulting in a murder she commits being unable to sustain the relationship with her husband. This play was inspired by true events of a murder case that Treadwell had covered as a reporter. The play is interestingly divided into nine episodes; all relating to the significant phases in the life of a modern woman of the twentieth century. The first episode titled “To Business” dramatizes the working life of the Young Woman who is uncomfortable with the dehumanised and mechanical world. It seems that she is forced into situations and has no right to choose her course of action. Lack of making a decision for her actions is basically the reason for feeling stifled all the time. Although she has no feelings towards her boss but she finds it unavoidable when she is offered a marriage proposal by him. According to her co-workers, it is inappropriate to reject her boss,

TELEPHONE GIRL: No! Tell him no.
STENOGRAPHER: If she does she’ll lose her job.
ADDING CLERK: Fired.
FILING CLERK: The sack.
TELEPHONE GIRL: *On the defensive* And if she doesn’t?
ADDING CLERK: She’ll come to work in a taxi.
TELEPHONE GIRL: Work?
The above conversation makes it clear that the Young Woman is helpless since she cannot but yield to Mr. Jones’s proposal. Accepting Jones’s advances would imply economic prosperity and luxury in her life. However the audience is given a glimpse into Young Woman’s troubled mind at the end of the scene as she speaks out in desperation, “…something-somebody” (*Mac*, 12).

In Episode Two named “At Home”, the Young Woman is forced by her Mother to marry Mr. Jones as it would help in improving their financial condition. She does not want to live in ‘filth’ and suffer without food, shelter, clothes and so on. The Mother is dependent on her daughter for her livelihood and tries to convince her and makes her understand the prospect of marrying the Vice President of the company. The Young Woman keeps on saying that she does not love Mr. Jones but the Mother emphasizes on the benefits that would follow after her marriage. It becomes quite clear that economic dependence is one of the obvious causes for repression within marriage. The same is the case with the protagonist who does not share any bond of love but marries the man for economic dependency.

Episode Three “Honeymoon” presents the situation in a hotel room where the Young Woman and her husband have arrived for their honeymoon. The wife is hesitant to the
sexual advances of her husband as she feels no real connection to this man whom she has married. She feels so embarrassed that she starts weeping as the husband comes closer to her. She even cries out for help; she remembers her Mother and wants to be her, “I want somebody…somebody-somebody.” (Mac, 26)

Episode Four “Maternal” is set in the hospital where the Young Woman has given birth to a child. It can be assumed that being a mother was not her choice and that it was forced to her. Her reactions at the hospital show her unwillingness to accept the maternal role since she does not even want to see her new born baby,

    DOCTOR: …You don’t want your baby?
    YOUNG WOMAN: No.
    DOCTOR: What do you want?
    YOUNG WOMAN: Let alone-Let alone. (Mac, 28)

The Young Woman does not want to experience motherhood and wishes to be left all alone by herself. The final monologue in this episode depicts the protagonist’s refusal to accept what has been pressurized on her till then. The repression ultimately bursts out into her defiance at the end of the scene which is striking, she says, “I’ve submitted to enough-I won’t submit to anymore” (Mac, 30).

The fifth and sixth episodes titled “Prohibited” and “Intimate” respectively presents the Young Woman in a different light. In the fifth episode, the Young Woman is introduced as Helen Jones to two men named First Man and Second Man by the Telephone Girl. The Telephone departs with the Second Man and the Young Woman stays back with the First Man. The First Man talks about his adventurous life and mentions that he once escaped from some bandits in Mexico whom he had killed with a bottle filled with
stones. He praises her by referring to her as an angel and the Young Woman develops a likeness towards this man and decides to go to his apartment. In the sixth episode, both of them lay in a bed and the man talks more about his love for freedom, his accounts of travel, adventures and so on. The Young Woman sings children’s song for the first time, an indication that she is happy to be with this man. She feels ‘free’ and ‘purified’ in his company. Ironically, this affair outside her marriage is unacceptable by the society and would be ‘immodest’ from society’s point of view. But the Young Woman refers to herself as ‘pure’ after consummating with this man. This is an important moment in the play where she breaks the boundaries of her marriage and the strictures of the society by exercising her free will in being with this man. Moreover she expresses her desire to continue this relationship,

YOUNG WOMAN: We’re going to stick together — always — aren’t we?
MAN: [honestly] I’ll have to be moving on, kid — someday, you know?
YOUNG WOMAN: When?
MAN: Quien Sabe? (Mac, 48-49)

Eventually the Young Woman leaves his room but takes away with her a bowl filled with pebbles and lily that was placed at the window of his apartment.

Episode Seven “Domestic” is set in Mr. Jones house. The Young Woman reads out an article from the newspaper, “Girl turns on gas —” “Woman leaves all for love —” “Young wife disappears —” (Mac, 53). The husband is busy talking about his business deals and property and attending phone calls. The Young Woman says that she feels ‘stifled’ and wants to open the windows. The husband asks her to breathe enough but
she is restless and keeps mentioning the stories in the newspapers where prisoners have escaped to be ‘free’, wife has killed her husband for her love and so on. She starts hearing voices of her lover who tempts her to be ‘free’. She hears her lover saying, “There were a bunch of bandidos-bandits you know-holding me there-what was I to do-I had to get free-didn’t I-I had to get free-…Had to get free, didn’t I, Free?” (Mac, 58-59). She hears other unidentified voices saying, “free — free — free…Who’d know? Who’d know? Who’d know?...head stones — head stones — head stones” (Mac, 59).

The wife exclaims, “Oh! Oh!” and the scene end here.

Episode Eight, “The Law” depicts the Young Woman who has been brought to the Court cross examination since she is accused of killing her husband. She is tried for the murder of her husband which she initially denies to have committed. However, the Court receives an affidavit from her lover which states that they were in a relationship and he had given her a bowl filled with stones and a lily, the stones of which were used as the weapon for the crime. When asked about the reason for committing such a crime she simply said that she wanted “To be free” (Mac, 75). It is the same reason that her lover, Richard Roe, gives for killing those bandits in Mexico and more importantly the Young Woman is compelled to kill by the voice of her lover and reminded of his crime in Mexico when he killed those people with ‘stones’. Through both the scenes, the murder of the husband and the killing of the bandits, Treadwell is suggesting that women are less ‘free’ than men and are always accountable for their actions. She also subtly implies the reality of the statement that Mr. Jones believed to be true, “All men are born free and entitled to the pursuit of happiness.” (Mac, 55) It is ironical that Mr. Jones and Richard are free to pursue their happiness and choose their own course of life but the Young Woman had no right even to choose her life partner and was forced to
marry Mr. Jones. The one thing that she did to pursue what made her happy, that is her affair, became the reason for her condemnation.

In the final Episode “A Machine” the Young Woman is about to be executed in the electric chair. Barbers have arrived on the scene who would cut her hair as she is being prepared for the final moment. She rebels against this as she finds it undignified and feels forced even at this hour of her death. Her final cry is a spectacle for the audience as she pleads not to submit anymore,

No! No! Don’t touch me-touch me! I will not be submitted-this indignity! No! I will not be submitted!-Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be left alone!
Always to have to submit!-to submit! No more-not now-I’m going to die-I won’t submit! Not now! (Mac, 79)

In her entire life it was only once that she had experienced freedom and she expresses this to the Priest who had also arrived to perform some rituals before her execution.

I’ve been free, Father! For one moment—down here on Earth—I have been free!
When I did what I did I was free! Free and not afraid! How is that, Father? How can that be? A great sin—a mortal sin—for which I must die and go to Hell—but it made me free! . . . And that other sin—that other sin—that sin of love—That’s all I ever knew of Heaven-Heaven on earth! How is that Father! How can that be—a sin—a mortal sin—all I know of Heaven? (Mac, 80)

At the end of the scene, the Young Woman cries out for help, “Somebody! Somebod-[her voice is cut off]” (Mac, 83)
In *American Feminist Playwrights*, Sally Burke comments “In addition to the physical machines, Treadwell presents the crushing forces of the abstract machinery of business, marriage, sex, motherhood, religion, the legal system, and the state” (78). Judith E. Barlow suggests a similar point of view in the introduction to her anthology *Plays by American Women*, “The villain of the piece is not Helen’s materialistic husband . . . Nor is it the cavalier lover . . . who considers her just another conquest . . . Rather, the villain is a rigid society that has no room for human feelings and dreams, especially those of women” (xxix). Burke also opines that Treadwell’s critique of the conventions of society and how it represses women might have been the reason for the average audience reception as the original production ran of only 91 performances (83).

Treadwell’s *Ladies Leave* (1929) centers on a housewife Zizi Powers who is bored with her mundane life and falls in love with her husband’s employee, Phillip. She was influenced by the ideas of a Viennese psychologist and decided to pursue an affair outside her marriage believing that it could change her monotonous life and make it exciting. Here we are reminded of the problem that the American women faced as described by Betty Freidan in *The Feminine Mystique*. She talks of some American housewives who shared a similar problem that had ‘no name’. Freidan gives an example of a woman, who said,

“I feel empty somehow…incomplete.” Or she would say “I feel as if I don’t exist.” Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilizer. Sometimes she thought that the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby… (20)
Women who stay within the domestic space fulfill the duties of a wife and a mother but there is something beyond these that defines her and shapes her identity and the lack of feeling ‘complete’ makes her dissatisfied. Freidan gives an example of a mother of four children, who left her higher studies at the age of nineteen to get married and she said,

I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do--hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you anything to think about--any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my home. There’s no problem you can even put a name to. But I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and putter-on of pants and a bed maker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I? … It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to. (21)

In the play Ladies Leave, Zizi Powers faces a similar crisis and therefore she thinks of pursuing an affair. However, she is disappointed with her new relation and finds it equally unsatisfying. As the play starts we see Zizi as a possession of her husband, Burnham who is a wealthy businessman. He talks about his various affairs with women and tells Dr. Jeffer, the Viennese psychologist, that he had to finally seek an old fashioned girl to marry and settle down. Zizi had a feeling that she was never an equal partner in their relationship and that she was ‘missing out’. She condemns her husband
saying that she resented him because he was the barrier who shut her out from everything. Zizi Powers resembles Nora Helmer of *A Doll’s House* who also can be viewed in a similar situation. Henrik Ibsen critiques the traditional marriage and highlights various problems inherent in the man-woman relationship that masks itself as satisfactory and perfect. Nora Helmer ultimately discovers that she is nothing but a possession of her husband who has restricted her from realizing her own dreams apart from having a life with her husband and children. She did not realize until the end that she was an individual who could have her own priorities in life and not always act in the manner as desired by her husband, Torvald Helmer. Zizi Powers acknowledges that she,

...was a fool to marry anybody. I thought anyone was. My honeymoon was a frightful annoyance to me. Really, Burnham, I never was so depressed! I had an awful sense, too, of being sold: Is that what all the poetry and novels are about? Either they’re crazy or I am! And then I got the idea they weren’t crazy. They couldn’t all be. And neither was I. (*Pause.*) And that’s where you came in, Burnham. (*LL, II, 189*)

Zizi’s life was transformed once she was exposed to the New York ideas and coming under the influence of Dr. Jeffer, she viewed life differently. Understanding the hypocrisy and double standard of her husband and the society she comes to the conclusion and tells Phillip, “Immorality is moral...as soon as you realize that-well, everybody wants to be moral” (*LL, II, 173*). She calls her affair with Phil as ‘profoundly moral’ if judged by the same values that society held for men. Although Zizi, during her courtship with Phillip, seems to have become vital and attractive than before but eventually she finds Phillip as having the same tendency of possessing her. This is clear in the following conversation,
PHILLIP: One reason that I wanted you so much was that then I thought I’d have you.

ZIZI: Have me?

PHILLIP: Yes. I was so green I thought that when a woman took a lover she—(Hesitates) she did something that—well—put her in his power, somehow. Not that he’d ever turn it against her—no; but that he’d have to be very careful and considerate. You act as though you had me and didn’t give a damn instead of my having you and being careful and considerate!

ZIZI: (Laughing) Phil, you are sweet. (LL, II, 172).

Zizi Powers discovers through her relationships with Phillip and Burnham that ‘real love’ that poetry and novel talks about is something beyond what she had experienced in her marriage or affair. She describes her opinion on love to Dr. Jeffer,

ZIZI: Love is a lover plus—plus—(Hesitates helplessly, then.) X! . . . But X is always the unknown quantity, isn’t it? And it varies for every equation. That’s the very secret of its X-ness.

JEFFER: (Interested. Slowly.) What is X for you?

ZIZI: Oh, I can’t define it. It’s made up of so much—so many different quantities. It’s A and B and C and—

JEFFER: And you don’t know what any of them are?

ZIZI: Well, one of them is pride—pride in the—the—beloved. (LL, II, 185).

Zizi realizes that pride and respect are essential aspects to make a relationship satisfying. She recognizes that her relationships lacked these and therefore was unsatisfactory; in spite of the fact that her affair with Phillip was quite liberating but it
too turned to be emotionally dissatisfying. Zizi’s maturity gained through her relationships with these men not only re-evaluated the meaning of love and relationship for her but she also recognized under the influence of Dr. Jeffer that how important it is to retain a woman’s identity and individuality in a relationship with a man. Her awareness of being belittled by her husband becomes clear when Burnham talks about “newfangled patter” of “you girls,” Zizi sharply retorts, “Don’t say ‘You girls,’ Burnham, please . . . Not ‘You’ anything. I won’t be herded, Burnham. I won’t!” (*LL*, I, 165).

The final decision taken by Zizi of going to Vienna has been interpreted in a variety of ways because it is unknown if she is departing to explore an independent existence or simply an adherer of Dr. Jeffer. Zizi chooses to leave both her husband and lover without deciding a definite place to move to and it is only after her husband insists that she might have decided some place to go does Vienne strike her mind. Different critics have interpreted the ending differently and Shafer asserts that Zizi “leaves to catch up with the attractive psychiatrist in Vienna” (263) while Gainor and Dickey suggest that Zizi is “leaving for a life of her own in Europe” (45), and Dickey and López-Rodríguez comment “Jeffer anticipates that Zizi will follow him, presumably to continue her self-exploration and growth in the capital of psychoanalysis” (76). The various suggestions about the ending reflect that it is entirely upon the reader or audience to decide if *Ladies Leave* is just a satire based on a bored housewife who uses psychoanalytic theory as a means to escape from the bond of marriage or is a serious examination of a modern woman’s search of identity and self-discovery. Shafer comments that the play lacks to convey any significant feminist message and is unsuccessful as a comedy. This view is
also evident in the words of the critic Stephen Rathbun quoted in Shafer’s *American Women Playwrights*:

Mrs. Zizi Powers is a feminist to the extent of insisting upon living her own life . . . . But it is hardly feministic of the frankly honest Zizi to be interested only in men. She lives in a man-centered world. Thus her newly acquired freedom is but an illusion. And that is why this drawing room comedy is an unimportant play and is just the fleeting diversion of an idle evening (204).

Rathbun’s comments may not fully justified since his reference to Zizi’s freedom as an illusion is not acceptable. The conclusions of Gainor, Dickey, and Lopez-Rodriguez are suggestive of the various ways that the play’s representation reflects Treadwell’s ending of *Ladies Leave* as signaling Zizi’s transformation and her quest towards self-realization and freedom. Notably, the decision of moving to Vienna by Zizi was influenced by Treadwell’s own life, as “Vienna would prove an intermittent stopping point and residence for Treadwell throughout much . . . of her life” (Dickey & Lopez-Rodriguez 76). Though the original production failed to achieve a massive hit and was not received well by the audience, *Ladies Leave* still dramatizes a modern outlook on representing a woman’s consciousness and her yearning for liberation. The choice she made must have been done with great courage and the confidence she gained was the result of the radical changes that were taking place in the ‘modern’ society.

One of the most recurring questions of the 1920s was the problems faced by a working wife and a mother. Various playwrights had dealt with this issue and Rachel Crothers is one of them who represented such women on stage. Her play, *He and She*, produced during the 1920s was well received by many critics. Alexander Woollcott praises the
play as, “…an interesting, thoughtful, and provocative play” and comments that “…this play by Miss Crothers rehearses the tragedy of the new woman with her longing for a creative career and the obligations of her home warring within her” (16).

The play dramatizes the problems of Ann Herford, a successful artist who is trying to come to terms with her role as a wife and mother on the one hand and that of a working woman on the other. Her husband, Tom, is also a sculptor who is initially contented working with Ann in the same sculpting studio. There is another couple in the play, Tom’s apprentice Keith and his fiancée Ruth. Their relationship offers a sharp contrast to that of Ann and Tom since Keith is unable to deal with the fact that Ruth would continue working after their marriage. According to Keith, Ruth should devote herself completely to the family and give up her job which Ruth flatly refuses to comply with:

    KEITH: This time next year you could be in your own home—away from those
damnable office hours and the drudgery—if you only would. If you only would.
    RUTH: It never seems to occur to you that I might be a little less tired but bored
to death without my job.
    KEITH: If you really cared for me the way you used to—you wouldn’t be bored

(HS, 902).

Keith believes that a woman’s true place is her home and a wife should stay at home and take care of it. His ideas are quite similar to the ones that prevailed in America during the early and middle twentieth century. Books and articles written on women stated that a woman should perform the role of wife and mother and seek fulfillment by performing her duties well.
Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, gives a detailed account of what was expected from a suburban American housewife,

Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire--no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights--the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (15-16)

Such similar views about women are also shared by the other characters in the play namely Tom’s sister, Daisy and Ann’s father, Dr. Remington. Daisy who is an independent working girl is bored with taking care of her own and wants someone whom she can depend upon. She does not agree with Ann and Ruth’s perspective of life and has a feeling that they are taking relations for granted. Dr. Remington also portrays conservative and traditional views about women:

The development of women hasn’t changed the laws of creation . . . Sex is still the strongest force in the world . . . And no matter how far she goes she doesn’t change the fundamental laws of her own . . . mechanism. And when the
sensitive—involved—complex elements of a woman’s nature become entangled in the responsibility of a man’s work—and the two things fight for first place in her—she’s got a hell of a mess on hand (HS, 905).

The twist in the play comes when Ann wins a commission for a project which Tom loses and although he seems happy for her success but his resentment surfaces when he refuses to use the money that Ann has received as a prize. Ann and Tom has a debate over this issue and Tom explains that it is inappropriate that he should use Ann’s money because the duties of managing the financial matters rests on him and it is what he got to do. Ann works because she wants to and Tom has to; herein lays the difference and the liabilities. Tom says that supporting Ann to pursue her career was the right thing that he did but now he believes that her career is obstructing her from performing her homely duties. She is unable to fulfill her maternal role and therefore Tom wants her to quit her job,

I am a man—and you’re my wife and Millicent’s our daughter. Unless you come back to the things a woman’s always had to do—and always will—we can’t go on. We can’t go on . . . Good God, Ann, can’t you see? You’re a woman and I’m a man. You’re not free in the same way. If you won’t stop because I ask it—I say you must (HS, 921).

Ann is shocked at Tom’s words and says that this suggestion might lead to the failure of their love and relationship. She had devoted herself to her work and if she quits it means losing an essential part of her life. She wants Tom to change his decision but another conflict arises when her daughter, Millicent, plans to marry the chauffeur of her school. Ann is troubled at the thought of her daughter marrying an undesirable match that
would ruin her future and bring bad reputation to the family. Finally she decides to leave the job for the sake of her daughter whose life is more important to her than any work that she is engaged in. However, she asks Tom to complete the project that she had started and believes that she might regret for this choice that she made of quitting the job but at the same time she feels that the duties of a mother should be prioritized when her child faces a crisis and needs her the most. She is proud of being a successful artist and states that the success of all women brings joy to her but then with the coming of Millicent she was not left with any choice. Her work was important but Millicent is part of her ‘body and soul’ and she could fail her now. Ann’s return to domesticity marks the resolution that Crothers intended to reflect through her play. Although a new woman, Ann dissolves the boundaries between a new woman and a true woman. The play represents the problems that are faced by working women who are bound by marriage and motherhood. This conflict between career and family was faced by a number of women in America and Crothers work is one of the most realistic and representative plays of those times.

Crothers’s *Let Us Be Gay* (1929) provides a glimpse into the marital conflict and divorce during the early twentieth century America. The Roaring Twenties witnessed a considerable increase in the rise of divorce rate in America. This play deals with the familial conflicts faced by women in their everyday lives. It reflects the social forces that shapes the life of women and dramatizes the problems faced by them such as conflict between love and marriage, divorce, issue of sexual liberation, double standards and so on. The play represents a young idealistic woman named Kitty Brown who discovers that her husband, Bob, has affairs with other women and she decides to divorce him. For her, “…marriage means just one thing—complete and absolute fidelity or
it’s the biggest farce on earth” (LG, 165). Three years later Kitty is called upon by her friend Mrs. Boucicault who wants to rescue her granddaughter Deirdre from the clutches of a flirtatious man. Mrs. Boucicault is worried that her affair might ruin her relation with her fiancé Bruce. Kitty has grown into a cynical and flirtatious lady and Mrs. Boucicault asks Kitty to seduce the man and distract him from Deirdre. Surprisingly the man is Kitty’s ex-husband, Bob, but they do not disclose their identity to others. The next time they meet, Bob is annoyed to know that Kitty had affairs since their marriage.

**KITTY:** Like you I’ve been amusing myself with anything and everything that came my way. I know how a man feels about that too.

**BOB:** You’re very glib but I don’t know just what you mean. What—do you—exactly? (LG, 96).

Bob has trouble dealing with the idea that Kitty had relations with other men and asks her directly about the affairs. She does not hesitate to speak the truth and finds Bob in utter shock after the truth is revealed. Earlier in the play when Kitty discovered Bob’s affairs, he gave an explanation that highlights the double standard in him, “*It has nothing to do with you*—nor the way I feel towards you—nor what I am to you . . . You still don’t know the actual honest to God truth about the man and woman business. If you did understand you’d forgive me” (LG, 7). Now, Kitty replies knowing the hypocritical nature of her husband, “I suppose you think I ought to have stayed at home with a broken heart, for the rest of my life—hugging my ideals. But I didn’t seem to be able to do that. I had to get out and find out what it was all about—to see why you did it” (LG, 165).
The play demonstrates the double standard that exists in the expectations of a woman’s chastity and loyalty. The concept of fidelity in marriage is applicable only to women and not essentially men because society has greater expectations from women to be faithful wives while men are not tied to the shackles of the society. The double standard laid down by the conservative society is reflected in Deirdre and Bruce. Bruce tries to prevent Deirdre from meeting Bob and he explains that being in such relations are futile as he had himself been in affairs with numerous women. He further adds that these affairs lead to shamefulness and regret in the later life. However, he expects that Deirdre should be a virgin when they are married and expresses his traditional views on women’s chastity. He says that either a woman is decent or she is not; there cannot be two sides of a nature in a woman. He says that a man expects his wife and the mother of his children as the ‘cleanest’ thing in this world. Deirdre retorts and highlights the double standard in his statement,

DIERDRE: And if a girl wants the darling boy she marries to be the same thing—where the hell is she going to find him?

BRUCE: It’s not the same thing at all for you and me.

DIERDRE: It is!

BRUCE: It isn’t!

DIERDRE: It is—exactly the same thing. Why should I marry you and settle down and pretend that’s all there is to it when I know damned well it isn’t? . . . Why shouldn’t I have Bob for a while and marry you, too?

BRUCE: Because you can’t. You simply can’t. That’s all there is to it.

DIERDRE: Do you mean to tell me if I’d had an affair with Bob—and it helped me to know I wanted to marry you—you wouldn’t marry me? (LG, 145-146)
In *Let Us Be Gay*, we see different perspectives on marriage and moral values through different generations. Mrs. Boucicault who belongs to the older generation represents a liberal outlook and progressive ideas when it comes to issues related to sex and gender. She seems to have accepted the changing views on morality of the newer generation.

I’d like to live another fifty years—without the bother of living—to see this thing through. I’ve watched a long procession of men, women, and morals through three generations. I’m seventy-six, and I don’t know anything . . . I always knew my husband wasn’t faithful to me, but I lived in hell with him for fifty years because I knew divorce wasn’t respectable. My only daughter had three divorces—which I was tickled to death to see her get—and here’s my grandchild in the middle of this modern moral revolution and I’m helpless . . . (*LG*, 31-32).

Mrs. Boucicault is happy that divorce has been accepted in the society and that Kitty’s modern lifestyle is welcomed by many women of the times. But she cannot agree with the sexual liberation that her granddaughter is experiencing with Bob. Deirdre has a desire of experiencing sexual bliss with Bob before she is married to Bruce but this becomes unacceptable to Mrs. Boucicault whose liberal ideas could not agree with it. Mrs. Boucicault is portrayed as a progressive lady who does not disapprove of her married friend, Madge, flirting with another man and cheating her husband. She also employs Kitty as bait to entice an unknown man for the sake of her granddaughter. Realizing the hypocrite that her grandmother is, Deirdre states that she should not be expected to be different from other women. The play represents the conflict between two generations and the evolving social and moral codes that brought about drastic
changes in the lives of women. *Let Us Be Gay* also questions whether marriage is a sacred institution and if chastity should be expected from women before marriage. At the end, Kitty confesses that her affairs made her feel lonely and terrible although she intended to experience sex about which Bob said she was ‘naïve’. She finally decides to go back to Bob after he persuaded her to return to him assuring that he would never be unfaithful again.

The ending of the play aroused a lot of speculation among the critics who saw lack of any feminist message and the play was also critiqued for the happy reunion that it presented as it catered to the taste of the popular audience. Many believed that the happy ending was the reason behind the successful 132 performances of the original production. However, an alternative way of looking at the closing of *Let Us Be Gay* is to analyze Kitty’s ultimate decision of returning to Bob as the realization that temporary affairs are futile and unsatisfactory. Both Kitty and Bob realize that extra marital relations bring disgust and agony at the end and Crothers might have dealt with this issue with her witty dialogues and realistic characters at a time when sexual freedom and liberation was experimented by women. Kitty proves to be a ‘true woman’ at the end as she states that she does not enjoy her independence and goes back to where she actually belongs. The fact that she returned to the conventions of the society trying to restore her failed marriage reflects a trend in the society when women became less interested in economic and sexual freedom and returned to domesticity. Eleanor Flexner notes:

> Thus the wheel is coming full circle. The modern woman who fought for and won the right to work on a basis of equality with men, the vote, moral as well as
economic equality, a creative existence beyond the confines of her home, finds only dust and ashes now at the end of her struggle. Having broken her chains, fought with all her might and main against being possessed, dominated, owned by anything or anybody, she cries out herself for the possession of another human being, for someone to “belong” to her, someone “whose very existence depends on her.” (245)

The progress made by women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began to decline. With the decline in the progress of women in the educational and professional field was evident the demise of the new woman as reflected on stage. Many writers of this period were addressing this issue and Rachel Crothers’ play also depicts the same social problem. At the same time it dramatizes the complexities of a woman’s life and her struggle in establishing her identity having talked about the hypocrisy and double standards of the society.

Crothers’s central characters are always a woman who is fighting against the odds of the society and trying to chart out a life for her and make her own destiny. The characters are quite similar to Crothers herself who emerged out of a small town of Illinois and made a fortune in the big city of New York. Zoe Kaplan writes, “...as a woman she has written with understanding about women and the problems they have faced-as well as created in and out of their homes…” (240). In Mary the Third (1923), Crothers deals with the issue of marriage and the changing attitude towards it. There are three women with the same name Mary; the first Mary of 1870 is the grandmother and the second Mary of 1897 is the mother of the third Mary of the present who is the protagonist of the play. Mary the First supports the ideas that the values laid down by the society should
not be violated. She is the conventional woman who believes that social standards must remain constant for generation after generation. She scorns her daughter, Mary the Second, saying that she was callous and getting along with what others were doing not maintaining strict standards for her child. Mary the Second guesses that her mother might have performed the duties of rearing up her children quite well and also acknowledges that she herself has not been able to do that. As the play progresses we realise the failure of being a good mother is the cause of her unhappy married life. She comments that she is disinterested in her child and unable to guide her properly. Moreover, she is perplexed at the ideas of the younger generation to which Mary the Third, her daughter, belongs. Mary the Third who is portrayed as intelligent, courageous and thoughtful is representative of the new age, the Roaring Twenties. She supported free love, equal standards in marriage, respectable divorce and believed that divorce is the only solution for her parents’ unhappy marriage.

Mary the third is a New Woman who is depicted as a “slender and strait as a boy. She wears a slip of a frock—which leaves her free—and she vibrates with vitality and eagerness—rather dynamically interested in her own affairs” (MT, 27). Crothers uses the aspect of evolving trend in fashion and dress which works as a strong metaphor for the changing ideals of feminine roles. The conversation among Granny, Mother, Father and Mary over Mary’s evening dress throws light on the difference of views on modesty and fashion between the old and young generation and this is done in a comic manner:

GRANNY: I don’t know how you can expect to be good in that dress.

MARY: What’s the matter with this dress? It’s a love. Isn’t it, Mother?

MOTHER: It’s very pretty, dear.
GRANNY: Yes, you uphold her in her nakedness, instead of making her put on clothes enough.
MARY: Oh, Granny.
GRANNY: I’ll wager you haven’t got a sign of a petticoat on.
MARY: Of course I haven’t.
FATHER: What’s the reason you haven’t?
MARY: Heavens—nobody wears a petticoat, Father.
GRANNY: I do. Look at her. She might just as well be stark naked for all the good her clothes are doing her.
MARY: You needn’t talk, Granny. I think it’s much better to show my back than the way you used to show your front (MT, 45-46).

This conversation also meditates on the changing aspects of feminine identity and behaviour along with the change in times. Mary the Third is not only modern with regard to her dress, her thoughts and ideas about relationships and marriage also represent her progressive ideas. Mary believes that she has realized and found out the reason behind the increasing numbers of unsuccessful marriages: “People don’t know each other before they’re married. That’s why most marriages are merely disappointing experiments instead of lifetime mating. That’s why experimenting ought to be done before marriage.” (MT, 29) By “experimenting” Mary does not necessarily suggest only sexual experimentation when she explains to her mother

We aren’t going away just so we can sleep together. . .I’ve just about decided that free love is the only solution to the whole business anyway . . . I don’t know that I could live all my life with one man—however much I loved him. Of course you and Father are satisfied with each other because you’ve
never had anything else. But you don’t know what you might have been, Mother, if you’d lived with a lot of men \( (MT, 32) \).

Her thoughts are quite radical and disturbing for the previous generation and unacceptable too. In the play, Mary the third reprimands her mother for being subjugated throughout her married life. She says, “Women will have to change marriage-men never will...You haven’t stood up to Father and looked into his eyes-levelly-without conditions and silly compromise because he’s a man and you’re a woman.” \( (MT, 13) \)

Crothers approaches the issue of economic independence of a New Woman through the portrayal of the youngest Mary in the play. The youngest Mary comments,

\[
\text{I shall have my own money. I’ll make it. I shall live with a man because I love him and only as long as I love him. I shall be able to take care of myself and my children if necessary. Anything else gives the man a horrible advantage, of course. It makes the woman a kept woman.} \quad (MT, 92)
\]

Mary also finds out that her mother and her grandmother had lived a life bereft of love. Their married life was devoid of any romance and it was just mere compromises on their part. The discovery of the lives of her mother and grandmother makes her decide that she would live with her lover without marriage. In the play the notion of ‘trial marriage’ has been addressed by Crothers depicting Mary’s attempt to decide if she should marry her lover knowing that not many couples are happy in their marriages. The play also exposes the banality of traditional marriages and highlights the disillusionment of the societal expectation that marriage and love will endure forever.
Mary, in the play, eventually marries but pledges that their love will be undying and that it will be different. The difference between her marriage and that of her mother and grandmother is that Mary is not bound to stay in her marriage if it turns unhappy and intolerable. This is possible as she has decided that she will be economically independent and that she could easily divorce her husband if she wanted thus making her marriage more acceptable and less stifling for her than that of the previous generations. It is notable that Crothers’s plays championed independence of women and critiqued double standards but they did not oppose marriage. The ‘new women’ in Crothers’s plays are strong and independent women who undergo the process of self-discovery and realize the worthiness of their lives instead of thinking solely about their male partners. Rachel Crothers’s plays highlight the social problem that occurs when the basic rights of women come into conflict with the patriarchal order of the society. Her plays focused on the indelible question of a woman’s life, that is, who or why she would marry. They reflect her feminist stance and respond to issues raised by the woman question in most her works namely *Three of Us* (1906) and *A Man’s World* (1909), and *When Ladies Meet* (1932).

In *When Ladies Meet* Crothers portrays Mary Howard, a writer who feels dissatisfied with her life although she is an independent woman. Mary’s friend Bridget observes, “I don’t care what strong women-like Mary-tell you about loving their work and their freedom-it’s all slush. Women have got to be loved” (*WLM*, 64). Mary herself asserts the incompleteness of her success when she says: “I haven’t found anything. Except to know that I haven’t got anything that really counts. Nobody belongs to me-nobody whose very existence depends on me; I am completely and absolutely alone” (*WLM*, 9).
Crothers, in her later plays, revisions the idea of freedom and independence of women and evaluates them with regard to various experiences of women. Most often it is seen that economic independence is not self-satisfactory; an experience that is evident in many plays during the 1930s. Return to domesticity is a common trait in her plays like *Mary the Third* and *He and She* with the exception of *A Man’s World* where the protagonist, Frank Ware is determined to live a life alone.
Notes

1. The Comstock Law was implemented in the United States in 1873 in order to promote public morality and therefore advertising obscene elements was strictly prohibited. The Law not only prevented business in obscene literature but also the advertisement of birth control devices and their uses. It was a campaign towards stopping abortion and restricting women to exercise their choice of maternity. In 1938, Margaret Sanger, a leader of the birth control movement filed a case and Judge August Hand lifted the ban on birth control thereby bringing end to the Comstock Law.

2. “A group of twenty-two men met weekly during the academic year at Sigmund Freud’s house to discuss psychoanalytic theory, method, and the application of analysis to problems of literature, art, education, and culture generally. Sixteen of these men were physicians, only one or two being psychiatrists. The others were musicologists, philosophers and other lay scholars. All were passionately interested in Freud’s ideas and each served in his own way to relate them to the outside world, and to provide necessary criticism” (Nunberg and Federn, 124). Their aim was to promote psychoanalysis as an important branch of discipline and their efforts culminated in the official establishment of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1910.

3. “Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, historians briefly portrayed post-1920 women as emancipated by the vote and by an urbanized, industrialized society, but choosing to remain for the most part in the home. Their portrayals of satisfied professional housewives or unstable career women were doubtless both products of and
reinforcements for the Depression psychology which sought to bring women out of the work force” (Freedman, 383). During the 1920s women’s participation in the workforce increased but gradually there was a decline in the number of working women and the proportion of women to men in the educational institutions also witnessed a decreasing trend.

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