CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Studies of women playwrights redefine the prevailing notions of American drama where men and masculine seem to define what essentially ‘American’ is. The idea of the Frontier, the Pioneer Myth, and the American Adam is always seen in terms of the male experience and dominant male culture. The problem lies in the fact that when a woman playwright writes something, “it is always seen as a political statement, i.e., feminist or anti-feminist…a man can write the same (thing) and it’s seen as life. It’s seen as art. It’s seen as universal. The male gets the universal, the female gets the particular” (Greene, 78). The works of the American women playwrights that I have studied suggest that women writers and artists not only excelled in doing what was preconceived to masculine art but they have carved out a space for themselves that redefines the ‘American’ experience.

It has to be noted that very few male playwrights have attempted to deal with issues such as the new woman, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, dialectics of space and so on and it is only the women dramatists who have been able to reflect upon and represent such ideas through their works. Having dealt with such issues in the works of the women playwrights, I have attempted to bring forth the complexities that these ideas entail. It is quite apparent from the study of the plays that the concept of the ‘new woman’ has been differently treated by Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell. Glaspell is far more radical in her treatment of the concept. Her ‘new woman’ is unique who does not
conform to the conventional feminine traits and Glaspell delineates this with her exceptional use of innovative language, use of space and an experimental theatre form.

Crothers’s depiction of the new woman suggests a kind of idealism that is resonant in most of her plays. Most of the women change their moral standards only to realize at the end that the change does not lead to happiness. They look for ideal relationship and when they fail at the end, they make compromises. Treadwell’s treatment of the ‘new woman’ or everywoman is different in the sense that most of the plays are written from her personal experiences of the situations in which she had placed her characters. Her play, *Machinal*, comment on the tensions and dilemma faced by working women who deal with men who are uncomfortable to see their women as equals. These issues get reflected in Treadwell’s other plays as well which she had experienced first-hand.

A detailed analysis of the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell shows the influence of the distinctive social and political changes of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ towards the shaping of a female identity both for the ‘new woman’ and the ‘true woman’. The study shows that the idea of the true woman as a contented wife or mother was self-contradictory during this period. The discussion also shows 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 thesis also highlights the importance of stage space in the plays of Glaspell and Treadwell and shows how space not only functions as backdrops to the action but can also become a key element in the dramatic evolution of a character throughout the plays. A major thrust is given towards depicting how the Myth of Mobility and the American Dream that was so much a part of the American culture has been revisioned
by Glaspell in her plays such as *Trifles*, *Bernice*, *Chains of Dew* and *The Verge*. Glaspell’s characters are analysed as geopathic, where space becomes a problem for the character. I have discussed how the space used in these plays becomes symbolic of the protagonist’s repression and alienation. Glaspell and Treadwell used spaces as important markers to show the dichotomy between inside/outside, personal/public, geographical isolation/community and the subversion of the power relation between those spaces.

The world of women as represented in plays of Glaspell, Treadwell and Crothers is by no means a monolithic one. They encompass a wide range of perspective and most importantly they project a sharp contrast between the male and female way of seeing the world. Their plays highlight a number of varied human experiences such as disintegration of marriages, psychological trauma, social bondage, breakdown of communication and so on. These dramatists were concerned with highlighting the uncompromising division between the male public world and female private world and this aspect has created interest in many feminists scholars.

Susan Glaspell shows a keen sensitivity in conceiving characterisation, themes, issues and style of her plays. Her representation of the American society and its people are quite significant in delineating a unique American experience. Glaspell most interesting techniques employed in the plays is that of the ‘absent centre’ which has generated much interest among theatre critics. The Provincetown theatre group played a pivotal role in shaping Glaspell’s career as a dramatist. She contributed ten plays during her seven years of attachment with the Players. Both the Players and the playwright were
influenced by each other; the Players provided her the platform to bring out her artistic talents and she contributed many interesting American plays to the theatre.

Rachel Crothers was one of the most successful women dramatists of Broadway and she gave a powerful voice to women on stage during the period of women’s suffrage movement. By representing ‘new woman’ on stage she delineated issues and experiences of women before a wide audience. Most of her plays showcase the conflicting nature of choices that women make between professional roles and domestic roles. Crothers and Glaspell seemed to have shared concerns regarding struggles of women artists and the manner in which their honour is judged by male standards. Through their plays, both the playwrights have voiced their need for women to help and support each other, particularly support women who are lonely, abandoned or independent.

Critics have suggested that Glaspell has been influenced by Crothers’s treatment of issues such as sexual double standard and the importance of female solidarity. Crothers’s A Man’s World raises an important question of who control’s a woman’s reputation and this issue has been a concern of many of Glaspell’s plays, Woman’s Honor being the most striking one. Most often it is seen that a man’s emphasis on maintaining a separate standard of sexual purity is shown as hypocritical. The Prisoner in Woman’s Honor is himself guilty of immorality but wants his woman to be the ‘purest in the world’ as is seen in A Man’s World. Malcolm Gaskell who is the father of the child named Kiddie whom he had abandoned long ago has been adopted by Frank Ware, Gaskell’s beloved. Frank decides not to marry Gaskell after knowing the truth of the child’s parentage and also resolves not to reveal Kiddie’s identity fearing that the child might be criticised for illegitimacy. Frank puts her own reputation at stake by
taking the child’s responsibility because she believes that a woman’s honour rests on her own action and not defined by exterior social forces. Frank, a woman artist, lives an independent and ‘free’ life only after sacrificing ‘honour’ which is the most important virtue regarded by society. Her friend, Fritz, initially resented Frank’s decision to keep the child but later realised that such a move could not be taken by anyone who is not independent and that it needs a lot of courage to take such a stand. Through the mutual understanding of Frank and Fritz, Crothers suggests that women have the ability to challenge the ‘immoral’ moral standards when they stop questioning each other’s honour.

The play, *A Man’s World*, written in 1910 was controversial at that period as Crothers suggested that a woman’s honour should not be threatened by her independence. This issue of a woman’s honour was carried forward by Glaspell who questioned if woman’s honour is something that women should be concerned about at all. In *Woman’s Honor*, the Prisoner protects the honour of the woman with whom he had spent the night when the murder took place and for which he was imprisoned. Although the woman could be the witness and might have saved his life but the Prisoner feels that it is his responsibility to guard her honour even at the cost of his life. Surprisingly, a series of women appear who are ready to sacrifice their honour to save the Prisoner. All of them believe that they were worried about their honour for their entire life until then and they wanted to enjoy freedom by giving away their honour. By doing this, the women are thwarting male expectations of being ‘pure’ and ‘cowardly’. All these women comment on the Victorian idea of protecting the honour of the ‘weaker sex’ and that the emblem of honour has been created by men and for their own needs. For once in their life these
women wanted to join the experience of relinquishing freedom by sacrificing their respectability.

The idea of sexual purity is also questioned in Treadwell’s *Machinal* and provides a female perspective of dealing with this issue and reconciling Victorian standards of morality with more a progressive idea of understanding sexual liberation. In *Ladies Leave* and *Machinal*, Treadwell has depicted women who strive to assert their identities and find freedom from unsatisfying relationships through sexual exploration. Most of her plays depict inner, subjective, emotional, psychological experiences through visual and audio effects that distorted, exaggerated or symbolically suggested the protagonist’s state of mind.

A study of the plays of Glaspell, Treadwell and Crothers leads me to reaffirm the seriousness of the subject matter in their plays and therefore it is important to look at the politics of production that has always foreshadowed women dramatists in the theatre group. The Provincetown Theatre that supported liberal outlook towards engaging men and women equally in creating ‘serious drama’ seemed to have contradicted their own beliefs as very few women playwrights had their plays produced by the Playhouse. Out of 145 plays written during the period 1915-1922, the Provincetown Players produced only 60 plays written by women, a number that not even equals half of the total number of productions.¹ A large number of women were associated with the theatre world during the early twentieth century with the coming of the little theatres such as Toy Theatre, Little Theatre in Chicago, Pasadena Community Playhouse, Washington Square Players, Provincetown Players and many more. Although these little theatres promised an equal opportunity for women but most of their contributions remained side-lined with regard to the productions of their plays.
Most of the Little Theatres produced plays mainly by male European and British dramatists but the Provincetown Players which called itself the “Playwrights Theatre” aimed at promoting American dramatists, both male and female, and supporting their works. An attempt was made by this theatre group to be an artistic community and George Cram Cook commented on the kind of theatre he wanted, “True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of the clan.” (Glaspell. 1926. 252) The Provincetown Players indeed provided a platform for women dramatists and artists but while looking at the production history it becomes apparent that very few women dramatists got the opportunity to have their plays staged by the Players and this suggests a gender bias that existed at this level. The plays of Rachel Crothers and Sophie Treadwell were not produced by the Players but this did not mean that their plays were not worthy of attention because they were produced on Broadway and many of them turned out to be successful. Sophie Treadwell had written thirty-nine plays, many of which were produced on Broadway. Jerry Dickey comments, “[Treadwell’s] plays often decry capitalism and cheer for the small, hardworking individual who is tied to the land and sustenance, yet she often preferred life in the city and was determined to succeed within the structure of commercial, Broadway theatre” (14). Rachel Crothers also provided many Broadway hits during the early twentieth century. Her play, *Young Wisdom* (1914), enjoyed a run of fifty-six performances in New York.

Many playwrights were drawn towards Broadway for the immense exposure it offered to women in terms of popularity, money and glamour. Also if we look at the number of women spectators we will find that by the end of the nineteenth century women started to attend the theatres on a regular basis and American theatres began “catering to respectable middle-class audience…and by the 1890s it was not uncommon to find
women occupying the majority of seats at certain plays” (Glenn, 14). It should also be taken into consideration that the rise in women theatre-goers was possibly due to the “increasing visibility of members of their own sex in the theatrical profession” (Glenn, 14). The perception towards female artists in theatre changed during the 19th and early 20th centuries and it was no longer regarded as degrading for a woman to be associated with the theatre. Broadway being the mainstream large scale spectacle allowed women to explore their potential and cater to a large audience of a commercialised world and dramatists like Rachel Crothers and Sophie Treadwell were successful artists on Broadway.

It is seen that recent productions have attempted to revive some of the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell by giving critical attention to their works. This thesis is an attempt not only to provide new insights to understand several crucial issues raised by Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell but also to bring to light the politics of production behind the staging of plays written by women. It is important to look at why women dramatists have been foreshadowed both in the production of plays by the Provincetown Players and in the American dramatic canon. Since not much work has been done on this theatre group, it might be enlightening to look at the similarities and points of departure in the treatment of subject matters and dramaturgy between the male and female Provincetown Players and understand the politics of production which I have not attempted due to limitations of time and space.
Notes

Works Cited


