Mariticide in Glaspell's *Trifles* vs. Uxoricide in Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary*: A Feminist Reading of Spousal Violence

قتل الزوج في مسرحية "تفاهات" لجلاسبيل مقابل قتل الزوجة في "أغنية لملاذ" لأحمد: قراءة نِسْوِيَة للعنف الزوجي

Dr. Magdy Gomaa Sayed
Lecturer, Department of English Language
Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University

د. مجدي جمعة سيد عبدالفتاح
مدرس بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية
كلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة الأزهر

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Abstract

Over its history, feminist literature has proven to be the voice of the voiceless, oppressed women in a male-centered society. The spousal violence against women has always been omnipresent in all societies, which may regrettably lead to one of the spouses being killed by the other. This study examines how spousal violence in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) has resulted in 'mariticide' and how it has led to 'uxoricide' in Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* (1991). This paper purports to read both Glaspell's *Trifles* and Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* from a feminist perspective. The aim of choosing the feminist approach is to resist the phenomenon of spousal violence, and to attempt to find cures for such a social disease. The researcher explores the way in which Glaspell and Ahmad dramatize their hatred for the spousal violence against women through displaying its evil fruits, of mariticide and uxoricide. In view of this, Glaspell and Ahmad accentuate the significance of female bonding as an attempt to cure such a social disease.

Keywords: Mariticide, Uxoricide, Spousal Violence, *Trifles*, *Sanctuary*.

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الملخص:

يُجَسِّد الأدب النِسْوي عبر تاريخه صوت النساء المضطهدات في مجتمع ذكوري. يعد العنف الزوجي الذي يمارسه الأزواج ضد الزوجات بمثابة وباء منتشر في كل المجتمعات، الأمر الذي قد يؤدي إلى مقتل أحد الزوجين على يد الآخر. أدّى العنف الزوجي الذي تعرضت له السيدة رايت في مسرحية "تفاهات" (١٩١٦) لسوزان جلاسبيل إلى قيامها بقتل زوجها جون رايت. في المقابل، أدّى القمع الممارس ضد الزوجة راجيندر في مسرحية "أغنية لملاذ" (١٩٩١) لروكسانا أحمد إلى مقتلها على يد زوجها براديب. تهدف الورقة البحثية إلى تحليل ظاهرة العنف الزوجي في مسرحية "تفاهات" ومسرحية "أغنية لملاذ" من وجهة نظر نسوية. يدرس الباحث الكيفية التي تُصَوِّر بها كلا من جلاسبيل وأحمد كرههما للعنف الزوجي ضد المرأة من خلال عرض ما قد يثمره من شر (قتل الزوج أو الزوجة) وتأثير ذلك العنف على مستقبل الأُسَر. يخلص البحث، بعد الكشف عن تلك الآثار المدمرة للعنف الزوجي ضد المرأة، إلى إيمان جلاسبيل وأحمد بأهمية تضامن النساء فيما بينهن كمحاولة لعلاج هذا الوباء الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قتل الزوج، قتل الزوجة، العنف الزوجي، تفاهات، ملاذ.

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Introduction to Feminism and its Waves

After its coinage in 1837 by the French philosopher Charles Fournier (1772–1837), the neologism of 'feminism' has been commonly mentioned to "connote the ideas that advocate the emancipation of women, the movements that have attempted to realize it and the individuals who support these goals" (Offen, 1988, p. 45). In its essence, the notion of feminism calls for equality to be achieved between men and women on social, economic, and political levels. Until the rise of feminism, European women were regrettably deprived of their rights to learn, to own property, or to take part in any social or political activity. Furthermore, they were denied their right to run business independently of males. In light of this, there had to be some kind of resistance waged by feminist writers. Perhaps the aim was to raise consciousness among the abused women for a common cause, hoping they could get their natural rights of justice, liberation and human dignity.

Over its history, feminism has gone through four distinctive waves; each is different in time and purpose. The first feminist wave, originated in the 19th century until the first decades of the 20th century, focused attention on women's lost rights, particularly rights for work, education, property, reproduction, marital status, and social agency. Moreover, the first feminist wave is concerned with "women's suffrage—a movement advocating women's entitlement to vote, the flagship organization of which became the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (1904)" (Malinowska, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, the demands of the first-wave movement were nearly satisfied, and the women were acknowledged to vote and practice their political rights.

The second wave of feminism emerged in the aftermath of the two world wars, particularly from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, focusing attention on women's work as well as family environment. In point of fact, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis exercised great influence on the second feminist wave, since it showed interest in "the relationship between the structuring of womanhood (in social practice and media representation) and woman's lived experience"

(Malinowska, 2020, p. 3). Then, the third feminist wave arose in the 1990s, in the era of the internet, aiming to raise a new consciousness of women's role in technological evolution. Indeed in 1991, cyber-feminism was introduced to accentuate the fact that there are "differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse" (Hawthorne & Klein, 1999, p. 2).

The 2010s witnessed the commencement of the fourth wave of feminism, both online and in the streets, to protest violence against women and children. Indeed, fourth-wave feminists made the best use of media platforms (like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and so forth, as well as the hashtag and blog campaigns that followed) to mobilize people against those who abuse both women and children. Such broad use of social media became "a real catalyst for the fight against women's harassment, professional discrimination, media sexism, and gender shaming" (Malinowska, 2020, p. 5). It should be noted that the main topic of the present study follows the main course of the second-wave feminists, since it displays the dilemma of women under patriarchal society, particularly the 'spousal violence exercised against them.'

A fair comparison between today's women and those of the twentieth century states the fact that the role of women at the turn of the last century was confined to the kitchen "serving meals, baking bread, and canning fruits and jellies" (Jabboury, 2007, p. 3). All their ambitions were to be good mothers to their children and perfect wives to their husbands. They did not have the right to learn, to work or to vote. Regrettably, women, in men's eyes, have "no ability to make complicated decisions, to think critically, or to rely on themselves" (Duffy, 2009, p. 2). Accordingly, men pay no attention to their needs or desires. However, today's women prove to be good thinkers, intellectuals and efficient laborers. They have the same rights as men to learn, to vote and to work.

Literature Review

There are numerous articles and research works written on spousal violence in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) and Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* (1991) from a feminist perspective. The following are some examples: Shirin Kamal Ahmed's "The Spousal Abuse of Women in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" (2018); Chris Duffy's "The Feminist Evidence in

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" (2009); Linda Ben-Zvi's "'Murder, She wrote': The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" (1992); Kubra Baysal's "A Black Feminist Analysis of the Domestic Violence and Victimized Women in Rukhsana Ahmad's Play, *Song for a Sanctuary*" (2021); Shrabanti Kundu's "Essentialising Feminist Paradigm in South Asian Diasporic theatre in the UK: Reading Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary*" (2022); besides many others.

The above-mentioned works tackle each writer separately. No attempt, as far as I know, has ever been made to include both authors in a single work. The present study will explore the spousal violence exercised by husbands against their wives in Glaspell's *Trifles* and Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary*. Moreover, the study purports to display both 'mariticide' and 'uxoricide' as evil fruits of such violence. The researcher has selected two prominent authors of two different cultures, i.e. Western and Eastern cultures. The first is Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), who is acknowledged as the mother of American feminist drama; whereas the other playwright is Rukhsana Ahmad (born 1948), a prominent contemporary Pakistani writer. The two selected plays will be read through the lens of feminism, which best suits the common theme of spousal violence

Introduction to Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Susan Glaspell's writings, both plays and stories, portray "feminist issues such as struggles of women in patriarchal society, identity crisis and female friendship as an essential part of women's growth" (Caroline, 2019, p. 642). Her feminist works satirize "the ignorant of patriarchy dominance and appreciate female's wisdom and power" (Li, 2022, p. 36). Glaspell's *Trifles* is her only play that displays the spousal violence against women, which is a common problem faced by many wives. It dramatizes the life of a woman who has been "suppressed, oppressed, and subjugated by a patronizing, patriarchal husband" (Duffy, 2009, p. 1). The spousal violence against wives is one of the most important topics for discussion in today's literature. Researchers for such topics tend to question the real motives behind mariticide or uxoricide as evil fruits of such oppression.

In brief, *Trifles* is a one-act play that "sheds light on power imbalances and gender differences in a society where males are the

oppressors and women are the oppressed" (Bazregarzadeh, 2023, p. 10). The story opens with the arrival of County Attorney George Henderson, Sheriff Henry Peters, neighboring farmer Lewis Hale, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who come to investigate the murder of John Wright. The prime suspect of murder is the oppressed wife, Mrs. Wright. Whereas the three men are searching for some clue that will decipher the riddle of Mr. Wright's murder, the two women enter the kitchen and the bedroom to collect some of Mrs. Wright's possessions to take to her at the country jail. Indeed, the two female characters can recognize some evidences that are regarded by males as "trifles" since they are domestic objects belonging to the female scope. Being affected by the same issues imposed on them by their society, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters sympathize with Mrs. Wright by hiding the only evidence, i.e. the dead canary, from the males. In the play, both Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are identified by their husband's surnames, which is the tradition followed in the western culture. This way of addressing married women by their husbands' surnames "seems to stress the female loss of legal identity after marriage" (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 9).

Glaspell's *Trifles* is, in fact, based on a real murder story of a sixty-year-old farmer named John Hossack. The murder took place in Indianola, Iowa, particularly on December 2, 1900. The prime suspect was his wife, Margaret Hossack, who was accused of "bludgeoning her husband with an axe as he slept" (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 9). By virtue of her work as a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*, Glaspell wrote twenty-six articles to cover the case, especially from December 3, 1900 to April 10, 1901. At first, Glaspell followed the "prevailing trend against female offenders" (p. 10). She appeared as a severe critic of Margaret Hossack via shaping "the image of the killer wife as a cold-hearted insane murderer" (p. 10). However after paying a visit to Hossack's farm and interviewing some of Margaret's friends and relatives, Glaspell changed her attitude and rapidly turned to be more sympathetic towards the murderer.

A careful reader of *Trifles* notices that the accused wife is referred to as "Mrs. Wright" by the three men, but as "Minnie Foster" by the two women. Indeed, there is some kind of pun on the surname "Wright,"

which is similarly pronounced as the word "right." After murdering her abusive husband, Minnie Foster lacked both the name "Wright" and almost all her rights since she would face a male-dominated jury. However from a feminist point of view, if Minnie Foster lost her rights by murdering her husband, she gained her "right to free herself against the societally sanctioned 'right' of her husband to control the family, a right implicit in the Hossack case" (Ben-Zvi, 1992, pp. 153-54).

Minnie's Motives for Mariticide:

The term 'mariticide' is defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as "one that murders or kills his or her spouse." More specifically, *Collins Dictionary* refers to 'mariticide' as "the murder of one's spouse, but has become most associated with the murder of a husband." However, *Vocabulary.com Dictionary* settles this debate by defining 'mariticide' as "the murder of a husband by his wife." Thus, it is commonly agreed that the word 'mariticide' is mainly used to indicate the killing of a husband by his wife. The feminist reading of *Trifles* provides "a convincing case for the necessity of women to move beyond destructive stereotypes and oppressive assumptions in order to be true to their own significant—not trifling—experiences" (Duffy, 2009, p. 3).

Glaspell's choice of the title word 'Trifles' is derived from a line stated by Mr. Hale, when he says, "Well, women are used to worrying about trifles" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 3). Here, the title seems ironic as Mrs. Wright is more concerned about trifles than about being under arrest for murder. However, the title cautions that "we ignore slighter things at our own peril" (Pailinrat, 2009). Such slighter things or trifles are, in fact, behind the motives for Minnie's mariticide. A feminist reading of *Trifles* reflects that Minnie's motives for murdering John Wright are twofold: personal and impersonal. Concerning the impersonal motives, Minnie Foster lives in a barren isolated house with a gloomy kitchen, which indicates disintegration among the family members. Ben-Zvi (1992) argues:

> Motives are writ large in *Trifles*. The mise-en-scène suggests the harshness of Minnie's life. The house is 'isolated, down in a hollow and you don't see the road,' dark, foreboding, and a rural, gothic scene. The interior of the kitchen replicates this barrenness

> and the commensurate disjunctions in the family, as the woman experienced them. Things are broken, cold, imprisoning. They are also violent. 'Preserves' explode from lack of heat, a punning reminder of the casual relationship between isolation and violence. (p. 154)

Regrettably, the state of loneliness experienced by Minnie Foster creates a state of harshness in her life, which motivates her to commit mariticide. Indeed, John Wright "isolates his wife in the house and refuses to install a telephone" (Caroline, 2019, p. 645). The broken door hinge of the cage reveals the fact that it is "the expression of anger and hostility" (p. 645). The state of the kitchen is clearly portrayed by Susan Glaspell in her first stage direction, "The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen and left without having been put back in order- the walls covered with a faded wallpaper" (1916, p. 1).

The barrenness of the setting resembles in many ways the aloofness of Mr. Wright who is described as being a “hard man” and “a raw wind that gets to the bone” (Glaspell, 1916, p. 7). Commenting on Mrs. Wright's predicament, Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters about the isolation, both physical and emotional, experienced by Mrs. Wright during her life on the isolated farm. Since it is not a cheerful place, Mrs. Hale does not like to visit Mrs. Wright on the farm:

> **MRS HALE:** I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come. I—I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now— (Glaspell, 1916, p. 7)

Regarding the personal motives, it can be said that the division of the investigation team into three men and two women symbolizes disunion among family members (i.e. between John Wright and his wife). From the outset of the play, we observe the separation of both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters from the male characters, "The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 1). They form a tight bond against men's irony. They are considered by men as 'trifles' who "are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 3).

However, Mrs. Peters appears more confident and a better investigator than her husband. She surfs the house trying to get evidence that could support Minnie's motive. Indeed, Mrs. Peters manages to observe the unbaked bread, the dead bird in the cupboard, the skirt and dress, as well as the broken door. Although men surpass women in number, they cannot grasp the evidence observed by women via unimportant details.

At first, Mrs. Peters is reluctant to support Minnie Foster. In her speech to Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters shows the extent to which she is deeply affected by the male doctrine of her husband the Sheriff, "But, Mrs. Hale, the law is the law" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 5). Again, Mrs. Peters confirms to Mrs. Hale that "The law has got to punish crime" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 8). However after experiencing the bitter sense of loss following the death of her two-year-old child, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale unite

> to hide the bird from the men, doing away with the laws of their time. Both women comprehend the loneliness, distress, and grief Mrs. Wright has undergone and sympathize with her. Their sympathy with Mrs. Wright arises not only from sisterly solidarity but from the two women's self-identification as mothers, in contrast to the childless Minnie. Maternal feelings, eventually, make Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters sympathize with Minnie's childlessness and want to protect her (Bazregarzadeh, 2023, p. 12).

Following this, Mrs. Peters begins to understand Mrs. Hale's defense and sympathy with Mrs. Wright when she says, "We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 8).

In the play, Mrs. Hale symbolizes the emotional side of women. She understands "the desperation, loneliness, and pain that Mrs. Wright experienced, and she instinctively knows that the roles Mrs. Wright played—even that of murderer—are scripted by the male-dominated circumstances of her life" (Duffy, 2009, pp. 2-3). As is the case with Susan Glaspell who expresses her sympathy with Mrs. Margaret Hossack, Mrs. Hale sympathizes with Minnie's plight from the outset. Once she enters the kitchen, she reorders the unwashed pans under the sink. Again, Mrs. Hale justifies her negligence towards Mrs. Wright through helping

Mrs. Peters get a proof that explains the motive behind committing mariticide.

While examining Mrs. Wright's skirt, Mrs. Hale begins to tell Mrs. Peters about the juvenile life led by Minnie Foster when she was a vigorous girl:

> **MRS HALE**: Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. 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. This all you were to take in? (Glaspell, 1916, p. 6)

Mrs. Hale cries Mrs. Wright's past days before her marriage to John Wight. Thirty years ago it was her habit to wear nice-looking clothes and be energetic. She was a town girl, singing in a choir. Regrettably, everything has gone upside-down since she married John Wright. She replaced the excitement of the town with the barrenness and isolation of the farm life. Moreover, she changed her pretty clothes with the shabby ones. Accordingly, she became a lonely and isolated housewife after being a sociable and lively girl. In short, Minnie's life after marriage can be summarized as "being alienated from her husband, powerless and silenced by her marriage" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 110). All these alterations of identity have affected Mrs. Wright so much "so that all she worries about in jail are her preserves and her apron to make her feel more natural" (Bazregarzadeh, 2023, p. 11). Indeed, all these considerations can justify Mrs. Wright's committing mariticide.

The attitude adopted by men towards women in the play justifies the violent reaction taken by women against them. In *Trifles*, both Mr. Peter and Mr. Hale seem to be flat characters, best representing the agents of male prejudice. Throughout the play, they make fun of Mrs. Wright's life and the lives of women in general. Intensely, most of their belittling happens in front of their wives. Indeed, the Sheriff, the County Attorney, and Mr. Hale ridicule Mrs. Wright's concern about her preserves despite her conviction of committing mariticide:.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worrying about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles. (Glaspell, 1916, p. 3)

It is worth noting that if John Wright is condemned of abusing his wife and ignoring her rights and desires, then the County Attorney is also to blame because his behavior in the play is no less than the murdered husband. To illustrate, when Mr. Hale tells him that John never seems to care about what his wife wants, he ignores him, saying, "Let's talk about that later" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 2). Moreover, when the women rise to Minnie's defense, he even mocks them for simply trying to be "loyal to their sex":

MRS HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. (Glaspell, 1916, p. 3)

Mrs. Hale is certain that Mrs. Wright is completely innocent. As soon as she begins to defend Mrs. Wright's housekeeping against the accusations of County Attorney, County Attorney's attitude appears aggressive to her, saying "loyal to your sex." Indeed, Mrs. Hale's bonding with Mrs. Peters helps in blinding men's eyes from recognizing the truth.

In the play, men humiliate women; however, women can resist and conquer men by uniting and backing each other. Their attitude here produces an affinity with the theory of 'sisterhood,' coined by feminists of the First Wave "to represent a feeling of affection, friendship and cooperation among women to find a solution to personal, political or gender issues" (Asif et al., 2020, p.78). Hooks (2000) argues that women's bonding is "a source to enhance struggle against gender inequality and the idea to abandon sisterhood will inevitably weaken the women's struggle against sexism" (qtd. in Asif et al., 2020, p.78). Thus, sisterhood is an effective way for women to fight against gender oppression, particularly the spousal violence they experience in a patriarchal-based society.

What is deplorable about Mrs. Wright is that she is forced to do her duties in a cold atmosphere, which makes Mr. Henderson say, “I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct” (Glaspell, 1916, p. 3). Indeed, Mrs. Wright leads a monotonous, childless life in which "the caged canary and its singing are the only ways of survival" (Bazregarzadeh, 2023, p. 12). The stifling life led by Mrs. Wright in a male-centered atmosphere forces her to keep a canary, hoping that it may soothe such a tough atmosphere. Thus, when John Wright kills the singing canary and deprives his wife of the only melodious element in her ruined life, she does not hesitate to commit mariticide to liberate herself from the restraints of her tyrannizer.

Another motive behind Mrs. Wright's committing mariticide is "her lost identity and her longing for renewal" (Bazregarzadeh, 2023, p. 13). Indeed, Mrs. Wright lost her identity when she was assigned a lot of duties and responsibilities on the farm. She is eventually driven to kill her “hard husband who has stifled every last twitch of her identity" (Duffy, 2009, p. 1). By moving in the male-centered track of her husband, Mrs. Wright lost her identity "somewhere along the way" (p. 1). The question now is, 'Was Mrs. Wright's mariticide justified?' Indeed, the way in which Mrs. Wright appears after killing her husband confirms the belief that she is satisfied with what she has done. In response to the County Attorney's question, Mr. Hale conveys Mrs. Wright's state as well as her feeling immediately after the murder:

> **COUNTY ATTORNEY**: How did she seem to feel about your coming?
>
> **HALE**: Why, I don't think she minded—one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, 'How do, Mrs. Wright it's cold, isn't it?' And she said, 'Is it?'—and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to sit down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she—laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. (Glaspell, 1916, p. 2)

Perhaps, the loveless marriage experienced by Mrs. Wright in a cold and unwelcoming home as described by Glaspell is what made her cold and passive after committing mariticide.

In *Trifles*, Glaspell employs various symbols to highlight gender inequality and the oppressive conditions of Mrs. Wright's life. Perhaps, the 'broken birdcage' is a good example since it symbolizes Minnie's own feeling of entrapment in her marriage. It can be assumed that the canary represents Mrs. Wright whereas the cage represents the male-centered society. Just as the bird is killed and the cage is broken, Minnie is forced to kill John to liberate herself from the oppressive relationship with her husband. Another symbol employed by Glaspell to accentuate the theme of spousal violence in *Trifles* is the 'dead canary' which represents Minnie's lost happiness and spirit. Indeed, the bird's singing is likely one of the few sources of joy in her life, and its death mirrors the stifling of Minnie's voice and freedom by her husband. For Makowsky (1993), the canary's voice is supposed to "displace the silence of a coldly authoritarian husband and replace the sounds of the unborn children" (p. 62).

Glaspell's symbols extend to reach the domestic objects such as the 'quilt' which symbolizes Mrs. Wright's life as well as her mental state. The quilt's erratic stitching symbolizes Minnie's nervousness and possible mental breakdown. The women's discussion about whether Minnie was going to "knot it or quilt it" subtly refers to the manner she uses to kill her abusive husband (knotting a rope around his neck). Moreover, the 'rocking chair' is another symbol which represents the state of confusion experienced by Mrs. Wright after her committing mariticide. It can also represent Mrs. Wright's mental state. Indeed, the repetitive motion of rocking might suggest a sense of being stuck or trapped in a monotonous, unchanging routine. It could also hint at her mental agitation and distress. After the murder, she does not know what she should do next:

> **COUNTY ATTORNEY**: What—was she doing?
>
> **HALE**: She was rocking back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of— pleating it.
>
> **COUNTY ATTORNEY**: And how did she—look?
>
> **HALE**: Well, she looked queer.
>
> **COUNTY ATTORNEY**: How do you mean—queer?
>
> **HALE**: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. (Glaspell, 1916, p. 2)

All these symbols justify Minnie's mariticide as an evil fruit of spousal violence in a male-centered society.

Introduction to Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary*

Rukhsana Ahmad is a prominent contemporary British-Pakistani writer, playwright, and translator. She is renowned for her noteworthy contributions to literature and theatre, with a particular focus on multiculturalism and women's dilemmas. Rukhsana Ahmad expresses her affinity with the feminist movement. As a writer, she exploits the chance to express her feminist viewpoints in all her literary works, particularly her famous plays such as *River on Fire* (2000), *Letting Go* (2008), *Homing Birds* (2019), and on top of them *Song for a Sanctuary* (1991). It is worth noting that Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* was written particularly to be performed on the Kali Theatre; a theatre specialized in introducing plays by South Asian playwrights. Regarding Ahmad's literary career as well as her strong feminist sensibility, Donnell (2002) states:

> Ahmad is motivated by a feminist activism. She was a founder member of the Asian Women Writers' Collective, and began the Kali Theatre Company, which she co-founded with Rita Wolf in 1990, to draw more Asian women to the theatre. She wrote Kali's first play, *Song for a Sanctuary*, which was nominated for the Susan Blackburn Smith Award. Ahmad also writes for radio and the radio version of *Song for a Sanctuary* was shortlisted for the Commission for Racial Equality Race in the Media Award in 1993. (p. 8)

As is the case with Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* whose story is based on a real murder story of a sixty-year-old farmer, Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* also stands on the true story of Balwant Kaur, a young woman who was murdered by her husband in 1985. In brief, *Song for a Sanctuary* opens with Rajinder, the protagonist, who runs away from her abusive husband, Pradeep, and seeks shelter in a women's refuge run by two workers, Kamla and Eileen. From the first moment in the refuge, Rajinder does not feel in harmony with Kamla who has forgotten about her Indian culture and traditions due to her assimilation into a different culture. In contrast, Rajinder does not only preserve her native culture and

traditions but she also does all her best to transmit "the cultural values of her place of origin to her children" (Kundu, 2022, p. 238). Due to her commitment to her native culture, identity and faith; Rajinder suffers a lot in the refuge. Throughout the play, Rajinder's abusive husband Pradeep hovers over his family like a ghost. He never gets tired of searching for his oppressed wife, and finally identifies her place in the refuge. Refusing to return with him, Pradeep commits uxoricide by stabbing Rajinder to death at night in front of Savita, their daughter. Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* is widely acclaimed as an example of feminist drama since it displays the dilemma of women under patriarchal society. Rajinder's abusive husband symbolizes patriarchal oppression, which reaches its utmost level via his committing uxoricide at the end of the play.

Uxoricide as an Evil Fruit of Spousal Violence in *Song for a Sanctuary*

This part explores the signs of spousal violence that led Rajinder's husband Pradeep to commit uxoricide. First of all, the term "uxoricide" is defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as the "murder of a wife by her husband." Moreover, *Collins Dictionary* explains that "uxoricide" refers to "the act of killing one's wife." Indeed, the researcher makes the best use of this term to be an evil fruit of the spousal violence exercised against women in Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary*. In contrast to Glaspell's *Trifles* in which mariticide represents its main theme, Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* displays uxoricide as an important topic generally discussed in more than one literary work. In the play, Ahmad presents Rajinder as a victim of the spousal violence committed by her abusive husband Pradeep.

Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* depicts both the moral conflicts and the troubled life experienced by a refugee who ends up being a victim of spousal violence in a women's refuge. Moreover, Ahmad brings in the element of "gendered violence, cultural duality and community life in a portfolio of South Asian presence in Britain" (Kundu, 2022, p. 236). In the play, Ahmad tends to question the oppressive patriarchal system, trying to direct public opinion towards the evil fruits of the spousal violence, hoping to find cures for such a social plight. The title word "Sanctuary" is defined by *Vocabulary.com Dictionary* as "a shelter from

danger or hardship." Indeed, it reflects Rajinder's desire to the find a safe place that protects her against the oppression of her husband. The title foreshadows "the unwanted ending of Rajinder's life through its elegiac tone" (Kundu, 2022, p. 237).

In response to Sonia's inquiry if it is her first time to be in a refuge, Rajinder replies "I've been in a refuge before ... couple of years ago, I went in an emergency situation, and it was a mistake. That is why I planned it all carefully this time. I think you need to" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 6). This indicates the repeated spousal violence committed by the husband against the wife. Then, Sonia begins to talk about the physical abuse exercised against her by her partner Gary. Having heard about Sonia's spousal abuse, Rajinder advises her not to marry him or even to go back to him again. Both women seem to unite in solidarity against their spousal abusers:

> **SONIA**: I think all men are different. And he really tries to be nice when I go back, at least in the beginning'; he'll get me presents, take me out for a drink, be quite loving'. Then he falls into his old habits. First it's a wallop, and ' then maybe a fist or two, then a couple of kicks, until one day he has to let it all out on me. Last time he messed me up really bad... The worse it is the longer it takes me to get back to him, but I always do in the end. See my back?
>
> **RAJINDER**: It looks dreadful. Five weeks, did you say?
>
> **SONIA**: Doesn't hurt any more.
>
> **RAJINDER**: You shouldn't go back this time. You're not even married to him. (Ahmad, 1991, p. 7)

Due to her cultural and religious commitment, Rajinder does not want to tell anyone about the spousal violence exercised against her by her husband, regarding it as a shame. When Kamla asks Rajinder if she has ever told the police about such violence, she replies, "Never. They open an inquiry and make your life hell with questions and questions and questions. The one who reports has to answer all their questions. They never catch the thugs: everyone knows that" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 8). Then, Rajinder tells her that the reason why she has come to the refuge is because she is "trying to escape from a man who's cunning, and strong,

and tough as a bull; he can see through curtains, he can hear through walls. (She is) really frightened of him" (p. 8).

Regrettably, the spousal violence of Pradeep does not only destroy Rajinder's life but also pushes "her elder daughter, Savita, to confusion and psychological problems because of her father's cruel treatment to her mother" (Baysal, 2021, p. 239). This is evident in Savita's speech to her mother in the refuge on a Friday night. Act One Scene Two opens with Savita waking her mother at midnight as she suspects the presence of her father in their bedroom:

> **SAVITA**: There's someone in here.
>
> **RAJINDER**: Who?
>
> **SAVITA**: Maybe it was Papaji. I couldn't tell, his face was hidden in his turban, and, and he had his kirpaan, he was holding it like that, like a flag, above his head.
>
> **RAJINDER**: Stop being so silly, Savita, there's no one here.
>
> **SAVITA**: You know how he looked that day when he went mad 'cause you got back late ... He just stood there, he was polishing his kirpaan ....and his eyes looked strange ....I really felt terrified of him. (Ahmad, 1991, p. 12)

Indeed, the spousal violence has its negative impact on all family members: wives and children. It has caused psychological harm to Savita, preventing her from having comfortable sleepy nights.

Savita begins to remember the moment when her father "flung his plate at her mother, for talking back at him" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 12). Savita is so afraid of the moment when Pradeep may find their place. Thus, she asks her mother to be cautious via keeping a hammer under the pillow, "We could keep a hammer under the pillow. I kept Sanjay's bat under the bed, last night. Look, here it is" (p. 12). The scene ends by Rajinder's shock when she smells a bad smell coming from Savita's bed. Regrettably, the mother finds out that her daughter has wetted her bed out of her fear from her father's coming, which clearly indicates the daughter's distorted psychology:

> **RAJINDER**: Try to sleep, jaan. Don't ask difficult questions at this time of night....Hold on, what's that smell? Oh, Savita!
>
> **SAVITA**: I never mean to. I don't know how it happens.

> **RAJINDER**: Go and wash and then change your clothes. You're fourteen! What if someone finds out? (Ahmad, 1991, p. 13)

Moreover, the contemplative reader of *Song for a Sanctuary* can observe Rajinder's obsession with hygiene as a negative outcome of Pradeep's spousal abuse. This is evident in Sonia's comment on her continuous washing and cleaning during the night, "And she says all the washing can't be left. Anyway she's got a thing about washing. She's in the bathroom for hours and hours" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 19). Rajinder asks her daughter to repeatedly clean and wash things, which again "exhibits her emotional problems resulting from the multi-faceted violence she suffers" (Baysal, 2021, p. 240): "Wash the bedclothes, your hands, your face, your body, once, twice, three times and pray for it to be cleansed. Then wash him off your body, Rajinder.... and never let him touch you again" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 13).

One of the remarkable aspects of spousal violence in Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* is the submission of women's bodies to male control. Due to their socio-religious status, some South-Asian women have no say on their bodies. In Act Two Scene Three, Savita rudely talks to her mother about the blue films her father forced her mother to watch. At first Rajinder denies, but she collapses at the end:

> **SAVITA**: I know about the blue films... he forced you to watch them, didn't he? ... and the times when he forced you to drink, and ... and ... he made you do things you didn't want to do.
>
> **RAJINDER**: Shut up, Savita. For God's sake, be quiet. Someone will hear you. (Ahmad, 1991, p. 38)

The last scene in the play portrays Pradeep's spousal violence in its worst form. It is the last confrontation between Rajinder and her abusive husband. Pradeep begins to threaten Rajinder, asking her to return to him. Savita begs her father not to hurt her mother. Upon her refusal to go back to him, Pradeep asks Savita to turn her face away, so he can kiss her mother goodbye. Eventually, Pradeep stabs Rajinder to death, "This is for denying me yourself, and this for denying me my children. This and this and this" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 55). Pradeep begins to justify uxoricide to Soniam by saying, "This is not a murder it’s a death sentence, her

punishment for taking away what was mine. Tell them when they come. She can't leave me, she's my wife" (Ahmad, 1991, p. 55).

To conclude, both Glaspell's *Trifles* and Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* represent the angry voices of abused wives against the restraints of their husbands. In the two plays, the female characters prove to be respected creatures not, as male characters think, inferior ones. The choice of feminism to read and analyze the two given plays is aimed in favor of the liberation of women. In *Trifles*, women prove to be able to think, act and discover the truth. They can find out the motives behind Mrs. Wright's committing mariticide. Indeed, Glaspell manages to shift the reader's eyes from the male roles to the female ones. She succeeds in concretizing women's position in their society by portraying them as united against the male abuse. In contrast, Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* presents the struggle of an Indian woman against the abuse of her husband. Ironically, Rajinder gets murdered in the refuge, the place where she expects to have protection. Despite the attempts of other women to deviate Rajinder from her native culture and traditions, the protagonist succeeds in preserving her identity as well as her values. However, she fails to protect her daughter Savita against Kamla's liberated ideas. Being a victim of uxoricide, Rajnder represents a tragic example of spousal violence against women in a male-centered society.

A point of similarity between the two selected plays is the fact that both Mrs. Wright and Rajinder are in continuous struggle against their spousal abuse, hoping to free themselves from the restraints of the rigid patriarchal system. Both of them endure emotional and physical isolation—Mrs. Wright in her barren home, and Rajinder in a refuge that alienates her culturally. These settings underscore how patriarchal systems suppress women's autonomy in distinct cultural contexts. Moreover, the two women have experienced tragic endings due to the domestic violence they receive from their husbands. Indeed, the spousal abuse exercised against Mrs. Wright in *Trifles* leads her to commit mariticide by strangling her husband the same way he does with her canary. On the other hand, Rajinder in *Song for a Sanctuary* tries to escape Pradeep's patriarchal abuse by resorting to a sanctuary as a refugee. In the refuge, Rajinder faces more than one struggle even with

the refuge women themselves. In the end, the protagonist finds herself helpless before the eyes of her husband who commits uxoricide (i.e. killing her) in front of their daughter, Savita.

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