
EXPLORATION OF THE AMERICAN FEMINIST DRAMATIST

SURIAKUMARY M

Abstract: In this study, it has been discussed about the feminist dramatist of the American drama who has craved their identity in the distinct theatrical genre. A large number of women playwrights with new self awareness and curiosity have used the theatre to explore what it means to be a woman. Mercy Otis Warren, Susanna Rowson's, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Rachel Crothers were the few playwright who explored were discussed in this article.

Keywords: American Dramatist, Feminism, Rachel Crother's, Women Playwrights.

Introduction: Feminist drama the off-spring of the feminist movements, deals specifically with female experience and turns the spotlight on woman endowing her with a sense of dignity and selfhood. Feminist drama has carved its identity as a distinct theatrical genre during the late 1960's both in Britain and America. During the 1960's the female playwright became self-conscious about the absence of women on stage. As Moore remarks, whether or not they identify themselves publically and politically as 'feminists', feminist playwright are now playwright who's 'art is related to their condition as women'.(51) [1].

The history of America's women playwright is as old as the history of the nation. Since the incorporation of the United States in the late 1700's, scores of women have dramatized the plight of women in a culture dominated by the interest of its men. Both the feminist theatre movement and feminist drama were foreshadowed in the hundreds of plays by women written in the early part of the twentieth century and more recently in a dozen powerful works by women dramatists in the 1950's and early 1960's. Women playwrights such as Warren and Mowatt wrote plays that pointedly reveal the complexities of women's lives.

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) a patriot of the revolution was not only the country's first woman playwright but also its first feminist playwright. Warren and the dramatists Susanna Rowson and Anna Cora Mowatt, who followed her in the 19th Century, addressed in their plays such feminist concerns as the objectification of women, the silencing of their voices, and their psychological and physical abuse- concerns that continue to appear in the plays of contemporary feminist playwrights.

Warren was a poet and celebrated historian. She created dramas that urged the colonist's cause in the Revolutionary war and also argued woman's cause in life itself. She argued equality of race and gender, in her plays. Her most famous plays are **The Adulateur (1772)** and **The Group (1775)**. Being a liberal feminist, she manifests the desire to be recognized as part of

the system that excludes her. As her dramas developed from sketches written first in the service of a propaganda battle, then an actual war, to the historical tragedies written after the revolution. Warren's feminist philosophy also developed. While feminist themes are readily observable in **The Group**, the playwright of **The Ladies of Castile (1784)** and **The Sack of Rome** is quite different from the playwright who composed **The Adulateur** and **The Defeat (1773)**. **The Group** was peopled solely by Loyalists, the patriots are present only diegetically. In this drama Warren refines her talent as a playwright makes greater use of set and setting, and develops a colloquial idiom. The gloomy set up palpably conveys moral decay. The play was the most popular of Warren's political dramas

Warren is the first American playwright to remark the manner in which the patriarchy constructs the female, then uses that construct to demean and denigrate women and their assigned roles. She demonstrates in her dramas the manner in which, as Maria points out in **The Ladies of Castile**, "men rail at weakness themselves create" [2]. By spotlighting women's abilities, Warren's plays legitimize their aspirations; by underscoring the evils of man's neglect of his emotional, psychological, and physical abuse of women, of his disregard for children and family responsibility in favour of power, money, and fame, the works present, the rationale behind Warren's radical sentiments for reordering society. Warren articulated with courage and clarity the injustice of the patriarchal system both abroad and at home. These issues are, for feminists the most important aspects of her dramas and paramount in consideration of the plays' present value.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the coalition of feminist and suffragist playwright of dowagers, matrons, and debutantes appearing on stage, had done much to augment the aura of respectability brought to the theatre by actors and playwrights such as Rowson and Mowatt. During 1790, Warren spoke of the theatre as a means of inculcating virtue in the audience.

In a culture that held its ideas about woman's proper place as increasingly sacred, the theatre provided one of the few areas wherein a woman strong enough to challenge society's perception of its immorality might exercise her talents and earn a living equal to a man's. Susanna Rowson and Anna Cora Mowatt succeeded as actors and playwright.

Susanna Rowson's primary subject is women. She studied them, promoted them, commented on their neglect presence in history, employed them as subjects in her writing and educated them. For the most part, Rowson was a radical feminist who challenged the Enlightenment tenet of male superiority. She envisioned bringing about radical social change and effecting material security for women through education.

In her only extant drama, **slaves in Algiers; or A struggle for Freedom: A play interspersed with songs** (1794), she combined the appeals of the political immediacy of current events, patriotism, and the popular ballad-opera form. Technically, her play is an amalgam of farce, sentiment, and melodrama. The plot is contrived, shot through with coincidences and encumbered by an especially melodramatic recognition scene. The drama's assets are Rowson's boldness in the treatment of female sexuality, the examination of woman's position in society undertaken through the title's metaphor, and the abolitionist statement made in the dialogue.

Like Rowson, Mowatt knew what being a woman who worked outside the home entailed. Her **Autobiography of an Actress** (1854) is an important source of theatre history. Her feminism is apparent in 'Fashion'. **Fashion** combines farce, caricature, and melodrama in a satire of the nouveau riche in mid nineteenth - century New York. **Fashion** is also a child of Warren's **The Blockheads** and **The Motley Assembly** in its satirizing of those who prefer foreign over American manners. The plot, farcical miscues, and melodramatic gestures of the drama are well known and modern audience delight in its mannered style.

Like Rowson, Mowatt utilized popular themes, including the contrasts of city and country life and European and American manners, and the idealization of the common man. In addition, stereotypes, racism, the philosophy of separate spheres, woman as chattel, woman's employment as her objectification, and the double standard are all present. Mowatt is at base, pragmatic in her picture of society.

In spite of the auspicious beginnings of feminist drama and artistic accomplishment, the strong articulated and united voice of the American women dramatists did not endure and increase, but rather modulated, eventually attenuated. The isolated and

individual voice of playwright like Susan Glaspell, Lillian Hellman and Lorraine Hansberry occasional broke the silence of the next forty- odd years.

At the turn of the 20th century in the wake of the struggle for women's emancipation, women playwright was very popular. A large number of women playwrights with new self- awareness and enthusiasm used the theatre to explore what it means to be a woman. The outbreak of the Second World War paved way for many women playwrights. As a result a new generation of woman playwrights emerged on the literary horizon of American drama. In the 1920's and 1930's the achievement of many women playwrights like Rachel Crothers, Zona Gale, and Susan Glaspell. "Marks the brilliant efflorescence of woman as creative dramatists" (Mersand 150) [3].

Susan Glaspell and Rachel Crothers were major forces in early-twentieth-century American drama. Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) helped to transform American Drama through her connection with the Provincetown Players and created new ways of representing women on stage. Among the heroine of the American drama, Susan Glaspell's heroines are most distinguished. Susan Glaspell won the Pulitzer Prize for **Alison's House** in 1930. She depicts her protagonists to be idealistic rebels. Glaspell's provocative works investigate deeply into the issues crucial to women.

Her first play **Trifles** is a study of male dominance and insensitiveness. She directed some of her own plays, almost all of her plays deal with the problems women encounter in attempting, against the strong current of patriarchal authority, to forge identities of their own. **The Verge** (1921) focuses her attention on a woman driven to madness, in her efforts to escape from the socially prescribed female roles of wife, mother and mistress.

Crothers (1870-1958) and Glaspell (1876-1948) brought the new women to the American Stage. Crothers was one of the most successful Broadway dramatists of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Crothers is a feminist dramatist who brought to the stage more new women than any dramatist of her era. Crothers represents and celebrates the New Woman. As a voice for the New Woman, Crothers explored feminist issues in a manner that makes her a worthy successor to Warren and Rowson.

Beginning with earliest plays, she exposes the frictions about women created by the patriarchy to reinforce its paradigms of womanhood, as she illustrates the arbitrariness of socialization by gender and the concomitant cost for women and society in the unfulfilled human potential for work, love, or both. The tension between women's increasing awareness of herself as a human being and man's desire to maintain the status quo is illustrated in her

plays. Some of her significant plays are **A Man's world** (1909), **He and She** (1911) and **When Ladies Meet'** (1932).

Crothers in many of her plays has apparently emphasized that her woman protagonist need no caretakers. She told in an interview with Theatre Guild magazine that 'For a woman, it is best to look to women for help; women are more daring, they are glad to take the most extraordinary chances (Burke 39) [4]. Crothers targeted in all her plays about the economic independence of new women, the freedom to choose one's career and freedom to marry a husband of one's choice or not to marry. These ideals were enforced in her plays **Nice people, Mary the Third, Expressing Willie, As Husband Go, When Ladies Meet, and Susan and God.**

These plays give a solution to the problems of women of upper class and middle class society. So she earned her audience the title of America's "foremost woman playwright". As Burns Mantle calls her "Americas first lady" dramatist in his 1938 contemporary American playwrights insisting that the double standards Crother's resisted in her dramas were alive in theatre [5]. Dramatically, her works are of importance in the history of the development of serious social comedy in American drama. Her early plays portray the increasing command of structural and stylistic technique. Her bright, witty yet realistic dialogue ranks her plays to be the best of its era.

References:

1. Moore, Honor.ed. *The New Women's Theatre*. New York: Vintage, 1977.
2. Quinn A H, *Representative American Plays*, The Century Company, New York, 1917.
3. Mersand Joseph. *The American Drama since 1930*. New York: Kenniket Press, 1941.
4. Burke, Sally. *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History*. New York: Twanye Publishers, 1996.
5. Mantle, Burns, ed. *The Best Plays and the Year Book of the Drama in America*. New York, Dodd: Mead, 1909-1947
6. Friedman, Sharon. "Feminism as Theme in Twentieth-Century American Women's Drama", *American studies* 25, 1984.

* * *

Suriakumary M/Research Scholar/ Department of English/
Mother Teresa Women's University/ Kodaikanal/
Tamilnadu/ msko277@gmail.com /Mobile: 9944949026