

## **The Outsider: A Feminist Study of Susan Glaspell's *The Outside***

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Received: 05/05/2022

Accepted:08/03/2022

Published: 08/24/2022

### **Abstract**

The American dramatist, Susan Glaspell, in her literary work, addresses the assigned position of women in a male-dominated society to promote gender equality and woman's empowerment. She negotiates the plight of women and gender roles by situating the female characters in confined and unlikely settings. This study is primarily concerned with the position of women in her controversial play, *The Outside* (1917). It focuses on the female characters' positions as outsiders and strangers in their society and how they have become outsiders and aliens in their community as a result of being non-conformists to the prescribed rules. It also demonstrates that women are forced to choose between conforming to the societal norm and being shunned and rejected as insane by society. Using feminist theories, the position of female characters as outsiders and detached from the social activity is analyzed. It concludes with the point that the writer defends the right of non-conformist women who want to have their own space and role that is not confined by masculine principles.

*Keywords:* feminist reading, gender roles, non-conformist women, Susan Glaspell's *The Outside*, the Outsider

**Cite as:** Mahmood, S. S. (2022). The Outsider: A Feminist Study of Susan Glaspell's *The Outside*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 6 (3) Pp.73-81.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol6no3.5>

## Introduction

Female characters and issues of gender are an ongoing concern in different literary works. Various writers have portrayed the life and struggle of the woman from different perspectives. The role and depiction of a female's life within a society are shown differently in literary works by man and woman writers in different periods. Susan Glaspell, a female American writer, examines the issue of women in modern drama. She uses her plays to raise awareness of women's rights and gender equality.

This study concentrates on the plight of revolutionary women and the challenges they face when attempting to be transgressive. It delineates the position of nonconformist women in society by focusing on the notion of the outside in the play. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the feminist message in a better and more profound way. It might lead to awareness of the dilemma of women and promote the improvement of the woman's position in society.

The author uses a qualitative approach with feminist theories of gender roles, especially the ideas of Luce Irigaray and Virginia Woolf. It is essential to mention that the contextual evidence and critic's insight are of great importance in approaching the notion of gender roles in this play. The data are collected through the close reading of the primary text, *The Outside*, and observing and searching for patterns within the text, then the patterns are explored in the light of feminist theories.

It seeks to identify these two female characters' conditions, desires, and duties to provide a comprehensive understanding of the notion of the outsider in this one-act play. It tries to find out the hidden meaning behind placing the two female characters in an abandoned station after the death of their husbands.

The current paper consists of two main sections. The first section is an introductory section that introduces the reader to the author and her play, *The Outside*. The second section analyzes the women characters within the play as outsiders and strangers. It further highlights the main reasons that turn them into strangers within their society. Finally, the study ends with a conclusion that summarizes the study's main findings. It shows how social convention and values have confined the woman. Moreover, women are torn between two options: either live according to society's traditional rules, or there is no space for them within that society.

## Literature Review

Susan Glaspell, in her play, *The Outside*, approaches the issue of gender roles in a highly symbolic language. The play was first performed in 1917, but it received little critical attention then; later, critics provided different interpretations of it. For example, Hinz-Bode (2006) has

described the play as a play showing the struggle between life and death through the symbolic description of the setting Ozieblo (2000) has acclaimed this play as seminal work that influenced Eugene O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*. They only differ from each other in the aspect of surrendering to destiny. "O'Neil's protagonists submit to the destiny the sea imposes on them, but Glaspell's women, though wounded by the sensitivity of man, are close enough to the life force to reassert their voices and claim a victory" (p. 114). Noelia Hernando-Real (2017) has compared *The Outside* with *Exorcism* by Eugene O'Neil. She clarifies the similarity between them and shows the influence of Susan Glaspell on O'Neil. Linda Ben-Zvi, Comparing this play to *Trifles*, another play by Susan Glaspell, has remarked that *The Outside* is about how women help each other in enhancing their lives because they share the same painful experience (qtd. in Makowsky, 1993). Accordingly, Darwesh (2019), has analyzed this play through the lens of feminist theory. She has recognized the play's negative feminist message and criticizes Glaspell for portraying men as a life-saver and women as hostile. However, this research paper focuses on the description and depiction of the female characters as outsiders and non-members of the society. It clarifies how the women in the play are driven into the margin of society. They live at the edge of death because of the role society has attributed to them. Their lives are encircling into a small spot outside the mainstream of social activities because they are women.

## Analysis

### *Female Characters as Outsiders*

Susan Glaspell dedicated a significant portion of her writing to promoting gender equality at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She addresses the issues of gender roles and oppression of women along with the limited space allotted to them in society. She approaches woman's social issues through a rebellious portrayal of thwarted, isolated, detached, confined, and trapped lives in a rural and specific geographical setting. In *The Outsider*, she depicts woman's plight by portraying female characters as outsiders. By setting the female characters in an abandoned life-saving station, detached from society, she discerns how women are deprived of the ability to decide about their lives. Either woman must accept social and conventional gender roles, or there is no space for them inside the society.

The play starts with the author's description of the setting: "a room in a house which was once a life-saving station. Since ceasing to be that it has taken on no other character, except that of a place which no one cares either to preserve or change" (Glaspell, 1987, p. 48). The description of the setting conveys the position and identity of a woman. The main female characters live in a situation that no one cares either to preserve or change. The setting hints at the position and status of women in a patriarchal society. The description of the woman's status also highlights that no one understands and cares about what a woman wants. As the title suggests, "The Outside" can mean what a woman wants. What is their position, and what kind of position do they want? Hernando-Real sees the outside space as a symbol denoting "individuality and freedom" (p. 88).

Therefore, the word outside indicates the notion of selfhood, individual freedom, and self-determination, and the action of moving toward the outside can suggest her freedom and autonomy. Being set on the outdoor landscape alludes to the notion that a specific social milieu powerfully subjugates women. It also embodies that women need to escape those social forces that cripple them, to be their true selves.

Moreover, “the station is located on the outside shore of Cape Cod” (Glaspell 1987, p. 48). The station’s location between the sea and woods, outside the community, reflects the status of women in society. They are dehumanized, inferior, other, and not equal to men. As Irigaray (1985) argues in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, women are destined to be others in a male-dominant society where men are the “subject” and women are seen as the “objects of the subject’s desire” (p. 133). For instance, Mrs. Patrick and Allie Mayo are turned into strangers from the day they ceased to live with a man. They are outsiders because they no longer follow the social rules that govern women’s lives. They are doomed to the vacuum of a non-member of the society because they have ceased to be a subject of man’s desire. As Bradford, the mouthpiece of the patriarchal outlook, describes them, “This Patrick woman used to be all right. She and her husband were summer folks over in town. They used to picnic over here on the outside” (pp. 50-51). After the death of her husband, she moved here. Then she needed someone to work for her. Allie Mayo comes to live with her because she has lost her husband.

They have no active role within society except for becoming wives and household managers. They live by depending on the man and performing the role assigned to them by social norms and conventions. According to the traditional gender roles, men are “rational, strong, protective, and decisive” while women are, on the contrary, “emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing and submissive” (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). Based on these assumptions, specific roles were assigned to women. They were not allowed to run their own business like men. They were not able to work outside and take a position of leadership. They were not free and independent because they were inherently weak and inferior to men. Therefore, they cannot live without depending on a man. They did not have the same equal rights and opportunities as men to build their own lives. Whenever they deviate or stand against those roles, there is no position or room for them. They turn into crazy mindless creatures not regarded as ordinary women. Likewise, these two women are described as crazy. They are belittled and degraded into a state of insane, unfriendly, hostile creatures. As Bradford describes them, “But the sea (calling it into the CAPTAIN) is friendly as a kitten alongside the woman that lives here. Allie Mayo \_they are both crazy” (Glaspell, 1987, p. 48). They are described as crazy because they differ from others in their belief and outlook. The position and role ascribed to them are internalized in the mind of people. When a woman like Mrs. Patrick and Allie Mayo ventures to leave their old self and seek renewal, this step and behavior sound strange. It denotes that women, like everything else, are defined from a male perspective. They are characterized through the lens of man. Bradford reaffirms the truthfulness of his opinion

by repeating that they are crazy because women are not like that. They should be like what man expects them to be. He states:

In my opinion the woman's crazy\_ sittin' over on the sand- (a gesture towards the dunes) what's she lookin' at? There ain't not nothin' to see. And I know the woman that works for her's crazy- Allie Mayo, .... She was all right once, but-. (p. 49)

They have held that position because of having different outlooks and beliefs. Additionally, Mrs. Patrick is described as “a sophisticated person who has been caught into something unlike the old life as the dunes are unlike a meadow. At the moment, she is excited and angry” (Glaspell, 1987, p.49). She is a sophisticated woman. Sophisticated means someone knowledgeable and experienced about different things in the world. It is the opposite of naïve. However, it is used here to denote that people do not understand her because she is no longer like other women. She is “unlike the old life” a life familiar to every woman in society. She has created a new life for herself that looks strange since it differs from the mainstream view of patriarchal society. She is both “excited and angry”( p. 49). She is excited to initiate her new life in which she establishes a world of her own and lives as she wants, not following others' wishes or desires. But, at the same time, she is angry because society has imposed on her a particular life that restrains her from having a room for her own, as described by Virginia Woolf. Because she is female, there is no room or chance for her to complete her education, establish her own business, to be economically independent. There is no chance for her to show her talent and ability (Bressler, 2011). There is no chance for her to define herself and her life. Likewise, Mrs. Patrick is angry because they don't let her have her own space.

She protests and raises her voice to ask about her right. By saying, “you have no right here. This is not the life-saving station anymore. Just because it used to be- I don't see why you should think- This is my house! And- I want my house to myself!”(Glaspell, 1987, p. 49). She repeatedly asks for her rights saying “I must have my house to myself!” But her demand does not make any difference for the men. The captain answers her by saying I will bring any more man to be saved here regardless of what you say. What you say makes “no damn bit of difference to me!” The answer to her demand is “Hell with such a woman”(p. 50). It indirectly suggests that no one care about women's issue, their voices are not heard. They are marginalized, suppressed, and silenced by men. That is demonstrated in Mrs. Patrick's broken speech when she wants to express her need. She is silenced before she can finish her sentence, “I – I don't want them here! I must\_” (p.50). The dashes here show that she is suppressed by men. She is finally obliged to retreat.

After she quarrels with the life-savers, she turns towards the dunes. Dunes is a hill of sand near the beach. It is a bare space like a desert that can be described as a symbol of having no choice, no chance to depend on yourself. Stepping towards their only option, the two women start to speak

with each other. They negotiate their own identities and selfhood. Allie Mayo reveals that she has experienced the same pain as Mrs. Patrick and affirms that she is not the only one; this implies that they discuss woman's dilemma in general. They speak in a highly symbolic language. This type of poetic conversation exposes that only women know and understand each other's suffering and struggle. Their understanding, unity, and support for one another show the hostility of their conditions and their struggle to survive (Hernando-Real, 2017, p. 169). They describe dunes as outside. They assert that they have named it outside because they were born and will die there. Mrs. Patrick states that "I am... on the dunes, land not life"(Glaspell, 1987, p. 53). In this way, dunes can symbolize the life of a girl and woman in a patriarchal society. Dune is a room that is allotted for them. Dune is also described as "the edge of life"(p. 53). When life is spoiled to the point where it no longer requires a name to be called a life. The edge of life implies that they are caught in a societal situation that is not their choice but imposed on them. They are obliged to lead a life full of distress because of their gender. As Mrs. Patrick states, "What do you know about it? About me? I did not go to the Outside. I was left there. I am only \_ trying to get along. Everything that can hurt me I want buried- buried deep" (p. 54). She is compelled to live a life of distress, misery, and psychological torture. Being stranded among various forces that cripple them and render them powerless to effect change, what would be there for them except outside? She expresses the lifestyle of the woman by asking rhetorical questions. What would there be for me but the outside? What was there for you? What did you ever find after you lose the thing you wanted?" the author herself answers her argument with Allie's reply, "I found- what I find now I know. The edge of life- to hold the life behind me\_" (p. 54).

The issue of gender is described as a complex problem that no one understands except females. The writer highlights that gender roles and female issues are complicated matters to approach and change, but not impossible. Their suffering is not considered to be suffering because gender roles are normal. It has been internalized and programmed into the characters' minds. It is implied by the male characters' descriptions of the struggle of these two ladies as aggressive, inhumane, and hostile. Their apprehension and comments on these two women denote that they have their rights. No one is held responsible for their miserable condition, or they are not in the miserable condition. They are themselves behaving like insane women. Therefore, their problems are discussed by the two female characters in a language that only they know it. It denotes that no one is ready to give a voice to their problems. Only the woman is aware of the other woman's plight. Allie Mayo, who has remained silent for twenty years, understands Mrs. Patrick. She starts to say "I know" repeatedly After being silent for twenty years. "I know" suggests that she is aware of the difficulties that women face in patriarchal societies. It denotes that she can readily envision and realize the harsh experience of the woman that others cannot see and even give a thought to. When she discusses the miserable condition and hardship of life with Mrs. Patrick, she repeatedly states, "I know" like "I know why are you doing that." "I know where are you going!" "I know why you came here". "I know what holds you on these dunes"(Glaspell, 1987, pp. 52-53). It

denotes that they are passive, and giving voice to their issues is a tough challenge. Any woman who wants to deviate from the social norm and initiate a new role for the woman will end up in the sand and dunes where these two women live. As observed by Linda Ben Zvi "the image of pioneering is a recurrent one in all Glaspell's plays, it shapes all her writing" (qtd. in Makowsky, 1993, p. 66). These two women are similarly pioneers in breaking social norms. The writer depicts them as outsiders who are leading a bohemian lifestyle. She addresses the dilemma of the woman in general and bohemian women in particular. She indirectly asks for their rights.

In addition to mentioning the difficulties one faces when asking for change and reform in society, the play is filled with optimism that transformation will occur one day. As Allie Mayo points out that since we are women, we should bury and suppress our free will and desires. Because of their gender, they are not allowed to lead the life that they want. They cannot shape their own life. Their lives are programmed for them in advance. "Bury it. The life in you. Bury it" (Glaspell, 1987, p. 53). It means that you have to bury your dreams. You have to give up your needs and goals because you are a woman; there is no room for you to fulfill the desired life. When they contemplate the sand and the woods, Allie Mayo notices that sand destroys and dries up the woods. The word "sand" can symbolize any evil force that confines progress and reform. It can be any devastating force. The woods can be a symbol of society and social members, such as a woman. As she says: "Bury it\_ watching the sand bury the woods. But I'll tell you something! *They* fight too. The woods! They fight for life the way that Captain fought for life in there!" (p. 53). The word "They" that is italicized and used as a pronoun for woods suggests that woods means women in general. The women will fight for their rights. Furthermore, the word "too" denotes that women will be equal to men and fight for their equality, as shown in the word caption. The world captain hints at the male. The writer wants to say that one day the woman will lead the same life as the man. They continue arguing on this topic of the struggle to establish a new space for the woman. The argument is contradictory; it shows that those ladies who are nonconformist as far as social values are concerned will end up in the dunes. They also argue that their effort is futile. Mrs. Patrick says even if they try, they will lose. Allie Mayo, on the other hand, states that "vines will grow over the sand"(p. 53). It implies that they will win. The definition of the female's struggle is conveyed through the image of the vine. Vine is a climbing plant that moves upward tremendously and covers other things. It can symbolize different meanings. Its nature to climb and stretch over unlikely places show determination, endurance, gradual progress, regeneration, and survival in a most unlikely place. The ability of this plant to cling to things can symbolize the woman's instance to adhere to their ideal beliefs and lifestyle. The expansion and moving toward different directions show that the notion of feminism will move forward, and new ideas will spring concerning gender roles. In early medieval art and Christianity vine is used as a symbol of life. Jesus Christ is described as a "true vine" (Ross, 1996, p. 97). Similarly, here vine can symbolize the woman and her continuous struggle to find a place or opportunity to climb and determine her own identity. As Allie Mayo asserts, the vine will reach an almost impossible spot- They will one day reach a new

location. They will get out of dunes, their bare, confined, fruitless situation. She says “strange little things” (Glaspell, 1987, p. 53) continue to grow despite opposition in the face of dunes that endeavor to bury them in the sand.

The play ends with Mrs. Patrick's speech in which she ironically describes men as savers. This denotes that she refutes the conventional concept of regarding man as a saver, as they are portrayed in the classical stories. A man saves a woman and alters her life into a happily ever after. She, with a bitter and exultant feeling, says: “savers of life! ... Meeting the outside!” (Glaspell, 1987, p. 54). She mockingly states savers of life. The repetition of meeting the outside affirms the establishment of new space as the play ends with taking further steps forwards, a step toward making change. Besides, her feeling of resentment and anger against the existence of unfair conditions shows that she is held in a position or entrapped and realizes that she needs to get out of that space. The two women are shown “in transition, not fixation” (qtd. in Jouve, 2017, p. 185). This transition will happen in the future. They transform from being an outsider to an active member of the social mainstream. Moreover, Susan Glaspell, in her plays, mainly depicts women as a character who are detached from society. They are also conscious of such existence. Thus being aware of their miserable condition leads to the ability to change it (Hinz-Bode, 2006).

### Conclusion

Throughout studying the two female characters' conditions, positions, desires, and duties, certain points have been concluded. The study has pointed out that Susan Glaspell defies the social norms that condemn the bohemian woman. She shows how those women who want to be themselves are abused psychologically. How they are shunned, dismissed, and degraded as strangers and outsiders. It also clarifies the difficulty of establishing a space for the woman where she can define herself and have her own identity detached from the one assigned to her based on her gender; on the one hand, it also depicts the struggle of the woman to overcome their gender role and malignant environment to become true to themselves.

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