

# Rachel Crothers' dramatic skill in projecting men as 'stumbling blocks' to the progress of New Women: An Appraisal

Dr. S.Chelliah

*M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt., Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Abstract-** This paper throws light on the most prolific American woman dramatist Rachel Crothers, she projects the life of new women in her plays, she depicts the actual life of women in the society as well as in their personal contradiction, but she portrays her New woman as strong, talented and intelligent to face trouble and manage situations. Her plays are more closely tied with women concern and also life of modern women than those of her contemporaries.

**Index terms-** New women, male-chauvinism, Exploitation of women, struggle, Independence

## INTRODUCTION

Rachel Crothers, the most prolific and successful female dramatist writing for the American stage in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was regarded as a talented craftswoman with a thorough knowledge of her profession. She is said to have contributed 24 full length plays to the New York stage and in almost all her plays, she has dealt with women's issues and nothing else, especially the problems confronted by the modern women such as doubt-standard, male-chauvinism, married life, pre-marital sex, the sufferings of the career women, the social and domestic barriers to women's freedom etc; In short, it may be said that woman is at the centre of Crother's drama throughout her career. In a self-assessment of her work in 1931, she observed, "with few exceptions, every one of my plays has been a social attitude toward women at the moment I wrote it "Nevertheless, one cannot label Rachel Crothers as a staunch feminist who vehemently and blindly attacks the male. It is out and out true that she wrote issue-oriented dramas, doubtlessly supporting the wide

range of feminist issues while she was particularly interested in the character of the 'New Woman' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, her plays continuously stressed the need for women's economic dependence.

In the beginning, the American playwrights, particularly the young dramatists were highly influenced by the plays of Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and August Strindberg. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Wild Duck* and John Gabriel acted as a stimulus and a challenge to the budding dramatists who were eager to try their hands in writing. One of these was Clyde Fitch whose play namely *The City* exposed the corruption in the lives of public officials. The impact of Ibsen could also be seen in Bronson Howard, a young idealist, who dealt with the struggle between capital and labour in his play *Baron Rudolph*. Edward Sheldon, the next prominent figure, dealt with the racial problem in his play *The Nigger* in 1910 and his *Salvation Nell* described the seamy side of American life. William Vaughn Moody, whose important theme was the conflict between Puritanism and passion was a poet among those budding dramatists in the American theatre and in his verse dramas. *The Faith Healer* and *The Great Divide* he went one step ahead and suggested that a woman could in all honesty love a man who had violated. This concept took much courage at that time. Then steps were taken by the playwrights like James A. Herne, Max Reinhardt, George Pierce Baker to better the American Theatre and such notable dramatists like Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, Philip Barry, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee brought revolutionary ideas to American drama.

A handsome number of women playwrights branded as 'modern' started writing plays contributing a lot to American theatre. Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Josephine Peabody (1874-1922), Mary Roberts Rinehard (1876-1958), Zona Gale (1874-1938), Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) and Edna Ferber (1887-1968) started making inroads into the American theatre, of whom Rachel Crothers was considered as the most prominent modern American playwright who show keen interest in the position and problems of women in the modern society.

Rachel Crothers, one of the few modern directors in the history of the American stage, was born in 1878 in an eminent, well-to-do professional family of English and Scottish origins. She was the youngest of four children born to Dr. Elikirk Crothers and Dr. Marie Crothers of Bloomington, Illinois. Dr. Marie Crothers began her medical career just at the time when Rachel was born. In 1877-1878, she took her first medical course at the women's medical college, Pennsylvania. After completing her medical course in the year 1882-1893, she started her medical practice in Bloomington amidst severe opposition and criticism. Dr. Marie Crothers' career brought a lasting influence on the life and the writings of her younger daughter, Rachel. Miss. Crothers seems to have inherited her mother's boldness and perseverance and so her plays are found to be filled with strong, independent, talented women. She records in her plays the independent women's conflicting professional and domestic concerns which she had witnessed in her mother's life. In one of her most important plays *He and She*, she stresses a daughter's need for material care against her mother's passionate desire to fulfill her artistic ambitions. Records clearly reveal that once Dr. Crothers had begun her medical career, she stopped to be a full time domestic woman. It further adds that baby Rachel was sent to live with an aunt in Wellesley, Massachusetts, during her mother's student years and Crothers had always been a "lonely child" due to her mother's medical career". (Gottlieb 3).

Crothers was graduated from the Illinois State Normal School in 1891. The driving force during her academic years was not her studies but her love for theatre. She took to writing melodramas, even as a girl of thirteen. Besides, she led her Sunday school pupils in educational dramatic sketches. These

memories were elaborated on in her later writings. Next, she joined the New England School of Dramatic Institution in Boston for one term. This short term course on dramatic art did not satisfy her appetite for theatre. Her deep desire was to go to New York to begin her career as a dramatist and ultimately to devote all her talents to the dramatic art. Her playwright career began in 1906 with the success of her first full length play, *The Three of Us*. For the next three decades, until *Susan and God*, Broadway saw an average of one new Crothers' play each year. She has to her credit publication of such notable plays as *A Man's World* (1910), *Young Wisdom* (1914), *Nice People* (1921), *Mary The Third* (1923), *Expressing Willie* (1924), *Let us Be Gay* (1929), *As Husbands Go* (1931) and *When Ladies Meet* (1932), all of which deal with position of women in American society, most often with such timely problems as the double standard, trial marriage, flaming youth and the problem of younger generation, feudalism and divorce.

From her early childhood days, her intent was to devote her talents to the dramatic art. Her one term experience as a student and as a teacher in the Stan lope – Wheat Craft School of acting made her write plays and direct plays. She took the responsibility of producing the play, coaching the actors, designing the sets and costumes. Crothers regarded this as an experience of immeasurable value because the doors of the theatre were tightly closed at that time to women in the field of directing and staging plays. Her commitment to the theatre was whole-heartedly unique and something remarkable. While shouldering the fullest responsibility for the entire production of almost all her plays, she directed such stars as Carlotta Nilson, Maxine Elliott, Emma Dunn, Francine Larrimore, Christine Herne, Lily Cahill, Frieda In escort and Gertrude Laurence. Though Crothers was at the peak of her dramatic career, she never behaved as an ivory tower dramatist. During World War – I, she was the founder and the president of stage woman's war Relief. During the depression of 1930, she was the founder and the President of the Stage Relief Fund, which aided needy theatre folk and during World War – II. She helped to organize and direct the American Theatre wing. *Susan and God* remains Crother's final contribution to American Theatre.

The notion that women are inferior and subjugated to men is deeply embedded in our society. Not only the common illiterate men, but also great leaders, poets and philosophers have developed the same idea.

Napoleon Bonaparte remarks:

“Nature intended women to be our slaves ....  
They are our property, we are not theirs ....  
What a mad idea to demand equality for women ... women are nothing but machines for producing children” (Deckard, 73)

In one of his poems, Alfred Tennyson writes as :

“Man for the field and women for the hearth,  
Man for the sword and for the needle she,  
Man with the head and women with the heart;  
Man to command and women to obey,  
All else confusion” (46).

Aristotle, one of the eminent philosophers of Greece, too holds the same view regarding women. Besides, the Bible aspects that “wives must submit themselves unto their husbands for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church”. This has inculcated in man a firm conviction that women cannot be their equals. They consider women as irrational, over-emotional and sentimental and hence fit to be only housewives.

Thus, woman’s sphere of life and activity is restricted by the prohibitive and protective walls raised by men. Women is by nature, soft and tender. Man simply dotes upon this weakness of women. He takes pride in being her protector and he cannot bear to make woman his equal. Woman is thus expected to conceal her talents and strength and to be submissive. Further, she has to adore and admire the wisdom and strength displayed by men. Women in general has to play different roles such as daughter, wife and mother. These traditional gender roles also prove to be the biggest hurdle women encounter on their way to progress to equal status. Man often reminds women of these roles as wife and mother and pushes them backward, thereby clearing the stage for his dominance. Neglect by the husband is a cause of suffering for the wife. The husband does not generally treat his wife as a companion but as a subordinate. Carrie Chapman Catt writes:

“The whole aim of the women’s liberation has been

to destroy the idea that obedience is necessary to women; to train women to such self-respect that they would not grand obedience; and to train men to such comprehension of equity that they would not exact it” (31)

Sexual inequality, exploitation of women, male domination have been challenged by many feminists not excluding Miss. Crothers. She had witnessed women’s liberation movement that took place during her life time. She went forth to champion her sex, to decry the double standard of morality by which men and women were judged in her plays. She talks about the restrictions confronted by the New women in the first decade of the twentieth century. Almost all the women characters in her plays are more or less influenced by this current movement. Hence, her plays are filled with strong, independent, talented women like Mary III, Ann Her ford, Mary Horward and Claire Woodruff. These women clash with the norms of their environment and propose theories and ideologies which attempt to change people or transform. Miss. Crothers never failed to present the injustice done to women by men. In *Criss-Cross*, *The Rector and Nora*, the central characters Ann, Margaret and Nora are strong and straight forward. Crother’s characterization of these three ladies reflects woman’s changing status. But the fate of her three strong women, who suffer loneliness, deprived of the men they love, is both the direct function of their strength and indirect reflection of Crother’s social thesis regarding the unjust treatment of the New woman. In *He and She*, something fine and strong dies in the last act. It is the hope, the ambition and all the future work of a genius, deliberately slain, in order that ‘she’ of *He and She* may be able to play more attentively and more wholeheartedly what she is driven to regard as her more important role, that of wife and matter. This play rehearses the tragedy of the new woman with her longing for a creative career and the obligation of her home, warring within her. When the play *He and She* begins, Ann’s husband is fresh, alive and generous in nature and viewpoint. When Keith, his assistant asks him, “Have you ever been sorry that Mrs. Her ford is a sculptor – instead of just your wife?”, he replies immediately, ‘Not for a minute’ (*He and She* 897). But the moment he realises Ann’s hidden talent, he is not the same man as he is seen at the beginning. Ann has found out that

Tom's frieze has lost the "feeling of swiftness". So she generally offers her sketches which are better than Tom's. This pricks his elated ego and he feels bitter. Though he and Keith accept her sketches as beautiful, they reject as not good as his. When Ann announces that she is going to make her models and send them, Tom, Keith and Dr. Remington are shocked. This reveals that men, however they appear to be generous, loving and splendid, cannot tolerate a woman excelling them. Though Tom gives his permission, "it is your own affair, go ahead" (910), it is not a wholehearted approval. The very idea that Ann, his wife, comes on par with him in the competition, is something unbearable to Tom, the husband. The whole of the second act is the best illustration to show that men are the stumbling blocks to the progress of New Women. "A look of sickening disappointment, comes into his face" (P 918) as Tom reads the letter informing him that he has got the second place in the competition when he learns that Ann has won the prize, he is jealous and fearful, but hides these emotions by reminding her of her duties as a wife and as a mother to her family. He is not able to share the happiness as Ann would have been if he had won. He is not as Ann thought to be. He goes to the extent of saying that he won't touch the money, she wins. Thus, he separates himself from Ann. The reason may be that he is brought up in a conventional society which stresses on the submission of women to men.

Every man likes to lord and rule over his wife. The first and the foremost victim at the altar of power of man has been woman. The story of woman is an unbroken record of shame for man. From one end of the world to the other without distinction of colour, creed or civilization, men join together to bring women down on their knees. In this play *He and she*, what Ann expects is a helping hand and a comforting word from her husband. If Tom had taken care of Millicent, she would have completed her frieze and won the commission. Now she is baffled. She cries bitterly before Tom, "Tom – you can kill our love by just what you do now" (P 921). This is her plea before husband. Not only hers but also the eternal plea of the women of all the slander leveled against women, the greatest has been man's conception of the nature of women as weak. Crothers has depicted clearly the struggles of modern New women through Ann.

Dr. Remington, Tom and Keith the three major characters in this play are the real conspirators against women. Each is pictured as one contributing his share in the attack against New woman only Ann, Ruthcreel, Keith's fiancé support feminist ideals and try to live by them. Keith Mc Kenzie is portrayed as an example of human wreckage moulded by the competitive society. His bitter views on the progress and power of the New Women reveal his fear of having to face a larger area of competition and the loss of comfort if women refuse to keep their places at home. That Tom allows Ann to be busy with her work rather than with their home is really something unbelievable to Keith because he resents Ruth's success as a journalist and her stubborn refusal to give up her job to marry him. Ann and Ruth in this play represent the New woman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both deny the fact that woman's nature is unchanging and that her domestic role is her only reason for existing. Both the women unquestioningly agree on the economic independence of women. Besides, they perceive the subtle social barrier to woman's progress. The larger social barrier to women's progress can be seen in the contrasting fates of Crothers' New woman. Ann's voluntary decision to withdraw from the competition takes her away completely from the male arena. As for Ruth, the outcome of her cleverness is that she is not eligible for romance and for marriage. Since she cannot compromise on her freedom, she breaks her engagement with Keith and exists from the marriage, market, giving way to the traditional woman Daisy, Tom's sister to have her chance. Thus, the play is aptly commented by *The New York Times* as a symposium on "New Woman".

In *A Man's World*, another play of Crothers, she has explored the indirect tyranny of a man's world. Loine Brune, one of the characters in the play remarks:

"Man are pigs of course. They take all they can get and don't give any more than they have to. It is a man's world – that is the size of it. What is the use of knocking your head against things you can't change" (P 37).

Of course, this is a man's world in which the New women are not able to progress as men hinder them in each step. Male dominance prevails everywhere which is the real obstacle to women. After so much

of struggles for women's freedom and liberation, even today men are not so broad-minded as they are expected to be. Crothers' other plays like *Many the Third*, *When Ladies Meet* and *As Husbands* deal more about her attitude towards love and marriage than about the conspiracy of men against women. Thematically, Crothers continues to explore the destiny of modern women in all her plays.

To Conclude, it may be stated that Crothers' commitment to the theatre is something exemplary. She humorously suggested that "she had burned by committing herself to the theatre they were neither social nor familiar" (Gottlieb 18). Apart from being a successful dramatist, she associated herself with various women's clubs and issues. Nobody can deny that her plays are more closely tied to the central concerns of feminism and of modern American women than those of her contemporaries. On the basis of her achievement as a feminist, Playwright and her success on the commercial stage, Crothers deserves a high regard and attention as an important contributor to the development of modern American drama and to the excellence of American Theatre.

Works cited:

- [1] Bardwick, Judith. M. *In Transition*. New York: Rinehart and Winston of Canada Ltd, 1979.
- [2] Deckard, Barbara Sinclair. *The Woman's Movement*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983. Print.
- [3] Gottlieb, C. Lois. *Rachel Crothers: The Apprentice Years*. Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- [4] O'Neill, George. *American Dream*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933, Print.
- [5] The Bible, Ephesians, 5: 23: 23.