

Empowerment of New Women in Rachel Crothers Selected Plays

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During the early years of twentieth century feminism was given high priority as a subject for drama and the number of playwright concerned themselves with the conflicts of the new women. The women's movement influenced women playwrights to dramatize issues of feminist concern. Rachel Crothers was the most prolific American woman dramatist during the twentieth century who brought new women to the stage; she also brought new ground by directing, staging and casting her own plays on stage. Her plays are of confrontation of women towards the unfairness of the society towards women. Crothers represents and celebrates new woman. Beginning with her earliest plays, she exposes the fiction about women created by the patriarchy to reinforce its paradigms of womanhood.

Rachel Crothers contributed 34 plays dealing with social themes and moral problems affecting women during her period. Crothers focuses her feminist concerns on male female interaction which present a conflict in attitudes and values between characters. Almost all of Crothers's plays deal with a role of women. Crothers's plays reflect women's actual social circumstances as well as their personal contradictions as they become professionals and assume the roles previously assigned to men. The American audiences were influenced by the characteristic feature in her plays which focuses on the empowerment of women. She emphasizes the importance of motherhood and assertion of a woman's right to combine a career with a fulfilling domestic life.

In her plays, Crothers gives a clean sketch about women's discussion about marriage, career, motherhood and relations between sexes in life. The tension between women's increasing awareness of herself as a human being and man's desire to maintain status quo is visualized in all her plays. Crothers in many of her plays has apparently emphasized that her woman protagonist need no caretakers. And most of them are over 30's, not 17 year- old ingénue. Crothers feminism is clearly shown in all her plays. In an interview May 1931 issue of Theatre Guild Magazine she told 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".

Crothers in her plays like **The Three of Us, He and She, A Man's World, When Ladies Meet**, and few other plays portray new women on stage. They portray woman choosing to be the power behind some ordinary man; to cherish the sweetness of small domestic triumphs; to restrain her sexual desires in order to be pure for her impure man; and economic independence of new women.

The Three of Us (1906) was one of the earliest plays to sound the trumpet cell for the dramatic revolution. The character of Rhy Mac Chesney is an outstanding representative of 'New Woman' on the stage. In the play **The Three of Us** her first Broadway drama the dramatist probes into the societal conventions that impede women's self determination. Rhy, with her brothers Clem and Sonnie lived in Nevada mining town, owing the three of us gold mine left by their father, expected to repay for their living. In **The Three of Us**, Rhy Mac Chesney, the heroine, aged 25, has been left alone in the world with two younger brothers to care for and an inherited claim for a seemingly worthless mine which she believes will eventually pay off. In the small Nevada mining town in which the story is set, two men are in love with Rhy. One is Steve, poor, honourable and her choice, but he feels obliged to stake a rich claim before he can propose marriage to her. The

other, the rich and corrupt Berresford, apparently has dishonourable intentions. Now, Rhy “is the head of the family and woman of business ..” as well as “an active force,” and when she has been put in a false position by giving her word to a clever schemer (Berresford) not to reveal certain information about a crooked mind transaction, she goes to his rooms at night and demands release from a promise. At this juncture, Rhy suddenly confronted by the double standard conduct expected from men and women. (Even seeming misconduct on a woman’s part, such as visiting a man at his home, is frowned on.) Although there is an essential conventionality to the plot, the “happy ending” of Rhy’s reunion with Steve comes about as a result of her determination to remain single and on her own rather than capitulate and ask for understanding in a situation that only appeared compromising. She has to be taken on trust and love alone, or not all, her independence signals her as an independently “liberated” heroine. Steve accepts this condition so that the ending can be seen as the coming together of equals, of a man and a woman who are prepared to give each other real and mutual respect, thereby undermining the double standard. The idea of “revolution” in Crothers dramatic beginnings is more understandable once that ending is rightly comprehended.

The dominant Crothers heroine is described in a stage direction as

... forceful and fearless as a young Amazon, with the courage of belief in herself – the audacity and innocence of youth which has never known anything but freedom—the loveliness of a big nature and sunniness of an undying sense of humor. What she wears is very far from the fashion, but has charm and individuality and leaves her as free and unconscious of her strength and beauty as an animal.

Rhy Mac Chesney, the protagonist of the play is forceful and fearless as a young Amazon, with the courage of belief in herself. The audacity and the innocence of youth which has never known anything but freedom. The loveliness of a big nature and sunniness of an undying sense of humor. What she wears is very far from the fashion, but has charm and individuality and leaves her as free and unconscious of her strength and beauty as an animal. “just as her unconventional dress announces freedom from slavery to fashion, her search through an old trunk for “a dress of mother’s” to wear to a party and her catching the keys to that trunk “like a boy” signal Crothers refusal to valorize traditional signs of gender.

Believing herself free to do as she wishes, Rhy resists the idea that she has seriously compromised herself by coming to a man’s home alone at night and that she has no alternative but to become his mistress. Shocked at the extent to which she is a prisoner of gender, she angrily responds. “It’s true, then—all women must be afraid. I haven’t believed it. I’ve thought we could do anything that was right in itself. A woman hasn’t anything to be afraid of. Nothing can make a thing wrong that really is right. I’m not afraid of the world---That this could have happened to me.” Rhy’s independence aspiration of spirit is demonstrated throughout the play.

In **A Man’s World**, produced at Newyork’s comedy theatre on February 8, 1910, Crothers’ first significant play, dramatizes the social and moral laws that unfairly restricted women in the society. This play revolves round the novelist and feminist, Frank Ware who takes the name of a man in order to consider her work serious. Frank raised by her writer father “to see-to know-to touch all kinds of life” discerned very early the limitations put on women. While living in Paris, Frank and her father take in a young, unmarried pregnant woman whom Frank sees “suffer the tortures of hell through her disgrace”. When the woman dies giving birth, Frank adopts the baby boy whom she names Kiddie. In protest to the death of the woman, Frankie writes a book entitled “The Beaten Path”, in which she condemns the double standard that punishes sinful women while giving sinful men a pass. Years later, after falling in love with Gaskell, she discovers he is Kiddies’ father. When Gaskell, who had abandoned Kiddies’ mother without knowing of her pregnancy, learns of his paternity, he claims male prerogative and refuses to acknowledge he has done anything wrong, Frank therefore rejects him.

Frank Ware the protagonist of the play is an upcoming novelist, an independent woman, proud of the position she has attained through her own talents and efforts. And she takes pride in living in a boarding house “filled with independent women who are making their own living”. To Frank Ware economic independence is the prerequisite to equality for women. As Frank sees it, once the woman is no longer financially dependent on the man, she can be free to be herself, free to face

life on an equal basis with the man. Financial independence, in short, is the basis for the decision taken to become a new woman.

Frank Ware, the New Woman of the play seeks to improve lot of women by writing novels that show the heroic struggle of poor women oppressed by the prejudice of a man's world. Frank wants to bring up the child Kiddie as well as to give him a decent chance in life and to keep the secret of his illegitimate birth. In maintaining Kiddie's history as a secret, Frank makes herself the subject of gossip even in the tolerant bohemian boarding house where she lives. Though she seems to be criticized by all Frank maintains the secret unrevealed. But Frank's decision at the end of the play is more revolutionary emphasizing the importance of freedom of women and their equality with men in all state of affairs.

In the crux of the play lies in the question that whether or not Frank Ware should forgive a man for pre-marital promiscuity while she herself has been dedicated to the ideas that women are not accepted in society unless they conform to the role which that society has set as a standard. Frank is unconvinced by the moral and social laws of the society which humiliates and ostracizes the women while the man is hardly blamed at all. Frank in this play tells her friend Fritz, that "everything I believe about men and women been so intensified by him[Kiddie] that he has become a sort of symbol to me of what women suffer through men----- and he's given me a purpose --- something to do". In the final act the two young people Frank and Gaskell are parting because of their different ideals. When Frank Ware discovers that Gaskell, the man she loves, was the seducer of Kiddie's mother and also finally refuses to acknowledge his mistakes that he has done to Kiddie's mother. Finally she renounces her love for him and sends him away. Frank's rejection show her burning belief in right over wrong and costs her a life of happiness with the one man she has ever truly loved, but it undeniably gains her a moral victory. With the presentation of **A Man's World**, Crothers burst into still fuller bloom upon the American Landscape.

He and She (1920) Ann Herford and her husband Tom, are architects whose seventeen years of happy marriage seem threatened when each submits a separate entry to a contest for a frieze design. Ann wins the \$100,000 prize but soon comes to recognize that she has won it at the cost of probably losing her husband and of neglecting her daughter, Millicent, she declines the prize, prepares to spend time with Millicent in Europe, and knows that she has lost neither the money nor Tom, since he was second and will now be the winner.

Crothers' next play **He and She**, a play about a woman's dilemma between a successful home life and a successful career, was produced in 1920. **He and She** represents the drama of married life in which the relations of husband and wife are modified by the rival claims of professional jealousies. The main story of the play is the conflict stirred up by the career rivalry between Tom and Ann Herford, both gifted sculptors and the parents of a teen-age daughter. Ann, the heroine of the play balances family and art. Ann and Tom have sent drawings to an important and prestigious national competition in which the winner will be commissioned to sculpt a frieze for a major building and also be awarded an enormous cash prize. She is given a painful choice to choose either the ranks of the first-rate, or tantamount of losing her real companionship with her husband as she is now publicly acknowledged to be more gifted than her husband Tom. Even more painful is that she has almost ruined her daughter's life by neglecting her because of her concentration on her art. The final choice was to reject the prize and all its implications and to devote herself totally to her daughter and her family. Finally Ann chooses the family life although with great agony of spirit.

Ann Herford, the heroine of the play, is a representative New Woman. As an artist a better one even than her husband she carves out a career for herself on the basis of equality. In the crux, if she likes she can be an independent woman and stand on her abilities as an artist. But as a woman who loves her husband and her daughter very much she takes a wise decision of choosing her family and daughter than the other. This wise decision was more understandable and realistic than the other would have been during the days of 1920's.

These plays discuss the study of common motive for women's quest for freedom, equality and self expression in a society dominated by men. In **A Man's World**, though Frank is not a mother yet she too faces up all the problems and responsibilities of motherhood when she takes it upon

herself to raise Kiddie, the illegitimate child of a girl whom she met in Paris. In **He and She** Ann Herford's choice of home and family over her career is not, basically, rationally inevitable choice; it is, rather, an emotionally inevitable one. Ann sacrifices her own personal desires to achieve a greater goal. The personal cost of her decision is high but she recognizes that no cost is too great to preserve her marriage and her family. These two motives implies the characters Frank and Ann Herford to be the New Women of their age as they predominately expressed their ideas as their expression of their life. Crothers in these plays effectively brought changes to the society by expressing her ideas to the women of those days.

In the play **When Ladies Meet**, its protagonist 32 years old Mary Howard is a successful novelist who cares what women of her own kind think of her work; Mary despite her success, feels incomplete without a man in her life. Her emotions lead her to contemplate an affair with her married publisher, Roger Woodruff. Her inclination is prefigured in her latest novel, which centers on such an affair. Woodruff described as having "an irresistible charm for women," is a romanticized idol for Mary. She cannot see, behind his charismatic mask, the clichéd character who tries to persuade her to become his lover. Mary agrees to go with him to Bridget Drake's country place but Jimmie who himself loves Mary shows up with Woodruff's wife, Claire, in tow, having first made sure Woodruff is called away on business.

Neither woman knows of the other's relationship to Woodruff. They like each other almost immediately, and they discuss Mary's books. Claire declares Mary's earlier novel Alice astonished that it is from a girl's standpoint. Mary says that she is preparing something new and honest from a woman's standpoint. When she asks Claire her opinion of the situation in the novel her prospective lover's wife reminds her that the other woman ought to know enough not believe a married man. Once the three members of this triangle come together Woodruff tries to keep up the pretense that he and Mary are at Bridget's merely to work.

Seeing Mary's pain at this rejection enables Claire to see her own realizing she, too, has been creating a fiction based on the false promises. Realising that her husband can't help attracting women and that his infidelities mean little when he returns home to her, she no longer wants him. Admiring each other, the women can no longer pretend that the wife is a dub and the potential mistress a slut; recognizing each other, they see him. Rejecting a man centered existence that merely staves of loneliness, these superior women mature, and this is Crothers point: When ladies meet in an atmosphere of confidence and trust, they become women, women deserving a better partner than Rogers Woodruff.

In this later play as in Crothers first works, women decide to forgo love with a particular man, but there is a notable difference. The earlier plays, the superior woman yields her interest in the male to another, perhaps weaker. Woman in an action indicative of the noble self sacrifice. Now, instead of silence suffering and surrender, the women undergo a course of self-discovery that allows them to realize the unworthiness of the man who lies to them both. Crothers brought the New Woman strong, talented and intelligent on stage. Many of her women centered dramas focus on the social problems that arise when woman's human rights conflict with the patriarchal order.

Crothers earned the title of America's "foremost woman playwright". Dramatically, her works are of importance in the history of the development of serious social drama in American drama. She presents women in various social problems and with various perspectives of men against women. She reflects social forces which shaped women's activities and aspirations where these women are the New Women in search of empowerment. Crothers allows audience to see the arguments about woman's perspective, both her own and those of her characters, some of whom mature form their romantic dependence on man as the imagined vehicle of fulfillment to achieve both a sense of self and freedom from the male ego's limited perception of her.

As Sharon Friedman observes, "with the decline of feminist activity after the first quarter of the (twentieth) century, the 'New Woman' character and the related themes were no longer a conspicuous element in plays written by women.....nevertheless.....the critic with a feminist lens may ascertain underlying issues of feminist concern that are linked to central themes(81).

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