Empowered Gossipmonger, Disempowered Woman: Navigating the Duplicity of Discursive Power in Alice Gerstenberg's *He Said, She Said*

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Abstract—This paper investigates the dual functionality of gossip in shaping the action of the comic character, Mrs. Cyrus Packard, in the play *He Said, She Said* by the Chicago playwright Alice Gerstenberg. During the American Little Theater Movement in the early 20th century, when small experimental centers of drama were established, Alice Gerstenberg challenged gender inequality through the use of social satire in her play. Incorporating textual evidence from the play, this study demonstrates that Mrs. Packard is both empowered and disempowered by her gossiping habit in terms of her self-perception and her social relationships within the play. It argues for the dramatic and satirical representation of female identity through the pragmatics of discourse analysis. These perspectives are evident in combining linguistics and literature.

Keywords—Discursive power, female identity, feminism in little theater movement, gossip.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE period spanning the 1910s and early 1920s marked an era of exploration and experimentation. Many American playwrights and artists challenged prevailing theater business models, production practices, and conventional dramatic norms on the professional stage. This period witnessed the emergence of the Little Theater Movement, a cultural phenomenon in opposition to commercialism. In this movement, decisions regarding play selection and production techniques often prioritized artistic rather than commercial considerations. Within the corpus of little theater plays, many playwrights delved into gender dynamics, focusing on women in society. These plays addressed various issues such as the suppression of women, the sexual hypocrisy, the subversion of traditional female positions, and power struggles within marriage [1]. As a pioneering feminist playwright of the Chicago Little Theater Movement, Alice Gerstenberg highlights the playwright's wit and use of comic irony to catechize the social stratification of women. Her 1919 one-act comedy of gossip "He Said, She Said" exposes the precariousness of women's reputations by criticizing societal scrutiny that confines women's autonomy. This dialogue-driven narrative showcases how identity is channeled through language, revealing the intricate interplay between female identity, discourse, and power.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Conventional beliefs regarding gossip as a facet of women's discourse have been perpetuated over the years through the age-old sayings like "the hens are clucking." These long-standing perceptions of gossip exacerbate gendered power distinctness by diminishing women's speech [2]. Adhering to these stereotypes surrounding female discourses that paint women's talk as immoral and trivial, Gerstenberg's delineation of the busybody, Mrs. Cyrus Packard, rather satirically refutes the criticism against gender roles, since Mrs. Packard's nosy nature partly stems from social ostracism. As Judith Butler explained, "performativity must be understood as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" [3, p.2]. Butler's concept of performativity examines how women operate language as a form of performance that shapes gendered subjectivities [4, p.13]. Mrs. Packard's engagement in gossip as a daily leisure is her way of becoming, as well as creating and maintaining relationships. While her performative speech is discursively constrained and disciplined by society [5, p.15], displaying her deeper, pathetic vulnerabilities.

Centering on the comic villain Mrs. Cyrus Packard, this essay aims to explore how discourse empowers Mrs. Packard in deploying the discursive power of gossip to promote her social mobility, which is invigorated by artful persuasion tactics and relationship mastery. However, her dependence on the influence of gossip originates from her social status as a married woman, evidenced by her anxiety over reputational detriment and deprivation of personal identity, revealing her underlying powerlessness.

III. III. HARNESSING GOSSIP: UNVEILING MRS. PACKARD'S EMPOWERMENT

A. Power of Re-configuring Gossip

Gossip normally refers to a sender conveying messages to a receiver about a target who is either absent or oblivious of the content. This process is integral to reputation-based cooperation [6]. As gossip involves three actors - senders, receivers, and targets - a "gossip triad" is conceptualized [7]. In the play, gossip is ubiquitous, manifesting in four sets of "gossip triad" integrated into conversations, though the intensity and length of each vary. Rumors emerge, ferment and interact with one another in Haldemans' living-room. When fragments of rumors are collided, recreated, and pieced together in infinite possibilities, power dynamics are perpetuated within individual

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and societal contexts.

Power, in Foucauldian terms, is highly dynamic and omnipresent, always ready to be manifested. While power itself is not tangible, its exertion often occurs via various discourses, which function as tools for constructing specific truths and knowledge. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, a discourse is a unified group of statements that are coherently organized, ensuring a consistent representation of the subject's reality [8]. Generated from the statements of gossip, the physical body of the discourse, Mrs. Packard, exercises the power of misleading knowledge in shaping other characters' perceptions. Based on Foucauldian discursive dimensions of power, Mrs. Packard's powerfulness is manifested through her cunning techniques of gossiping, such as the utilization of collective pronouns and rhetorical questions, and the mediation of conversational speed. These techniques assist her in evading retaliation and minimizing the chance of detection.

Foucauldian analysis of discursive statements takes place in terms of their functions both at "an individualisable group of statements" and within "the general domain of all statements" [9, p.80]. At an individual level, at the outset of the play, the original subject of the gossip is displaced by the use of collective pronoun, "they." Rather than specifying an actual singular person, Mrs. Packard intentionally initiates ambiguity, obscuring the clarity of meaning. The frequent use of "people" throughout the play also reinforces this vagueness. The signified counterparts of the signifiers "they" and "people" are missing, which seems to impair the trustworthiness of the message. Nevertheless, the low accuracy affixed to the collective pronoun and noun does not preclude its effectiveness. Mrs. Packard distracts the subject of the rumor's initiator to an absent other, namely, Diana. By utilizing the third-person collective pronoun, she constructs a sense of collectivity that excludes her own involvement with the message, dwindling her relevance to the gossip. When interrogated by Diana near the end of the play, she again proclaims: "Not my mind! Everybody's mind! I have nothing to do with it!" [10]. Overall, the oriented substances of information embodied in the collective pronoun and noun divert the listeners' attention from the antecedent to the target of the gossip.

B. Power of Mobilizing Gossip

In terms of the general domain of all statements in Foucauldian analysis, Mrs. Packard's word choice of collective vocabularies is unified into protean sentence structures. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), message processing comprises the four elements: a) the persuasion agent or source of the message; b) the topic or arguments; c) the message content; d) the persuasion tactics used in the message [11]. In Mrs. Packard's persuasive strategies, she obfuscates the source of the gossip at the first step. She then accentuates the topic of the message - namely, a fabricated romantic affair between Felix and Diana - outweighing the exact message content. Her persuasion tactics can be deciphered from the frequent occurrences of rhetorical sentences, whose effects are expected to enhance the elaboration of the message content [12].

Situated in the context of this invented adultery, the phrase "you haven't heard?" [10] displays the usage of a rhetorical question to form a positive statement. This negative presupposition, coupled with a skeptical tone, easily provokes emotions and engages the listeners. Another example, "there! Of course you do ... why do you think she didn't?" [10], exhibits an affirmative question followed by a negative question. These rhetorical questions indirectly express assertions, aiming to convince the addressee to mentally consent to the implication of obviousness by exerting psychological pressure [13]. Apart from rhetorical questions, disjunctive questions are also widely applied for emphasizing that the previously asked idea is evident. The listeners fail to trace back the root of the message since its birthplace is an ambiguous term - "they." In general, Mrs. Packard's employment of rhetorical questions tempts the listeners into believing the gossip, consolidating the threshold for obscuring the gossip.

Apart from rhetorical questions, Mrs. Packard's persuasion tactics are also manifested through subtle management of the speed of conversation. She swiftly transits from one question to another, decreasing the likelihood of elaborating on each one in detail. The rapidity of conversation heightens the persuasion of gossip during each turn, leaving little time for the listeners to contemplate. On some key words, such as "your husband--," "that's what they say--," "disagreeable things--" [10], she deliberately slows down. The prolongation of each response arouses the listeners' curiosity and anxiety to follow her logic. In their eagerness to discover the ultimate truth, the listeners are continuously challenged by her as she casts doubt on almost each of their replies. For instance, she picks up and repeats individual words from Diana's responses, as exemplified in "Best - did you say?" [10]. Taken together, after examining Mrs. Packard's persuasion tactics, including the use of collective pronouns, rhetorical questions, conversational speed, and sentence lengths, she steers the language towards the directions she hopes to head for, thus elevating the trustworthiness of the gossip.

C. Internalized Power within "Gossip Triad"

According to Foucault, power should be examined as a circulating force, operating solely through a chain-like mechanism, which is conjointly embedded in social and spatial relations [13]. The Haldemans' living-room is not merely a material space where the physical bodies of the four characters preside, but a social construct where different modalities of power take effect. The living-room accommodates interlocutors of dialogues, whose capacity provides opportunities for expanding social interactions. Conversely, when multiple layers of social connections are braided together, the production of space is also enriched and fulfilled.

Often occurring in casual social settings, gossip facilitates the exchange of positive or negative evaluations regarding absent individuals [14]. The target of gossip is typically ignorant of the communicative information, minimizing the possibility of the targets' retaliation [6]. During gossip exchanges, both the gossiper and the gossip receiver implicitly impose influence on the absent other. When the target is

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deprived of autonomy over discourses concerning them, the absence of the target is particularly central in facilitating gossip among the "gossip triad."

In the play, gossip is arisen from a domestic setting. Before Diana's arrival, there have been two instances of gossip involving three speakers, revolving around the central figure, Diana. The authority of discourse is exerted over Diana, with reputational costs imposed on Mrs. Packard, Enid, and Felix. The superimposed layers of information, whether truth or false, double the burdens of proof. For listeners, the complexity of the gossip is raised as its intricacy lies in locating the source. Consequently, for Mrs. Packard, the difficulty of distorting its authenticity is reduced.

Previous studies evaluating the relationships between parties involved in gossip have observed a coalitional structure underlying gossip about norm violation: (a) a positive, highly valued relationship between the sender and the receiver, and (b) a mutual negative, less valued relationship between the sender/ receiver and the target. In this scenario, senders may only engage in gossip only with receivers who are unlikely to reveal information to the target, as the avoidance of possible costs of retaliation suggests that senders should primarily gossip to reliable others [7].

The relational structure exhibited in the play obviously violates this coalition. Since Enid and Diana are "best friends" [10], the relationships between the sender, Mrs. Packard and the two receivers, Enid and Diana, do not necessarily conform to the framework, complicating the triangulation between sender, receiver and the target of gossip. Mrs. Packard's avoidance of detection depends on her selection of a romantic affair, demonstrating the subtlety of this gossip. Nonetheless, the risks of succeeding in the gossip remain. Depending on the different evaluative meanings that the gossip receivers attach to the gossip, the valence of the gossip differs. As Enid has a more intimate relationship with Mrs. Packard than Diana does, the gossip more easily takes effect. On the contrary, at the beginning, a highly valued relationship between Diana and Mrs. Packard is not established. Mrs. Packard seems to bear preconceptions about Diana when Enid mentions her for the first time. During their conversation, Diana is also repeatedly irritated by Mrs. Packard's half-truths. This unbaked relationship later triggers the possible failure of Mrs. Packard's gossip. Overall, the cleverness of Mrs. Packard's approach lies in her mastery of the gossip triad, intersected with power dynamics, while the veracity of the gossip depends on the receivers' evaluations, leading to the potential collapse of the gossip.

IV. WRESTLING WITH GOSSIP: DISCLOSING MRS. PACKARD'S POWERLESSNESS

A. Maintenance of Social Bonds for Advancing Mobility

Though discourse possesses or arises from power, it itself is not power in that the very rules are in part constitutive of discourse [15]. On the one hand, gossip serves as a linguistic weapon, enabling Mrs. Packard to derive pleasure from connecting with others [16]; on the other hand, her

powerlessness is discursively constituted in actuality, emanating from a mode of repression on women, rendering her discourse autonomous from extra-discursive social structures and institutions.

The deeper reasons regarding why Mrs. Packard takes risks for violating the triangular structure of gossip reside in her social insecurity. When engaging in discursive statements within the power network, Mrs. Packard's weaknesses are manifested through her efforts to preserve and cement social relationships with other characters. Her inner emptiness is assuaged through keenly observing and gossiping others.

Several studies have shown that gossip benefits the formation and maintenance of social connections between gossip senders and receivers. It broadens the scope for indirect reciprocity and reputation-based partner selection, fostering cooperation by amplifying the dissemination of reputational messages [17, p.253]. The functionality of gossip includes, but is not limited to, the three main features: exchanging information, influencing conversation partners, and developing social connections and trust relationships for providing social assistance [6].

When engaging in conversations with other two female characters, Mrs. Packard endeavors to gain more trustworthiness from both sides. On the one hand, she utilizes Diana's popularity to lend authenticity to the gossip and expresses sympathy to Enid in an effort to improve their closeness. On the other hand, as Diana is a society girl, establishing contact with Diana and winning her recognition are beneficial for expanding her social circles. Mrs. Packard is mindful of the possible threats imposed by the gossip to both Diana and Enid. The gossip testifies to trust, fidelity, and honesty among the three friends.

Enid does not shy away from admiring and praising Diana's great charisma, which underpins her gullibility to the gossip. After hearing the gossip, Enid's insecurity about the stability of her marriage becomes apparent. She lacks the courage to confront Felix. It is not the content of the gossip that concerns her, but rather the stability of her kinship. By contrast, as a more independent woman without the constraints of marriage, Diana displays a more confident image. By contesting Mrs. Packard's claims, she has no scruples about the integrity of her information. She enjoys relatively greater autonomy, demonstrated by her eventual disclosure of her engagement to Aubrey Laurence, not dreading expressing her emotions. Through mediating between Diana and Enid, Mrs. Packard maneuvers the friendship between them, and the kinship between Enid and Felix in pursuit of upward mobility.

B. A Portrait of Women's Limited Agency in Society

Foucauldian theories point out that power is localized and diffused throughout every fabric of social networks [18]. The social relations depicted in the play symbolize a microcosm of a larger society. Although adept at deploying the power of gossip, Mrs. Packard is also highly sensitive to the potential discursive hazards that might afflict her. Fearful of being accused of not conforming to accepted standards for regulating women's behaviors and appearances, Mrs. Packard evades admitting her responsibilities in gossiping. For example, when

the altercation between Diana and Mrs. Packard reaches its peak, she still insists on "trying to be help" [10]. Her fearfulness for her reputation being damaged confirms the unsteadiness of women's social status.

Alarmed by the danger to her personal prestige, Mrs. Packard's powerlessness is also manifested through the absence of her personal name, concealing her selfhood. Addressed by Mr. Cyrus Packard's surname, she becomes an appendage of her husband under the marital contract. Locked into the marital relationship at an expense to self, her dependency can be examined from two types, structural dependency, i.e., the degree to which an individual is dependent upon the relationship, and personal dependency, i.e., oneself in terms of the relationship with the partner [19]. Mrs. Packard explicitly articulates her eagerness to join Enid's dinner: "jumped at the invitation" and enunciates her loneliness: "so lonesome with John away" [10], while envying Enid's company with Felix. In contrast, Diana arrives after "dressing at the club" and subsequently Enid mentions "nursing at the hospital all afternoon" [10]. These pieces of information reveal that they are both busily occupied with their jobs. In this case, Mrs. Packard's loss of maiden name implies her strong structural dependency. Without her husband's company, her personal dependency fails to be accomplished, leading to her reliance on gossip. Gossip may be the only chance for her to win more attention, fulfilling her inner void, which uncovers her pathetic nature.

V. CONCLUSION

Focusing on the gossiper, Mrs. Packard, in *He Said, She Said* and examining the interrelationships between discourse and power, this research has shown that Mrs. Packard is both empowered and restrained by gossip. Her powerfulness is energized by gossip through the craftiness of persuasion tactics and the handling of gossip triangular relationship to enhance social mobility. Her oppressed subjectivity is revitalized by observing other people's lives for entertainment. Through a set of articulations, the function and position of discursive power are constantly redefined. However, gossip also reveals her powerlessness, regarding her marital title of address and potential reputation impairment. For Mrs. Packard, spreading slander may be the only opportunity to boost her self-esteem, demonstrating her pathetic essence as a married woman in society. Continued efforts are needed to probe into additional factors that could affect Mrs. Packard's propensity for gossip.

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