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, 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 discourse analysis in combining linguistics and literature.**

Keywords—**discursive power, female identity, feminism, little theater movement, gossip**

I. INTRODUCTION

The period spanning the 1910s and early 1920s marked an era of exploration and experimentation when many American playwrights and artists challenged prevailing theatre business models, production practices, and conventional dramatic norms on the professional stage. This period witnessed the emergence of the Little Theatre movement, a cultural phenomenon in opposition to commercialism. In this modern movement, decisions regarding play selection and production techniques often prioritised artistic merits rather than commercial considerations [1]. Many of the promising tenets of the movement had grown to be accepted practice particularly in the growing field of educational theatre for the benefit of elevating the quality and purpose of theatre [2].

Within the corpus of Little Theatre plays, gender dynamics were explored by many playwrights, with a particular focus on women in society. These plays addressed various issues such as suppression of women, sexual hypocrisy, subversion of traditional female positions, and power struggles within marriage [1]. As a long-lived pioneering feminist playwright of the Chicago Little Theatre movement, Alice Gerstenberg enlivens the plot, highlighting the playwright's wit and use of comic irony to catechise the social stratification of women, but her work is often unstudied. This paper aims to explore Gerstenberg's critique of feminine ideals, which are often shaped by social conventions and normative gender expectations, as presented in her 1919 one-act comedy and social satire *He Said, She Said* within the experimental and feminist practices of modernist theatre.

The play, set during World War I, revolves around four main characters who are friends: Mrs. Cyrus Packard — the focus of this paper, Diana Chesbrough, Enid Haldeman, and Enid's husband, Felix Haldeman. Mrs. Packard is depicted as a busybody who delights in spreading rumours and engaging in gossip. Diana, a single woman and Enid's childhood friend, is a regular presence in the Haldemans' household, making her an easy target for Mrs. Packard's gossip. Enid is perceived to be the care taker of both her friends and her husband, frequently organising social gatherings. Felix is portrayed as a generous and loving husband who does not enlist in the war. When Mrs. Packard and Diana are invited for dinner hosted by Enid, the fermenting gossip in the Haldemans' living-room not only strains the bonds of trust among the four friends but also accentuates the power of discourse in manipulating social relationships. This play utilises gossip as a thread for the development of the storyline, which exposes the precariousness of women's reputations under societal scrutiny relative to men.

Centring on the comic villain Mrs. Packard, this paper argues that Gerstenberg employs gossip not merely as a narrative device but as a lens to explore the interplay of power, social validation, and vulnerableness in women's lives. Specifically, Mrs. Packard's mastery of gossip reveals the dual nature of discursive power: while it temporarily elevates her social standing, such power also exposes her dependence on a fragile system of reputational control. This paper will adopt the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's concept of discursive power to analyse the paradoxical nature of gossip in *He Said, She Said* from two perspectives: its capacity to empower Mrs. Packard, as represented from the discourse's lexical, phrasal, and syntactic units, and its role in undermining the strength of women's discourse while simultaneously revealing the vulnerabilities of their experiences.

II. GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS AND THE POWER OF GOSSIP

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 [3]. Adhering to these stereotypes surrounding female discourse that paint women's talk as immoral and trivial, Gerstenberg's satirical portrayal of the busybody, Mrs. Packard, is both a critique of and an engagement with these stereotypes.

According to Foucault, a discourse is a unified group of statements that are coherently organised, ensuring a consistent representation of the subject's reality [4]. The ultimate intent of discourse–in this case, gossip–is to generate significance. Moreover, discourse represents a physical body, i.e., the set of behaviour and practices generated from a unified group of statements [4]. The discursive power of statements is both achieved and amplified through various forms of performative action, which is where Judith Butler's

theory comes into play. This concept of performativity examines how women operate language as a form of performance that shapes gendered subjectivities [5]. Therefore, gossip functions as a performative speech that empowers women.

Based on Foucauldian discursive dimensions of power, Mrs. Packard, the physical body of gossip, misleadingly exercises the power of knowledge in shaping other characters' perceptions. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), message processing consists of four elements: a) the persuasion agent or message source; b) the topic or arguments; c) the message content; and d) the persuasion tactics employed in the message [6].

In the initial stage, Mrs. Packard cultivates a negative perception of gossip by asserting that Enid "ought not to hear" Mrs. Morgan, whom she characterises as possessing "a long, bad tongue" [7]. Simultaneously, she claims that she herself is "not going to gossip" at the dinner-party, all while concocting the story that Mrs. Morgan is the source of the message and has been gossiping about Enid. By doing so, she efficiently diverts attention away from herself as the source of the gossip. Next, she shifts focus to the topic and content of the message, centring it on a fabricated romantic affair between Felix and Diana. By emphasising the subject of the message while obscuring its origin, Mrs. Packard further distracts attention from herself and the detailed illustrations of the message's content.

The fourth element − the persuasion tactics employed in the message [6], including the utilisation of collective signifiers, rhetorical and disjunctive questions, and the modulation of conversational speed − will be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs, highlighting how Mrs. Packard adeptly uses them to evade retaliation and minimise suspicion from her friends.

A. Mrs. Packard's Powerfulness: Re-configuring Gossip

According to Foucauldian discourse analysis, discursive statements take place in terms of their functions both at "an individualisable group of statements" and within the "general domain of all statements" [8].

At an individual level, one of Mrs. Packard's most effective persuasion tactics is her deliberate use of generalised terms. At the outset of the play, the original subject of the gossip is displaced by the use of imprecise sentence subjects, "people" and "everyone". Rather than specifying a particular individual and continuing on mentioning Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Packard intentionally initiates ambiguity, obscuring clarity of meaning. This is further reinforced by her frequent use of these vague expressions throughout the play. The signified counterparts of the signifiers: "they", "people", "everyone", and "everybody" are missing, which should have impaired the trustworthiness of these messages.

Nevertheless, the low accuracy affixed to these collective pronouns and nouns does not preclude its effectiveness but seamlessly integrates into Mrs. Packard's performance of discursive techniques. Mrs. Packard leads attention from the originator of the rumour to an absent figure, namely, Diana. Consequently, others fail to trace the source of the initial message and instead focus their discussions on the target of the gossip. By effectively utilising the third-person collective pronoun or noun as an imitable signifier, Mrs. Packard 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 adamantly insists: "I never said it! Never, never, never!", and later proclaims "Not my mind! Everybody's mind! I have nothing to do with it!" [7]. Therefore, the oriented substances of information embodied in the empty collective pronouns and nouns divert the listeners' attention from the antecedent to the target of the gossip.

B. Mrs. Packard's Powerfulness: Mobilising Gossip

In addition to the "individualisable" level, within the "general domain of all statements" in Foucauldian analysis [8], Mrs. Packard's word choice of vague expressions is integrated into protean sentence structures. Her persuasion tactics are evident in the frequent occurrences of rhetorical sentences, which are designated to enhance the elaboration of the message content [9]. Within the context of the invented adultery, the phrase "you haven't heard?" [6] displays the use of a rhetorical question to convey a positive assertion. This negative presupposition, coupled with a sceptical tone, easily provokes emotions and engages the listeners. Another example, "there! Of course you do ... why do you think she didn't?" [6], combines an affirmative question with a negative question. These rhetorical questions indirectly convey assertions, aiming to compel the addressee to mentally accept the implication of obviousness by exerting psychological pressure [9] on Mrs. Packard's gossiped others.

Apart from rhetorical questions, disjunctive questions are also widely employed to emphasise the evident nature of previously posed ideas. For instance, in the question, "You're with each other a great deal aren't you?" [6], Mrs. Packard highlights the close friendship between Enid and Diana. This emphasis serves to arouse Enid's suspicion of Diana and lays the groundwork for the subsequent affair between Diana and Felix. However, potential listeners of the gossip fail to trace back the root of the message since its birthplace is an ambiguous term − "they" or "people". Mrs. Packard's employment of these two questions tempts the listeners into believing the gossip, reinforcing the blurred line between truth and rumour.

Other than rhetorical and disjunctive questions, Mrs. Packard's persuasion tactics are also evident in her subtle management of the conversational pace. She swiftly transits from one question to another, decreasing the likelihood of elaborating on each one in detail. The rapidity of conversation leaves little time for the listeners to contemplate, heightening the persuasive effects during each turn. On some key words, such as "your husband--", "that's what they say--", and "disagreeable things--" [6], 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, she continuously challenges the listeners while casting 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?" [6].

Taken together, through gossip, Mrs. Packard gains power by skilfully employing cunning persuasion tactics to steer the discourse toward her intended outcomes. In doing so, she enhances the gossip's perceived trustworthiness and solidifies her control over it.

C. Internalized Power within "Gossip Triad"

Gossip normally refers to a sender conveying messages to a receiver about a target who is either absent or oblivious of

the content, which minimises the possibility of retaliation from the target [10]. The involvement of the three actors–senders, receivers, and targets–contributes the conceptualisation of a "gossip triad" [11]. This process is integral to reputation-based cooperation. During gossip exchanges, both the gossiper and the gossip receiver implicitly exert influence over the absent target [12]. When the target is deprived of autonomy over discourses concerning them, the absence of the target becomes particularly central in facilitating the construction of gossip within the "gossip triad" [11].

In *He Said, She Said*, gossip is pervasive, manifesting in four sets of "gossip triads" that are integrated into four separate conversations among Enid, Felix, Mrs. Packard, and Diana. Although each conversation varies in intensity and length, together they underscore the ubiquitous nature of gossip. Rumours emerge, ferment and interact with one another in the Haldemans' living-room. When fragments of rumours are collided, recreated, and pieced together in infinite possibilities, power dynamics are perpetuated within individual and societal contexts. Therefore, through shaping power dynamics within the play, gossip also operates as a social tool, fostering relationships and testifying to trust, fidelity and honesty among the four friends.

Evaluating the relationships between parties involved in the "gossip triad" reveals 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 engage in gossip only with receivers who are unlikely to reveal information to the target, as avoiding potential costs of retaliation suggests that senders should primarily gossip with trustworthy individuals [11].

In the play, prior to Diana's arrival, the central topic and figure of gossip–Diana's marital status–emerges, involving three speakers–Enid, Felix, and Mrs. Packard. The authority of discourse is exerted over Diana, resulting in reputational costs for the three speakers. The superimposed layers of information, whether true or false, complicate the burden of proof. The complexity of the gossip increases, as its intricacy lies in locating the exact source. Consequently, for Mrs. Packard, the difficulty of distorting its authenticity diminishes, while its perceived reliability increases.

In terms of the relational structure exhibited in the play, it clearly violates the coalition within the "gossip triad". As Enid and Diana are described as "best friends" [6], the relationships among the sender, Mrs. Packard, and the two receivers, Enid and Diana, do not conform to the framework above. However, Enid, as the initial receiver of the gossip, is still inclined to believe the worst, even at the cost of jeopardising her friendship with Diana near the end of the play – "I have always trusted you ... but perhaps ... perhaps the world has been able to see better from the distance and understand--" [6]. Therefore, Mrs. Packard's ability to avoid detection relies on her choice of a romantic affair for the gossip, highlighting the subtlety inherent in this gossip. This complicates the triangulation between the sender, the receiver, and the target of the gossip.

Nonetheless, the risks associated with successfully disseminating the gossip persist. The valence of the gossip varies depending on the evaluative meanings the receiver attaches to it. Given that Enid has a closer relationship with Mrs. Packard than Diana does, the gossip is more likely to take effect in Enid's case. In contrast, a highly valued relationship between Diana and Mrs. Packard is not established at the outset. For example, when Enid first mentions Diana, Mrs. Packard appears to bear preconceptions about her. Throughout their conversations, Diana is repeatedly irritated by Mrs. Packard's half-truths. This unbaked relationship later leads to the potential failure of Mrs. Packard's gossip.

Overall, the cleverness of Mrs. Packard's approach lies in her mastery of the "gossip triad", which serves as a central mechanism for manipulating trust and reinforcing social bonds. However, gossip inherently holds a dual potential: it can both strengthen and disrupt social networks. Its veracity ultimately hinges on the evaluations and perceptions of the receivers, whose interpretations may lead to the gossip's failure to achieve its intended outcome.

III. VULNERABILITY AND DEPENDENCY: MRS. PACKARD'S POWERLESSNESS

Foucauldian theories point out that power is localised and diffused throughout every fabric of social networks [13]. On the one hand, gossip functions as a linguistic weapon, allowing Mrs. Packard to derive pleasure from her connections with others. By keenly observing and gossiping about others, she temporarily alleviates her inner emptiness. Her enthusiastic engagement in gossip as a daily leisure is her way of performing and becoming, as well as creating and maintaining relationships.

On the other hand, the deeper reasons regarding why Mrs. Packard takes risks for violating the triangular structure of gossip reside in her social insecurity. Her powerlessness is discursively constituted in actuality, stemming from a mode of repression directed towards women. When engaging in discursive statements within the power network, the persuasion tactics that she harnesses also render her vulnerable, as these empty signifiers cannot provide her with genuine happiness. Her reliance on the void substances of the collective terms, such as "they", leaves her susceptible to any slight queries. This paradox of discursive power, renders her unaware that her performative speech is discursively produced and disciplined by society, ironically displaying her deeper, more pathetic vulnerabilities, which are demonstrated in the following three ways.

A. Personal and Structural Dependency

Partly alarmed by the danger to her personal prestige, Mrs. Packard channels her anxiety through repetitive discursive performances. Her reliance on gossip 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 [14].

In terms of the structural dependency, surnames frequently play an important role in shaping a person's social identity by fostering a sense of connectedness to a particular family [15]. Mrs. Packard's loss of her maiden name implies her strong structural dependence on her husband. She is the only female character referred to by her husband's name, along with the title "Mrs." This surname functions as a linguistic tool, enabling her to investigate the marital status of other women without concern for the stability of her own. However, within the confines of the marital contract, she simultaneously becomes an appendage of her husband, which conceals her self-hood and results in the partial loss of her personal identity.

Regarding personal dependency, gossip becomes a stand-in for her husband's absence, marking a shift from her reliance on domesticity to a dependence on gossip as a source of connection and affirmation. This shift unfolds within an intimate yet isolated domestic space during WWI, a time when, despite Gersternberg's deliberate avoidance of direct war-related terms, the implicit relationship between women and war becomes evident.

The war created novel and exciting opportunities for American women, particularly in the realm of paid employment [16], and this broader societal change informs the experiences of Enid and Diana, who seem to be actively participating in the possibilities generated by the convergence of wartime mobilisation and women's activism. Diana arrives after "dressing at the club" and subsequently Enid mentions "nursing at the hospital all afternoon" [6]. These pieces of information reveal that Diana and Enid are both busily occupied with their jobs. Unlike Enid and Diana's enriched lives, Mrs. Packard explicitly articulates her eagerness to join Enid's dinner − "jumped at the invitation" − and enunciates her loneliness: "so lonesome with John away" [6], while envying Felix's company with Enid because the absence of Mr. Cyrus Packard implies his fighting at war.

Mrs. Packard's limited agency, in contrast to Enid and Diana's wartime activities, is exacerbated by WWI in the lack of her husband's company, isolating her from her female companions' routines and leaving her daily discourse confined to trivial matters. Her internal vacancy is rejuvenated by observing and discussing the lives of others as a form of entertainment. Gossip thus becomes a means of self-expression, relationship-building, and sustaining her sense of identity. For Mrs. Packard, spreading slander may be her only opportunity to boost self-esteem, garner attention, and temporarily fill her inner void − subtly revealing the pathetic role underlying her actions, which ultimately hinders her from realising her true essence.

B. Gossip as a Substitute for Advancing Validation

Several studies have shown that gossip benefits the formation and maintenance of social connections between gossip senders and receivers − its functionality includes, but is not limited to, three main features: exchanging information, influencing conversation partners, and developing social connections and trust relationships for providing social assistance [10]. It broadens the scope for indirect reciprocity and reputation-based partner selection, fostering cooperation by amplifying the dissemination of reputational messages [17].

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 and its capacity provides opportunities for expanding social interactions. Accordingly, when multiple layers of social connections are braided together, the production of space is also enriched and fulfilled.

As Mrs. Packard turns to gossip as a substitute for meaningful personal and social validation, her weaknesses are manifested through her efforts to preserve and cement social relationships with other characters. When engaging in conversations with other two female characters, Mrs. Packard manipulates any possible threat imposed by the gossip to both Diana and Enid. By doing so, she endeavours to gain more trustworthiness from both sides.

On the one hand, she leverages Diana's popularity to lend authenticity to the gossip while expressing sympathy to Enid to foster their closeness. Mrs. Packard pinpoints Enid's indecisive character, whose shifting attitudes are beneficial to be employed for diminishing the friendship between Enid and Diana. During the height of the conflict, Enid does not hesitate to admire and praise Diana's great charisma, as evidenced by her remark, "But Diana is pretty..." [6], which underscores her gullibility regarding 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.

On the other hand, as Diana is a popular figure, establishing contact with her and winning her recognition are beneficial for expanding Mrs. Packard's social circles. As a relatively more independent woman without the constraints of marriage, Diana displays a more confident image. This independence is further manifested in her determination to persistently contest Mrs. Packard's claims, showing no hesitation in questioning the integrity of the information presented. She enjoys a relatively greater freedom, as evidenced by her eventual disclosure of her engagement to Aubrey Laurence, and she does not shy away from expressing her emotions. In general, by mediating between Diana and Enid, Mrs. Packard manoeuvres their friendship and the kinship between Enid and Felix in pursuit of upward societal validation.

C. Women's Limited Agency in Society

Gerstenberg's use of irony and satire to criticise the limited roles available to women reflects her engagement with feminist and modernist concerns. The social relations depicted in the play symbolise a microcosm of broader societal structures, where Mrs. Packard's pursuit of upward social validation underscores a destabilising sense of status uncertainty. Although adept at leveraging the power of gossip, Mrs. Packard is acutely aware of the potential discursive hazards that might afflict her. Her fear of being accused of deviating from the accepted norms governing women's behaviour and appearance compels her to avoid acknowledging her role in spreading gossip.

For instance, even at the height of her altercation with Diana, Mrs. Packard still insists that she is merely "trying to be help" [6]. Her preoccupation with preserving her reputation underscores the fragility of women's social standing, which is perpetually subjected to the pressures of external validation. Consequently, Mrs. Packard's nosiness can be understood as a response to social ostracism, exposing the deeper realities which Gerstenberg critiques through satire.

Similarly, Enid falls into a similar discursive pattern, struggling to determine which second-hand information to believe. Despite initially casting doubt on Mrs. Packard's slanders, she ultimately does not question the discourse itself. Instead, Enid conciliates between Diana and Mrs. Packard, seemingly ready to believe the worst as a willing audience. Endeavouring to maintain the steadiness of her relationships, Enid is clearly aware of the consequences of presenting a higher propensity to disrupt or threaten her apparently happy marriage.

Although Diana, as a single woman, enjoys relatively greater autonomy in her romantic relationships, she is not portrayed as an alternative model for women's lives. Instead, she continues to face questioning from Felix for not marrying

one of her suitors − "Diana ... should have married one of the boys ..." [6], reflecting societal expectations of marriage and the criticism often directed at so-called "leftover" women. This criticism is not limited to Felix's assertion; Diana's public persona is also refracted through the dialogues of her two female companions. For example, Mrs. Packard's remarks, "... why Diana didn't marry one of the boys before they went off to war" and Enid observes, "If she can't get the best male company she prefers female" [6]. Facing slander, Diana's anxiety about damaging her reputation is manipulated by Mrs. Packard's gossiping. To navigate her current reputational crisis within the constraints of marital culture, Diana feels compelled to fabricate an engagement with a suitable partner in the end.

In contrast, as the sole male character in the play, Enid's reference to Felix as her "Cock of the Walk" [6] subtly suggests his threatened masculinity, stemming from his absence from the war and failure to fight for his country. Despite becoming the male counterpart in the gossip surrounding Diana's romantic life, Felix remains unblamed, while Diana bears the brunt of societal scrutiny. This imbalance reflects a distinct double standard: women's behaviours are heavily judged and criticised, whereas men escape accountability.

The dividing societal expectations highlight the rigid gender assumptions that intensify women's insecurity within this patriarchal framework, which amplify the challenges of navigating a society where their roles are dictated by patriarchal expectations. As the female characters' autonomy is largely confined by a form of social validation based on notions of virtue, they are continuously trapped in networks of relationships shaped by wartime dynamics.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper connects the linguistic analysis of gossip with Foucauldian theories of power to examine how gossip as a performative speech simultaneously empowers and constrains women in *He Said, She Said*, particularly in reconstructing power dynamics. Mrs. Packard's sense of power is bolstered by her strategic use of discourse, employing crafty persuasion tactics to shape other characters' perceptions. She also orchestrates the "gossip triad" to manipulate trust and social bonds. However, her reliance on gossip also exposes her vulnerability as a married woman, as evidenced by her fear of reputational impairment, crises of personal identity, and eagerness to advance personal and social validation.

Against the backdrop of first-wave feminism, *He Said, She Said* exemplifies how female subjectivity and voices are expressed through theatrical discourse. The female characters' efforts to maintain social status and relationships reflect their limited autonomy within the constraints of gender stereotypes.

Gerstenberg's focus on women's issues reflects her alignment with modernist feminist concerns and her dedication to effecting change within her Chicago community and beyond. This commitment to social change is evident not only in her contributions to the feminist modernist canon but also in her direct involvement in shaping Chicago's theatrical practices. For instance, she was awarded the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award in recognition of her continued efforts, which included co-founding the Chicago Junior League in 1921 and establishing The Playwright's Theatre of Chicago in 1922. Both theatres were less controversial and more mainstream compared to the non-commercial playhouses of pre-war Chicago [18]. Through these efforts, Gerstenberg's works challenge the divide between "art" and "community", encompassing both artistic innovation and community-centred initiatives. Her innovative dramaturgy, particularly in challenging gender norms, continues to deserve scholarly attention.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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