

'Unhappy Marriage' As A Recurring Issue In Lillian Hellman's Plays

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Abstract – Lillian Hellman has treated subjects which are vital to every generation in her plays, and marriage is indeed one such vital issue. Her basic concern is with the essential realities of human life. She felt impelled to point out with great vehemence that America was in dire need of change, suffering from a variety of ills which needed to be rectified. She felt a nostalgia, a need to reaffirm old and tried values, a sense of anguish and a feeling of impotence in the face of economic chaos. Hellman was not engaged so much with her times as with the family of man. Her plays are primarily family plays, plays where the sympathy or the lack of it amongst members of the same family, the intervening facts of personal greed, the animosity which may creep into the husband-wife relationship, the ideological stances — all play an important role. A family is a social unit based upon legal (marriage) and on blood (birth) relationships. But is not an enclosed unit insulated from the influence of society. It is moulded, supported, disrupted by social and economic factors and of this Hellman was very conscious.

Key Words – Marriage, Deviant, Aberrant, Love, Relationship, Couple, Compatibility, Promiscuous, Adulterous, Incestuous, Unscrupulous, Money, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of unhappy marriage is a recurring issue in Hellman's plays. Except for *The Children's Hour*, each play consists of one or two unhappily married couples. The couples in her plays lack all compatibility because their marriages are based not on love and understanding but on money. Hellman shows that people often, in their naivete and greed for money, give priority to wealth and social status against love, compatibility and other human qualities are relegated to the secondary place. The vacuity and futility of such marriages are exposed after a few years of marriage. Hellman's social protest is implied because all such marriages in her plays result in utter failure. She exhibits realistically that because they are marriages of convenience and opportunity, the very foundation becomes weak, and as a result, there is no love, no sacrifice, and no real attachment. Probably no one can deny the authenticity of Mrs. Mary Ellis's statement in *The Autumn Garden* while she sums up a common marriage problem, "I was too good for those who wanted me and not good enough for those I wanted" (509). This statement is suggestive of the bitter reality that marriages particularly in the upper-middle and upper-classes are finalized on the basis of wealth and position. Moreover, it also explains the reasons for late marriages; parents are class and status-conscious, they prefer delayed marriages, and in some cases even no marriages of their children. Loveless marriages, late marriages or no marriages at all, lead to deviant love as Hellman justly demonstrate in her

plays. Therefore, the instances of loveless marriages and deviant love can be focused upon simultaneously. Sometimes, these instances are not directly a part of the main action, nevertheless, Hellman introduces them in the plays for voicing her social and moral protest.

In *The Children's Hour*, for instance, there are no married couples, yet a love interest so strikingly deviant as lesbianism which the lie involves, provides Hellman with an area of social protest against New England Puritanism in particular, and the conventional, self-righteous upper-class people in general who are ever ready to destroy those who deviate from the established social (sexual) mores.

In *Days to Come*, it is Andrew Rodman's wealth that fascinates Julie to marry him, and therefore, it is wealth that presumably takes precedence over love as the basis for their marriage. She confesses to Andrew, "Darling, I told you the truth. I was not in love with you when we were married I am not in love with you now" (126). Her loveless marriage makes her willfully promiscuous, and she has no regrets for her adulterous relations with her husband's rich friend, Henry Ellicott, and an affair with the labour union organizer, Leo Whalen. Hellman's social protest against the unsound values attached to the bourgeois society which Julie represents is implied.

In *The Little Foxes*, there are two married couples, Oscar and Birdie; Regina and Horace, and both are

marriages of opportunity as they are based on wealth and not on love. Oscar married Birdie because of procuring her Lionnet plantation, and Regina loved Birdie's cousin, John Bagtry but Ben gets her married to Horace because of his wealth and social status. Regina too, very much like Julie, discloses to Horace that she never loved him and thus causes him a heart attack which leads to his premature death.

In the companion Hubbard play, *Another part of the Forest*, we have only one married couple, Marcus and Lavinia. Marcus married Lavinia because she was socially superior to him, however, after becoming rich through unfair means, he starts ill-treating her, and even transfer his whole attention to his daughter Regina. There are strong hints in the play that Marcus's love for her is an incestuous attraction. Ben also nurtures similar incestuous feelings for his sister, Regina, and thus emerges as a rival of his father for Regina and his wealth. The reasons behind these incestuous leanings in the play can be attributed to Marcus's loveless marriage, and Ben's no marriage at all.

Watch on the Rhine is the only play by Hellman where one comes across a happily married couple Kurt Muller and Sara. It is the only instance of marriage which is not based on wealth but on sound values of true love and understanding, and a spirit of sacrifice. They are poor, without a house and live without proper food but they become each other's strength. One cannot afford to disagree with Hellman's view that only those marriages stand the test of time which are based on sound values, and not on wealth and other extraneous factors. There is another couple in the play, Teck and Marthe, which comes across as a total contrast to Kurt and Sara because Marthe's mother married her to the Count Teck for the sake of European title. As a result, Marthe's life stands almost ruined because she cannot put up with her husband's way of living. Hellman's protest against such parents who marry off their children to wrong persons for the sake of wealth and false social prestige, is implied. Teck emerges as an immoral, cruel and callous person in the play, therefore, Marthe's clandestine affair with David Farrelly does not seem immoral and shocking because Teck's ill-treatment of Marthe justifies this sort of deviant love. It is the creative genius of Hellman that what seems acceptable in the case of Marthe, a similar instance of deviant love in *Days to Come* makes Julie appear promiscuous because of Andrew Rodman's sincere devotion to her.

In Hellman's next war-play, *The Searching Wind* occurs a love triangle which consists of Alex Hazen, his wife Emily, and their common friend Cassie Bowman. In this play, as in her last couple of plays, Hellman condemns the characters for taking wrong decisions because of self-delusion and lack of self-knowledge. Alex loves Cassie but when the latter rejects his proposal, he immediately marries Emily whom he does not love. Cassie feels cheated and intending to hurt Emily, carries on her relationship

with Alex. However, the fact is, neither of the women loves Alex passionately but they exhibit it to hurt each other. Alex who is an appeaser, both in his political and private lives, tries to appease both the women. Therefore, Hellman's moral protest against the trio is implied and also justified.

In *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman depicts two mismatched couples - Nick Denery and Nina Denery; Benjamin Griggs and Rose Griggs. Both these couples are in their middle age and after several years of living together, both men find themselves incompatible with their respective spouses and are now determined to walk out of their failed marriages. Nick loved Constance in his youth, however, felt enamoured of wealthy Nina and ultimately married her. Nina is a lovable lady yet her flamboyant husband who is a frustrated person openly flirts with other women. It is because of his wrong choice that he does not feel passionate about his wife. Nina also sometimes feels fed up of her feckless and flirtatious husband, yet her inherent goodness always forbids her to leave him.

Ben Griggs and Rose Griggs marriage is not based on money altogether but on the wrong choice. Ben is a sober, sedate, sane and seasoned gentleman, however, his wife is a total contrast to his reserved self. Rose is a childish, garrulous, flirtatious and a silly socialite. Therefore, their incompatibility with each other is quite obvious. Nevertheless, like the Denerys, duty is the only thread that holds the Griggses' marriage together. These claustrophobic marriages reveal the sour and specific forms of interdependence that keep unhappy couples together. Hellman's sarcastic yet very realistic portrayal of these marriages forces one to think that the Griggses and the Denerys are representatives of countless couples in any society of the world today. Besides highlighting the unhappy married love, the play also suggests an instance of aberrant love in Frederick's latent homosexual attachment with his writer friend, Payson.

In Hellman's last play, *Toys in the Attic*, there are again a couple of married couples, Julian and Lily, and the other couple which remains offstage throughout is Cyrus Warkins and Charlotte. Julian's love for his wife is selfless and normal and he holds no grudge against her, despite the difference of age and social status between them. However, there are suggestions in the play that he was lured with money to marry Lily by her wealthy mother Mrs. Prine. Just before their marriage, Julian's sister Anna needed an expensive eye operation which the middle-class Berniers could not possibly afford, therefore, Mrs. Prine obliged Julian by taking care of all the expenses of the operation. Not only this, she even gave \$ 10,000 as a wedding gift to Julian and Lily. Lily also doubts her mother that she bribed Julian to marry her, and thus, ruins not only her happy married life but also makes Julian lose his fortune because she foolishly suspects him that he is carrying on an affair with his ex-mistress, Mrs. Charlotte Warkins, who is

incidentally behind Julian's new fortune. Hellman's moral protest against such naive women who unnecessarily suspect their husbands is implied. Julian wins the sympathy of the audiences because they know that he is wholeheartedly devoted to his wife, Lily. However, Charlotte and Warkins relationship is that of dove and hawk relationship; Charlotte being the victim and Warkins her victimizer. Their bond recalls to mind the Lavinia - Marcus relationship in *Another Part of the Forest*. Warkins is a typical representative of a male-dominated and authoritarian society which derives pleasure in tormenting its women just because they are women, and therefore, worthy of subordination and chastisement. Hellman's social and moral protest against such a patriarchal society is evident because her portrayal of Charlotte as a pathetic woman arouses our sympathy for her, whereas, her inhuman and unscrupulous husband deserves disgust and indignation.

There is no dearth of deviant love in the play. For instance, Charlotte Warkins' unhappy married life, and Julian's late marriage force them to indulge in pre-and extra-marital relations with each other. Similarly, Carrie's confirmed spinsterhood can be held responsible for nurturing incestuous feelings for her brother, Julian. She even dislikes Julian's wife for expressing sexual-intimacy with her brother. As a result, during their stay at the sisters' place in New Orleans, Julian observes complete abstinence from sex with Lily, which she takes otherwise. Another instance of aberrant love in the play is Mrs. Prine's open live-in relationship with her mulatto chauffeur-lover, Henry Simpson. Display of deviant love relationships may appear thrilling on the stage but in the real-life, they are a cause of disgust and agony.

CONCLUSION

Hellman's plays are written in the realistic mode, as distinguished from theatrical. In the introduction to her first collection of four plays, she wrote, "the realistic form has interested me most". Needless to say, when she wrote this, she meant more than stating plainly her aesthetic position. Hence, her plays become all the more interesting as they deal with contemporary yet timeless issues like love and marriage, and allow the readers to closely analyse and scrutinize the issues raised by her. Indeed, it is their timelessness and critical and social involvement which gives to her plays their special urgency and appeal.

Although Hellman does not give any direct solution to the issues raised by her in her plays, yet she does awaken our sensibility and prompts us to think over these issues seriously and to find out a solution for ourselves and thus making ourselves better human beings. She does not preach as Shaw and Galsworthy do, nevertheless, in her protests, there is a note of morality, a hidden message for those who

are sensitive and sensible enough to read her works between the lines.

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