

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*: The Destructive Scandal Mongering, the Smear and the Big Lie.

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America's most talented, energetic playwright, Lillian Hellman, came to prominence at the age of twenty-nine with the brilliant success of her play, *The Children's Hour*. Being a moralist, Hellman was preoccupied with the evil in man as an individual and in society overall. The play is based on a narrative account of an 1810 Scottish trial. Often critics mistake the theme of the play as the terms used are suggestive of lesbianism or homosexuality. But in fact the true theme deals with, as Falk Doris points out:

...the destructive scandal –mongering –the smear and the big lie. It deals with the power of the old and rich to rob- to despoil – others of livelihood and life.¹

The Evil, here, is in the form of a big destructive lie that takes away lives of the innocent teachers, so Hellman challenges the pseudo conventions of the contemporary society and accuses those who believe those to be right. To lie is a condemnable act in religious, ethical and moral context. Martin Buber says:

The lie is the specific evil which man has introduced into nature. All our deeds of violence and our misdeeds are only as it were a highly bred

development of what this and that creature of nature is also to achieve in its own way. But the lie is our own invention, different in kind from every deceit that the animal can produce. In a lie the spirit practices treason against itself. 2

Hellman believes in the same thought that lying is a kind of treason not only against others', souls but also against our own soul.

The play is set in and around a Country Boarding School for girls run by two friends – Karen Wright and Martha Dobie. They have been successful in fulfilling their cherished youthful dream of private school for young girls. One of the students, Mary Tilford, undergoes punishment for her lying habit and being insulted by it she again creates a lie and wrecks the lives of the two headmistresses. Amelia Tilford is the financial benefactor of the school, who has been convinced by her granddaughter, Mary, that the two teachers - Martha and Karen- are lovers. Mary also compels her classmate, Rosalie to back up her accusation. Mary's chief evidence rests on an overheard conversation between Martha and her aunt, Lily Mortar, during which the pending marriage between Karen and Joe Cardin is discussed. Her aunt is dependent on her, Martha knows her aunt's unfitness and asks her to leave the school. Lily Mortar accuses Martha for her jealousy towards Karen and Joe's relationship. She says, "I know what I know ...She likes anybody else." (p.63)

At that time Martha listens a noise at the door and finds some eavesdropping girls , who promptly report to Mary what they have overheard .Mary gets the clue to avenge her teachers as her teachers always accused her for lying and creates a story of lesbian relationship between the teachers . Mary persuades her grandmother to remove

them from the school. Consequently, thoroughly convinced Mrs. Tilford withdraws her financial support and the school closes down due to bankruptcy, in the course of time. Overcome with disgust she telephones the shocking news to all the parents. Karen and Martha are thoroughly baffled, they don't understand what the commotion is about and they go on asking questions to Mary. Mary falters but holds control and finally lies that it was another girl who saw them. Disgusted with lies of Mary, teachers challenge Mrs. Tilford that they will sue her for libel. Unfortunately, the only witness, Mrs. Mortar, is away from the school as she has been fired by Martha, previously. When requested she refuses to come as she doesn't want to indulge in the scandal. Finally, both the teachers are defeated in their 'libel'. When the last act opens they are publicly branded and they hide themselves in a vacant school.

Joe, the fiancé of Karen, apparently shows sympathy towards them yet Karen knows that somewhere in the corner of his mind lurks suspicion regarding the relationship between herself and Martha. So, he clearly tells her about their fair relationship and sends her away as she is convinced that her relationship with Joe is over. Martha confesses to Karen regarding her true nature that she really loved her "the way they said" (p.62). Being guilty she feels that she has ruined Karen's life and realizes that they can no longer stay together. Martha steps quietly into the next room and shoots herself. A few moments later, Mrs Tilford herself appears and tells Karen about Mary and how she had compelled Mary to confess her lies. Now Mrs. Tilford wants to amend the things including public apology but it is too late, Martha has ended her life by this time.

The most notable character in the play, Mary Tilford, is the ‘mover and shaker’ of the play. She has been centralized in the play in such a manner that she appears like a puppeteer. The strings of two teachers’ lives are in her hands and she plays with them at her feet, at last letting them loose when things are beyond control. She dominates the first two acts with her cunning and guile. Like a sorceress she entraps the teachers in inescapable clutches. She does not know how her lie has volcanic power which destroys everything in its way. She has been presented as a perverse child, a vicious maid, all the minute details of child’s mind have been observed deliberately by Hellman while drawing her character. She has tremendous capacity for lying, and her satanic, poisonous sting proves to be a lethal one. Many critics describe Mary in different ways. C.W.E. Bigsby thinks that Mary represents ‘simple malignity’ which:

...functions rather too unambiguously in the play, a malevolence which exists not so much as a psychological truth; as an image of implacable hostility which is then compounded by those incapable of conceiving the existence of pure evil³

In the words of Atkinson, Mary is ...a miniature genius of wickedness.”⁴ R.C. Reynolds thinks that Mary can “Spread suspicion and destroy anyone or anything she wants to in the name of morality.”⁵

The evil in the form of Mary’s lie is the fundamental element of the destruction which is supported by other destructive elements. At the time of revival of the play Hellman said about Mary:

...on the stage a person is twice as villainous, as, say in a novel. When I read that story I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her In her case I saw her as a bad character but never outside life. It's the result of lie that makes her so dreadful this is really not a play about lesbianism but about a lie. The bigger the lie the better, as always. ⁶

Hellman's strong abomination for lying sarcastically comes forth through the statement.

Thus, the writer herself admits that the evil found in Mary is not out of life. Obviously, it is confronted by good in Karen and Martha. Mary represents evil in many forms, her lies, pretexts and guiles are full of evil potential. Mary's superego which is diseased and corrupt overpowers righteous way of life. All her expressions of aggression and all her forms of tyranny and dominance are outcome of her too much self-importance which is unknowingly reared by Mrs. Tilford. Mary's treatment to various characters like Martha, Karen, Rosalie and Peggy, is terrifying. She uses Rosalie's weakness of stealing bracelet as a weapon against her. She blackmails Rosalie and bends her according to her will. According to R.C. Reynolds Mary's character has an allegorical significance at one level she imitates her elders like Lily Mortar:

But on another level, Mary symbolizes something more than simply a particularly evil child who uses violence and threatens to get her way. She also stands for something pernicious in society, and element which is innocently disguised as "right" but in reality is utterly destructive. It

can spread suspicion and destroy anyone or anything it want to in the name of morality⁷

Hellman also accuses society as a guilty factor, responsible for the total doom of innocence; the pseudo ethical values fostered in the minds of the society members:

...make them unable to justify right and wrong good and evil judiciously. Evil , in the society always , forces its way into positions of trust among the conservative stratum of the social order and perverts whatever good it finds there ...⁸

Likewise, Martha and Karen, the good characters, are considered by the society members as bad ones. Both of them try to swim against the forceful stream of pseudo values established by society but it results into futility. Judith Olauson feels:

...the two women seem to personify Hellman's view of hopeless struggles of human beings who contend against evils, as well as the unresolved incompatibilities of human nature, particularly women's nature with society.⁹

His hopeless struggle has taken place due to the contradiction in value system, and moral system. In fact, it is a struggle between self-established value system of the society and truly moral system observed by teachers.

Evil in the form of maliciousness of the child is just a beginning. Only lie would have been futile if the elders in the play would have been judicious and sympathetic. If they had tired to dig out the truth, the force of evil in Mary would have been nullified. On the contrary, evil in Mary gets so overpowering that the sense of justice in Mrs. Tilford and the parents has been replaced by hasty unreasonable judgments. Mrs.

Tilford's decision to remove the teachers is not only merciless but also insane; her suggestions to parents to take away their daughters from school, her attempt to convince Joe not to marry Karen for her having unnatural relationship with Martha which consequently results in Joe and Karen's break-up, Martha's shocking revelation about her true nature are the factors responsible for the final destruction. The various relationships in the play are destroyed in the end. Faiths, love, Sanctity are the basic factors behind every good relationship, but all these words seem hollow in the contact of evil. Mary's lie goes beyond logical human understanding and the irresponsible behavior of the elders widens the gap leading to destruction.

Lily Mortar and Mrs. Tilford are two wrong-doers and they are unaware of it up to end of the play. There are two ironic situations in the play which enhance the tragic effect. Evil is present in both the characters in its varied forms. Firstly, Lily Mortar, who is the real source of lie, returns when the things are beyond repairs. If she would have remained present at the time of the hearing of the libel suit, the situation would have been amended but at that time she was moving around, as a result of it both the teachers lose the case. Secondly, Mrs. Tilford, who unknowingly supports evil in Mary, comes to her senses when the bracelet of Helen is found in Rosalie's room. She comes to Karen to help her by making a public apology. She has realized by this time 'how evil Mary is!' but the time cannot be reversed. In all these happenings, Mary, the cunning destroyer, remains unharmed. Instead Mrs. Tilford gets punishment when Karen suggests sending the child away, who has something wrong in her.

Along with lying, Mary has all the evil aspects of character that a villain possesses. She is an opportunist liar, who overpowers other characters by her bluffing, cheating, blackmailing, threatening, and harming them mentally and physically as well. She performs role of a thorough vicious character. She knows how to manipulate the weakness of morally feeble character for the fulfillment of her selfish purpose. As in the case of Rosalie she knows that Rosalie has stolen the bracelet so she blackmails her, she takes disadvantage of the overheard discussion between Martha and Mrs. Mortar and plays much guile against both the teachers. She is a coxer, a flatterer, a blackmailer and in a way a destroyer. As R.C. Reynolds puts it she has the element which

Often forces its way into position of trust among the conservative stratum of the social order and perverts whatever good it finds there, Mary points a particularly sinister aspect of “the enemy within”- it’s childlike quality – which evokes trust and even pity from those who are duped by it.¹⁰

Lily Mortar’s, symbolic comment, “one master passion in the breast Swallows all the rest” (p.9) is quite applicable to one lie of Mary that has shattered everything innocent and beautiful. Although, Hellman has commented on the play as it is not about a time or a movement and it is a story yet it is apparent that at the end of the play she points a finger towards the society. Her anger against the passivity of the society clearly comes forth. As Judith Olason puts it, “The situation is left unresolved as it is irresolvable, reflecting as profound a human conflict as the more universal struggle between good and evil”.¹¹

Through the play, Hellman fosters an idea that is, ‘mercy is the ultimate good whereas merciless cruelty is the ultimate evil.’ Mary’s mercilessness is so overpowering that she does not care about other people and the same carelessness accelerates panic. Mary also appears to be a narcissist who indulges in herself so much that she does not think beyond herself and aggression towards others – creating victims within society becomes rampant in her case.

As Lillian Hellman feels strong abomination for the passivity in society, she is also concerned with the universal problem of human evil, gossip and scandal mongering. The shocking power of gossip and the diseased nature of evil make Lillian restless. The members of the society are indulged so much in self righteousness that they neglect the truth. Judith Olason feels:

The ascendance of the wickedness which springs from the lie of the child is weighed against the descending capacity for the truth to survive, with relentless momentum deception outbalances truth and the irreparable damage is done to the two main characters.¹²

Hellman’s rage against the moral disease of lying is prominently reflected in the play through Mary’s character. Moreover, the social injustice makes Hellman restless and creates great stirs that leaves permanent scar in the lives of the characters and in the minds of the readers as well. The social statement is apparent in the play which questions social passivity which wrongly permits evil to take control over good. Hellman points her finger at the society for its inability to make justice. In a way through such characters she wants to show what is wrong in society and life and how the society can lead towards betterment if such wrong is terminated in time.

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