

Gender Bias in the Plays of Lillian Hellman and Clare Boothe

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Abstract

When the women were accorded the franchise in 1920, it was thought that they had been given everything they could aspire for. The Great Depression of the 1930s and then the Second World War moved what were considered “women’s issues” to the back burner, while the Cold War period ushered in a reactionary attitude toward gender roles as well as politics. Economics, global conflicts and domestic conservatism combined to make the years from 1930 to 1960 more unfavourable for women playwrights than the beginning of the century had been for dramatists like Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Zona Gale, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Sophie Treadwell. Except for few female critics like Rosamund Gilder, Edith Isaacs, Mary McCarthy and Kappo Phelan the entire critical establishment was totally male and it still continues to be so. The male critics’ attitude towards women playwrights were at times condescending and at times outright hostile. They put down women dramatists as recorders of routine and commonplace, never aspiring to lofty ideals and thoughts.

Women writing for the stage during this period faced such common challenges as the notion that women had gotten all the rights they needed when they won the right to vote, the assumption that economic depression and global war had nothing to do with gender issues, and finally the conviction that all the nation’s problems would be solved if the cosmos were returned to its “rightful” order: men at work, women at home, children in the nursery. Despite the heavy odds, female playwrights like Clare Boothe and Lillian Hellman went on to make their mark in the world of theatre even as the theater remained an uphill battle for women. The plays, *The Women* and *The Little Foxes* can be taken as the representative of the time and they are also highly representative of their creators Clare Boothe and Lillian Hellman respectively, who revealed through these plays their views on gender bias in a male dominated world.

Key Words: *American Drama, Women Playwrights, Gender Bias, Feminism, Clare Boothe, Lillian Hellman, The Little Foxes,*

The Great Depression and the World War II caused a backlash against the economic, social, and political gains made by women from 1930 and continued till 1960. There remained stagnation after gaining the right to vote and the participation of women in the field of industry and education dwindled. In general, women were discouraged from working during the Depression, wooed into the labor force during World War II, and encouraged to “retire” after the war (AFP 101).

Lillian Hellman and Clare Boothe were the two famous women playwrights of the thirties. Lillian Hellman is the sole woman considered a major playwright during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, an era when Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams reigned (*AFP* 104). Yet they were also diametrically opposite to each other. Hellman acknowledges that "there is no possible basis for comparison except that we are women dramatists with success to our credits" (*CLH* 10). Boothe was more traditional and conservative while Hellman was fiercely liberal. While Boothe remained within the system and pursued her political goals by becoming Representative in Congress, ambassador, and member of a President council, Hellman remained an outsider, attacking the system vehemently and the closest she came to the congress was when she appeared before the House of Un-American Activities Committee wherein she famously declined to "cut my (her) conscience to suit this year's fashion" (*CLH* 226).

The critics and political opponents of Boothe undermined her literary achievements attributing it to her feminine appeal. In 1939 *Scribner*, Milton McKaye wrote a long profile of Boothe as "the glamour girl of letters, the most beautiful living playwright." Ironically, her contemporary Hellman simply suffered the opposite accusation: that her drive and ambition were simply compensation for her lack of conventional beauty. In his biography of the playwright, Carl Rollyson describes her as having "the face of a national monument...In later years, her craggy face resembled one of the facades etched in stone on Mount Rushmore" and suggests that she used sexual aggressiveness to overcome her cosmetic imperfections:

In the biography's index there are twelve page references for Hellman's "physical appearance" but only seven under the heading "place in the American theater"- a startling ratio for America's most eminent female dramatist. Damned if they fulfilled society's expectation for women and damned if they didn't, Boothe and Hellman inevitably harbored deep ambivalence about women and gender roles. (*PAW* Introduction XV)

Clare Boothe derived her writing strength from her acid social comedy and witty dialogue, while Lillian Hellman's power lay in her strongly dramatic characters and fierce moral indignation. Boothe embraces the feminine role but fine tunes it to use it as a weapon in the fight against the society and men at large. Her women characters hone on their glamour and feminine appeal making them a heady combination and absolutely deadly too. Hellman attacks head on and her characters use their intelligence and determination to get even with men. Despite the difference

in their treatment, both the plays share a common thread. They were overwhelming success on the Broadway.

The continuing popularity of *The Women* and *The Little Foxes* over the years is a tribute to their theatrical virtues, yet their success is at least partly due to the fact that some critics and audience members believe they have found their misogyny confirmed in plays by women writers. From a feminist perspective, *The Women* is the most problematic, for the protagonist Mary Haines is scarcely a model of independence and intelligence and the audience get easily deluded and believe that Boothe is showing the way woman *always* behave rather than revealing how patriarchal communism turns them into adversaries who must use their bodies to compete for wealthy husbands. Similarly, *The Little Foxes* is often taken as the parable of a woman who is monstrous because she values money, power and freedom over family. Only in recent years have critics begun to acknowledge the depth of Hellman's analysis of capitalism and the sexism inherent in that system, a system that grants choices to Oscar Hubbard but denies them to his far more capable sister.

The Women and *The Little Foxes* are direct or indirect attacks on a system that fail to provide food for starving families and living wages for working women. *The Women* shows the chasm between the working women and the socialites who employ them, while *The Little Foxes* moves back to the turn of the century to reveal how those like the Hubbards got rich by fleecing the poor Whites and Blacks by them the minimum wages.

Boothe and Hellman have revealed their anger against the skewed society through the characters of their plays. Hellman opines: "It's very hard for women, hard to get along, to support themselves, to live with some self-respect. And in fairness, women have made it hard for other women. I think some men give more than women give" (*CLH* 136).

In *The Women*, Mary Haines struggles to be a perfect housekeeper, a docile wife, a loving mother, a popular socialite and still be an interesting companion for her husband. She has to juggle many hats and succeed in everything which is clearly impossible. The women in Boothe's play, despite their riches and comforts are always insecure of losing their position to younger and more attractive upstarts. Basically, it is not a fight with the opposite sex but mostly among themselves to keep their position intact. They try every feminine trick in trade to seduce men and still have to be innocent.

Hellman, in another of her interview with Bill Moyers in 1974, comments on women empowerment as:

I believe in women's liberation...I think it all comes down to whether or not you can support yourself as well as a man can support himself and whether there's enough money to make certain decisions for yourself rather than independence. (CLH 149)

Both Mary of *The Women* and Regina of *The Little Foxes* had to be manipulative because the society doesn't allow them to form their individual identity. Reduced to being dependant on man for their survival they leave no stones upturned to achieve their ambition. Although Boothe outwardly spews venom at these artificial women who are spineless and manipulative she is in fact laying bare the distorted society that has made the woman think about herself as an object of gratification than being an intelligent and creative human. While the rich women constantly prune themselves to hold on to their husband's attention, the condition of the poor women was all the more pathetic. They had to work hard to survive and still felt insecure especially, after they have lost their youth and glamour. Therefore even while they are young, they try to seduce a rich married man hoping for an easy life.

To please MAN – either as husbands, lovers or bosses seem to be the sole occupation of the women and their every thought, word and action revolves around him. In the play, Mary Haines and her upper class friends constantly go to the beauty parlor to keep themselves young and they also do various physical exercises to remain slim and attractive. Still, they are paranoid about losing their husbands to some young, attractive gold-digger. Yet, their lives are shown to be complete and blissful only if it revolves around their husbands and children. The intelligent one among this group Nancy Blake who is also a writer is considered to be abnormal and she says ruefully, “I am what nature abhors, I'm a virgin – a frozen asset (TW 75). She thinks her cleverness and intelligence makes her less appealing to men. Elsewhere she says, “Practically, nobody ever misses a clever woman” (TW 83). Although she travels all over the world as a part of her profession, she still feels wistful about her independence and is considered inferior to the married women in her group.

Crystal Ellen, a sales girl of the perfume counter in Saks, under the pretext of helping Stephen Haines selects a perfume for his wife, bowls him over with her attractive attitude.

Smitten by the charming Crystal, Haines puts her up in a distant apartment and spends nights with her lying to his wife Mary that he has late night meetings at office. The play is about how plain Mary manipulates and wins back her husband. The play exposes the fickle mind of men which seems to be a generic trait that transcends class. So, even Mary's cook's husband is seen flirting with Jane and the other maids in the kitchen. But, for his wife, "except for women, he's a good man" (TW 87) and she blames Jane for his bad behavior.

The playboy nature of man is glossed over and the wives are ever ready to take them back with love. The notion that it is a man's world is drummed into the woman even while she is a girl. Accordingly, Miss. Fordyce, the governess for the Haines children, Mary and Stevie constantly rebukes Mary to be polite and obedient while she deliberately spoils Stevie by pampering him. However Mary is adamant and refuses to be a lady. In her own innocent way she understands that the sentimental and emotional women are easily controlled by men who at the same time are more adventurous and enjoy all the fun. The little girl, Mary represents the next generation that would slowly come out of this Fool's paradise.

It is the older generation as represented by Mrs. Mary Haines' mother that completely acknowledges the supremacy of men and doesn't find anything wrong with their attitude at all. So, when Mary confides about Stephen's affair to her mother, the latter advises her to let things be. In fact, Mrs. Morehead considers Stephen's behavior to be perfectly normal and tries to justify his attitude:

Stephen is a man, He's been married twelve years...Stephen's tired of himself. Tired of feeling the same things in himself year after year. Time comes when every man's got to feel something new – when he's got to feel young again, just because he's growing old. ...No, dear, a man has only escape from his old self: to see a different self – in the mirror of some women's eyes. (TW 92)

And as long as he has not given any of Mary's things to the new mistress and takes care of her children and has given her the societal and financial security she should not have any complaints regarding him. But Mary's hurt that Stephen has preferred another woman and her pride makes her leave the house and her children. This only helps Stephen to bring Crystal out of closet and she lives openly in Mary's house. Ironically, no one sympathizes with Mary. Women especially consider her to be proud and stupid to have walked out of marriage. Maggie, the new cook of Haines household puts it succinctly:

She's (Mary) is indulging a pride she ain't entitled to. Marriage is a business of taking care of a man and rearing his children. It ain't meant to be perpetual honeymoon. How long would any husband last if he was supposed to go on acting forever like a red-hot Clark Gable? What's the difference if he don't love her? (TW 112)

Even Stephen's female co-workers have little sympathy for Mary. This is plainly evident from the attitude of Miss Watts, his secretary and Miss Hummerback a co-worker. They are jealous of Mary who needn't work for her survival and still doesn't feel grateful for her upkeep by her husband. In fact Miss Watts is downright scornful to her: "He'd (Stephen) have gotten further without her. Everything big that came up, he was too cautious, because of her and the kids" (TW 115).

On the other hand she even appreciates his new dalliance which has made him more energetic: "I don't butt into his private affairs. Oh, I hold no brief for Allen. But I must say knowing *her* gave him a new interest in his work. Before her, he was certainly going stale. That had me worried" (TW 115).

But all the independence and identity of a working woman pales before the respect that a married woman is accorded in the society for as Miss Hummerback says:

I wish I could get a man to foot my bills. I'm sick and tired, cooking my own breakfast, sloshing through the rain at 8 A.M., working like a dog. For what? Independence? A lot of independence you have on women's wages. I'd chuck it like that for a decent, or an indecent, home. (TW 116)

Interestingly, Lillian Hellman, a thorough professional, in one of her interview with Stephanie de Pue echoes a similar view:

I think women almost have to be more sort of interested in a personal life than men have to be...I think women, no matter, how liberated they are, feel more pressed to look for a personal life, whether it's a husband or a lover or a house or children or whatever it is, than men feel pressed to. (CLH 188)

At times women become coldly efficient and unfeminine like Miss Watts who considers her office to be her home and herself an office-wife. She makes herself indispensable to Haines and gets her sense of self-worth through it. As she puts it: "I relieve him of a thousand foolish details. I remind him of things he forgets, including, very often these days, his good opinion of himself. I

never cry and I don't nag. I guess I *am* the office-wife. And a lot better off than Mrs. Haines. He'll never divorce me!" (TW 116).

Mary and Crystal fight for Stephen – who incidentally is shown as the victim in this vicious woman eats woman world. The simple and virtuous Mary rises to the occasion and becomes devious towards the end. She wins back her husband by exposing the wanton Crystal to Stephen - the vixen like Crystal who is not happy with the much older Stephen - and is casting her net for younger lovers like Buck. No wonder she is praised by her tribe thus: "Mary, What a dirty female trick! Yes! From the great, noble little Woman! You're just a cat like all the rest of us!" (TW 154). Thus, Boothe portrays woman as a temptress out to lure men by snaring them and poor men fall for them again and again unable to see through their feminine tactics.

If Boothe is apologetic and embarrassed to portray women as a predator in the man's world, Lillian Hellman comes down heavily on women and makes them as vicious as men to give them what they deserve. Regina Giddens, of the *The Little Foxes*, has taken her place in the annals of literary figures like Lady Macbeth. Yet, on deeper analysis the play is about capitalism and sexism that results in the denial of choice to the more capable daughter, because she is a woman when compared to her incompetent brothers.

Regina Giddens is the ambitious sister of Ben and Oscar Hubbards, whose father Marcus, in spite of his incestuous nature leaves the entire property to his sons, leaving her with little option but to marry the weak Horace Giddens which forms the story of *Another Part of the Forest*, a prequel to *The Little Foxes*. Thus, Regina Giddens, the highly intelligent, independent and strong willed woman has to suffer the continued dominance of her father, brothers and husband all through her life. And unlike the women of Boothe's plays who deploy feminine charm to get what they want, she revolts against them directly pitting against them her using her intelligence to give them back as hard as she gets. Lillian Hellman, true to her nature has portrayed Regina Giddens as a tough as a nail character devoid of feminine sentiments.

In contrast to her is Birdie Hubbard, Oscar's wife, the floundering, feminine, docile paragon of virtue who completely gives in to the whims and fancies of her husband and still gets treated like a doormat. In the play, Ben and Oscar have got into a business agreement with Marshal, a northerner to set up cotton factory in Linnet, their home in deep South. Regina too, would like to have a share in the business but the brothers don't want any woman, and especially

their sister. So, she ends up blackmailing them and bargains hard with them using her husband as cover. But even her husband turns against her and she eventually allows him to die so that she can claim her share. All through the play it is a battle of wits, where she has to try every means to emerge victorious. Unlike Mary Haines of *The Women*, Regina is no lover of man. She hates them all, and manipulates them for her own benefit. She can hardly be blamed because, she has always seen the men in her family behave in that manner. Growing up under a tyrant father, a weak mother and two mean brothers she learned very early to be ruthless in her fight for survival. She is unabashedly ambitious and unapologetic about her attitude. She is outright scheming and doesn't pretend feminine niceties in her dealings with men. In fact, if not for her gender, she would have bequeathed all the property of her shrewd father and she would have been a successful business woman than her brothers. Her ruthlessness makes her almost masculine like Lady Macbeth who daringly coaxes Macbeth to kill Duncan.

Horace, her husband, who is more sensitive appears almost effeminate and pales before Regina. In fact, Regina is contemptuous about Horace for his lack of ambition and drive in life. She accuses him to be a small-town clerk forever. She had married him not out of love but out of loneliness because all the male members of her family were busy with business and her mother was too weak to be of any importance. And being a woman, marriage was her only means of getting independence and identity. She "wanted the world. Then, and then – (*smiles*) Papa died and left the money to Ben and Oscar" (*TLF* 222). Yet, Horace is no match for Regina, who almost idolizes her father in an incestuous manner, and she is completely disappointed:

It took me a little while to find out I had made a mistake. As for you – I don't know. It was almost as if I couldn't stand the kind of man you were- (*smiles, softly*) I used to lie there at night, praying you wouldn't come near- ... I couldn't understand that anybody could be such a soft fool. That was when I began to despise you (*TLF* 223)

But she needed the social security and money that he provided and was hoping that she would be able to get rid of him:

I told you I married you for something. It turned out it was only for this. (*carefully*) This wasn't much what I wanted, but it was something. I never thought about it much, but if I had I'd have known that you would die before I would. But I couldn't have known that you would get heart trouble so early and so bad. I'm lucky, Horace. I've always been lucky. (*TLF* 223)

Being calculative she waits for Horace to die and live the life of a rich widow. Ben warns her again and again not to be ambitious and shrewd like a man but to be humble and docile like a woman: “Horace has already clipped your wings and very wittily. Do I have to clip them, too? (*smiles at her*) You’d get farther with a smile, Regina, I’m a soft man for a woman’s smile” (*TLF* 229).

Ben and Oscar are outright thugs who cheat and have amassed wealth in an unjust manner. Yet, they want Regina to be angelic and self-sacrificing. Ben roars: “Greedy! What a greedy girl you are! You want so much of everything!” (*TLF* 229). Hellman thus exposes the double-standards of the society which praise men for being ambitious, arrogant, ruthless and can even have them be promiscuous, but for woman it is considered to be sacrilege. Elsewhere, the morally corrupt Ben is seen defining good girls should not be worldly.

Regina almost becomes a male monster ruthlessly eliminating her femininity which is hardly a laudable decision. Feminism is not copying men to their last vice. Nor does it mean completely doing away with the sensitivity, empathy and nurture which forms the core of femininity. An irate Hellman, slams the society for reducing Regina to the position of a predator, because if she is passive like Birdie then also she is victimized and mercilessly cast aside. Thus, Hellman portrays the two extremities of women and the little choice they have in surviving in this world. They are the products of the society they inhabit and at any point of time a woman is influenced by so many issues that doesn’t even register in the mind of a man:

The Little Foxes is a drama of women’s lives in which Hellman focuses on such concerns as economics, women’s status as chattel to be disposed of at the discretion of the patriarchy, and the convergence of race and class as well as gender in determining one’s destiny. (*AFP* 114)

Hellman makes Addie, the Black nurse to be the mouthpiece of her ideal: “There are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. And other people who stand around and watch them eat it. (*softly*) Sometimes I think it ain’t right to stand and watch them do it” (*TLF* 217). Hellman’s reference here need not be capitalists – they might also refer to all those men who with their patriarchal attitude have forced women to raise the cudgels. When a woman is not cherished for the precious femininity that she represents then she has no other option but to ruthlessly deface her femininity and stand up to the man. A Birdie pushed too far

would come back as Regina. Hellman opts for the ideal Alexandra, representing the new generation –loving and caring enough to her loved ones but ruthless in her stand against injustice even if it is her own mother, Regina. As for a man, only a sensitive loving man can raise a strong stable woman who can make sound decisions for herself and others. Thus, Horace is the true man who doesn't feel insecure or shy away from standing by his daughter against all odds. Ben and Oscar are not men but animals who manipulate and abuse the women in their lives. In fact, it only reveals their insecurity, which makes them shout and fight for respect that can never be theirs in the woman's world. *The Little Foxes* is a complex drama, combining social themes of corruption and greed with focus on the wrongs done to women and blacks by a patriarchy determined to retain its power. (AFP 118]

Both Clare Boothe and Lillian Hellman, consciously or unconsciously, may have been catering to Broadway tastes by embedding their critique of gender roles in plays that could be “read” in conventional ways. More likely, both women had ambivalent feelings about their own sex, born and raised as they were in a world in which women were meant to be seen and not heard, an ideal to which neither aspired. Hellman in particular was often hardest on characters – White middle class women – who almost resembled herself, as if she were angry at them for fulfilling society's expectations. It is easy to look at these plays now and wish that Boothe had made it clearer that women are not “natural enemies,” that Hellman had been more sympathetic to meek women. But these plays were written in years which, in both gender and racial terms, were overwhelmingly conservative. The challenge of contemporary feminist critics is to recognize the many levels on which these works operate, the contents in which they were written and performed, and the changing relationship between audiences and these plays over the past half century.

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