

MISS LILLIAN HELLMAN'S LITERARY FRAMEWORK: A GLIMPSE ON SOCIO-CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ETHOS OF THE 1920S AND 1930S IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

PANKAJ KUMAR SINGH

Assistant Professor, Applied Science and Humanities Department RRIMT, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

A fearless and self-reliant lady, Miss Lillian Hellman (1905-1983), was a leading voice in the American theatre in the 1930s. She is by birth a southerner, a Jew, and female; by profession a playwright, memoirist, essayist, and teacher; by political persuasion a liberal, a controversial one. She is an often angry, ironic, and witty commentator on her time. This paper is devoted to explore the socio-cultural, economic, and spiritual milieu in which Lillian Hellman was placed and which shaped her mental make-up. The formative influences as a woman and playwright have also been taken into consideration. Miss Hellman, Perpetually concerned with the problem of human in her writings, tries to reveal the major miseries, sufferings, and tragedies in human life. They are engendered by evil. To make an in-depth study of Hellman's plays, first it warrants me to fashion a viable survey of the socio- cultural, economic and political ethos of the 1920s and 1930s, which formulates and shapes the literary framework for her. An editorial of the London Magazine pointed out that during the thirties "it was widely held view that poets, novelists and playwrights should be closely concerned in their writing with the fundamental political and social issues of their time."¹

KEYWORDS: Socio-Cultural, Economic

INTRODUCTION

The major agitating contemporary problems, which churned the minds of the creative authors, were the socio-cultural situations, the economic setback and events. They captured the minds of the authors and expanded the field of drama. Darwin's theory of evolution, Freud's psycho-analysis, the discoveries of science, the development of technology, the industrial revolution, Russian revolution, Marxist philosophy and the danger of Fascism and Nazism arrested the minds of the authors. These ideals, attitudes and institutions were the vital forces behind the dramatist on which Hellman was placed and wrote her plays. Hellman commenced her writings unlike the melancholy themes of Clifford Odets and the Marxist philosophy of Roger Lawson, because the audience and critics seem to be bored with such presentation. They began to look for fresher themes and newer approaches to social problems. Hellman was different both in her techniques and in her interpretations of social problems and managed to astound with her innovative style. Unlike Odets, she was not a "theatre person", and actor who desperately wished to write plays. Her desire to write drama is a curious one which is not fully explained either by her biographers, Richard Moody and Doris Falk, or by her own revelations in her autobiographical works.

The 1930s and 1920s

The 1930s in America were a period of turmoil and flux. This was an era of great social, economic, political, and

moral upheaval. However, there was a marked difference between the two decades: the 20s brought for the American nation great economic prosperity, whereas the 30s saw a nation in great economic depression struggling hard to alleviate the sufferings of its people. Though both periods are often contrasted, they are closely associated and our understanding of the 30s would be incomplete without the understanding of the 1920s. The 1920s are a decade of revolt in literature. Being the boom period, it reflected the mood of a prosperous nation, largely satisfied with things, as they had no any pressing major problems or anxieties to society except those relating to sexual freedom and man's sense of alienation. The period has been the period of breaking past identity, an era of lost orientation-the search for identity. The Americans found themselves chasing illusion, the dream of success. It brought economic independence for both men and women. In addition, there was a persistent talk of general prosperity everywhere:

Cities became bigger, building taller,
 Roads longer, fortunes greater,
 Automobiles faster, colleges larger,
 Night club gayer, crime more numerous
 And speculation more frizzled than ever
 Before in history.²

As the wealth flourished corruption also increased. Drug addiction, sex crimes social prejudices and gang murders had become common phenomena of the day. There was a clash between the labour and the capital. The business of America indulged in smuggling, black-marketing and corrupting the standards of trade and commerce. Sex had thrown other values into background. With the changing manners and moral, society also became corrupt in trade and commerce, and life became rootless and insecure. Success in business was the only norm in America. The 1930s in America were a period of turmoil and flux. It proved to be a period of great strain and drama. This was an era of great social, political, moral and spiritual upheaval and felt the worst economic depression in the history of America. In the *cataclysmic* year of 1929, a decade of economic expansion abruptly came to an end with stock market crash. The depression injured the American economy very seriously and ended the "get-rich-quick" dreams of millions of Americans. The leading capitalist country in the world became a land of hunger, unemployment, sickness and destitution. One of the worst impacts of the crash was to turn men into paupers. Thousands of Americans who had purchased stock "On margin" saw their savings wiped out in a matter of days. Baruch considered the public to be chiefly responsible for their own misfortune: "The stock market boom was a classic example of the madness of crowd."³

The depression exploded the American economy dangerously-factories, and mines were closed, banks and business menaced, prices and wages became low. Trouble was transmitted to the economy of some weak sectors like agriculture, foreign trade and commerce and the machine had stopped running. The great majority of these people were living on a reduced scale, the factory gates were blocked with crowd every day. Consequently, the depression reflected every sphere of life. Poverty, unemployment, the dwindling away of personal savings, working families faced with cruel threat of death of starvation. Housing problem was also very acute during the period of economic crisis. In New York homeless people slept in station, on park benches, and in Chicago thousands of homeless people slept on the grass of Grant Park. The condition of the farmers was also shaken. They were even unable to pay the taxes and debts.

The depression afflicted adversely the family relation, too. The man, who lost his job, also lost the respect from other members of his family, which he used to get when he was a breadwinner. The unemployed people developed a sense of dejection that led to a dreadful fear, inadequacy, which was one of the depression's commonest psychopathological results. In some parts of Europe, during the period after War I, the depression had also struck a fatal blow at liberalism and democracy, and paved the way for fascist ideology. The dramatists of 1930s were deeply anxious about the catastrophe brought about by the fascist ideology. American dramatists, far from being isolationist, produced anti-Nazi plays, too, during the 30s to show their protest against fascism. Writers like Hemingway, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson, S.N. Behrman, Lillian Hellman etc. stand against fascism at the cost of their lives to defend democracy.

Economic crisis produced so many crimes in the American society. Educated people as doctors, engineers, architects and actors became unemployed. Some of them could not find satisfactory job. The educated people who could not find job involved in crimes to earn money to support their family. Women had to go to prostitution. Thousands of students were compelled to leave schools. There was an "Ode to Higher Education" of which one variant went like this:

I sing in praise of college
Of M.A.'s and PhD's
But in pursuit of knowledge
We are starving by degrees.⁴

Another result of economic breakdown was that people's belief in democracy and capitalism was totally shaken. Economic pressures and imbalances entirely played an important role in shaping the minds of people and the whole outlook of life. Many young men and women were attracted toward communism. Marxism and communism seemed to them the most impressive means of fulfilling their desire. The depression also compelled the communist party to establish a strong position in the American capitalist soil. Communism, an instrument, which started the class war through labour movement, promised the working class people better wages and better conditions of life.

Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Before the scientific invention and the doctrine of evolution, man was supposed to be the child of Adam and Eve, a born sinner. He was completely at the mercy of the grace of God for his redemption and salvation. On the other hand, Darwin's theory of the Origin of species advanced the idea that the fittest would survive in the "struggle for existence", opposing the Biblical thought and collapsing many of the old bases of religious belief. By 1920s, Darwinism had become a main contemporary thought. It exposed an effective means for justification of the practice of capitalism and violence, which was a natural outcome of the Darwinian theory. It influenced the writings of the major playwrights of the 1920s. In *O'Neill's Desire under the Elms* (1924) Abbie murders her own child and Mr. Zero in Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) does his boss. They depict not only violence but also represent some of the scientific truth.

Having no specific social issues at hand, the dramatists of the 1920s tried desperately to apply the doctrines of Sigmund Freud and Darwin to their dramas. The history of the American playwrights was not very important part of American literature until the 20th century. By this time, there was already a considerable body of serious foreign plays and the ambitious American used realism, expressionism, Darwinism and so many powerful literary forces in their writings.

The dramatists of this age were experimenting various forms and techniques. Bamber Gascoigne remarks:

Most of the plays (of the twenties)
 Accepted simplicity that there was
 Nothing to be done, certainly nothing
 Specific. It was essentially a theatre of
 Inaction, a negative theatre⁵

Impact of Freudian Psychoanalysis

Freudian psychoanalysis had left a tremendous influence on almost all literary forms in the early 1920s. Sigmund Freud presented a new thought in the field of human behavior. He brought a new change in the understanding of human personality by his demonstration of the existence of the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious levels of the mind. Freudian psychology focussed the conflict of *id*, *ego* and *superego*. His theory introduced suppressed desires, obsessive compulsion, neurotic symptom, fixation and all mental processes. This new event in the field of psychology brought a tremendous change in the field of literature. Oedipus and Electra complexes had been freely discussed in the plays of the twentieth century.

The United States of America happened to be the leading capitalist power in the world. In the prewar imperialistic development, the U.S.A. becomes the world's most powerful industrial nation. The World War I implicated incalculable loss upon the European people, but it did not touch American continent. During the war, the country was in an extremely good position. In fact, the U.S.A. took advantage of the world-crisis to gain huge profits, supplying munitions, foodstuffs and raw materials to other nations. By 1920, the U.S.A. became the most flourishing industrial nation of the world.

Discoveries of Science and the Development of Technology

The rapid growth of the new branches of technology and American Industry, the scientific invention and discoveries crushed all the existing moral and social values. It brought about a new thinking and attitude. America grew richer and more prosperous by the day since 1920. In fact, Americans found themselves chasing illusion. While their lust for wealth and flesh goaded them into irresponsible act to the explosion of all moral and social belief, people became critical and questioning. Spiritual thought shattered under the heavy weight of all the deadly sins, which were active to break the peace and produce widespread depression, tension, jealousy and despair. With the result, the existence of God is totally avoided and religion, which so far has dominated man's life, achieves low ebb. Men started worshipping tools, machines and wealth. In this connection Harold Clurman writes:

This was a fantastic world we were
 Living in electric with energy, feverish
 With impulse, gigantic with invention.
 It was a world full of sharp curiosity
 and enormous activity. But it was a

Meaningless world just the same... it
Had no inside, it was empty... nothing
Tied the fast moving forces together, no
Governing principle, no aim, no deep
and final simplicity... There was no
quiet here. Man couldn't find himself.
He was perpetually on the go to a place
he didn't know, for a pleasure couldn't
enjoy, for purpose he didn't seek. Man
no longer understood his own nature,
his own dreams, even his own aptitude.⁶

Spiritual Barrenness and Moral Destruction

Spiritual barrenness and moral destruction was one of the main themes for the writer. These events brought a tremendous change in man's social behavior. Women broke away the shackles, which bound them to their homes and hearth. They became so much conscious of their rights that they asked for equality in all spheres of life. They refused to believe that they were different. Home-life was totally disturbed. Working at home, looking after their husbands and children meant loss of identity. They started using various comfortable house appliances in their kitchen and got plenty of leisure at their disposal. They chose to seek job elsewhere, which in turn gave them economic independence. The result was ego clashes. Each partner shirking his/her responsibility accused the other for the peace and harmony they had lost. Of women F. L. Allen has remarked: "the quest of slenderness, the flattening of the breasts, and the vogue of short skirts... All were signs that, consciously or unconsciously, women of this decade worshipped not merely youth: they wanted to be... men's casual and light hearted companions, not broadhipped mothers of the race but irresponsible playmates".⁷ With all this high-speed activity, the sexual relationship between men and women lost their morality and sacred touch. Satisfaction of the flesh was to be strived for to the destruction of all spiritual and moral harmony.

Theory of Fascism and Nazism

The 1930s were not only period of economic failure but also the fearful presentation of the theory of Fascism and Nazism. Fascism was not only something native to the soil of Italy or Germany, or for the matter of Europe, it was also global phenomena of the time. The Fascist or Nazi system is a system of direct dictatorship, which is ideologically marked by the "national idea". It is a system that resorts to the intellectual and other strata of society, and to corruption through the building up of a compact and well-paid hierarchy of Fascist units. The principal aim of Fascism and Nazism is to destroy the revolutionary labour-organization i.e. the communist section and leading wits of the proletariat. Fascism resorts to methods of open violence in order to break the power of the labour organization and those of the present poor, and capture power. Fascism is not merely an expression of the whole tendency of modern decaying capitalism. It is the final attempt to defeat the working class revolution and organize society on the basis of decay. Thus, Fascism believes in a system of a

government characterized by rigid one party dictatorship, in which all industrial activities are controlled by the state. No political opposition is allowed and hence discredited, because it is a challenge to individual liberty, equality, fraternity and peace in the world. It avoids human freedom. Fascism, in the view of the Fascist themselves, is a spiritual reality. It is described by them in terms of ideology. It represents the principle of "duty", of "order", of "authority", of "the state", of "the nation", of "history" etc. Mussolini finds the essence of fascism in the conception of the "state".

The role of fascism is the conception of the state, its character, its duty and its aim. Fascism conceives of the state as an absolute, in comparison with which all individuals of group are relative....

Whoever says fascism implies the state.⁸

In 1933 Hitler came to power, organized the Fascist movement and regarded Mussolini as the leading statement in one world. Establishing a Nazi dictatorship, he stifled all liberties, and tortured those who raised their voice against the government. Hitler wished to sweep away all oppositions, abolished other political parties, purged his party of potential rivals, controlled the press and radio and emasculated the trade unions. Fascism was not only confined to Italy and Germany but it reached Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world. In America, Fascism, during the depression period, was accepted a new gospel of salvation from economic and political distress, by the leaders like Huey Long, Dr. Francis, and Father Charles E. Coughlin. In America, it did not receive much response, as democracy was deep-rooted in American blood. In addition to this, Americans were aware of the danger of Fascism as an imminent threat to the world peace. President Roosevelt, while accepting the democratic nomination, said, "We are fighting to save a great precious form of government for ourselves and for the world."⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Lillian Hellman emerged as a luminous star in the gloomy horizon of the Great Depression of the thirties. She had the will and impulse to express the problems of the age in her plays. During this period she reflected her own political awakening throughout her career. Her analysis of American society is essentially Marxist, since it is based on the primacy of material and economic conditions to explain social relations. She emphasizes environmental conditioning conflict among classes, and the hope that a new person, socialist man, would be born of the conflict through the dialectical collision of opposites. Most of the plays of the 1920s deal with the problems of society. There is a consciously or unconsciously presentation of the contemporary problems in most of the plays of the 1930s. Baffled with the depression, the dramatists of this era thought that the main goal of drama is not only to entertain but also to raise an awareness of the reader to the present burning realities. These were some of the major social, economic and political forces, which changed man's attitude towards religion. His approach of thinking, his faith in social system, his manners and behaviours during the 1930s, one of the most horrible periods in American history, shaped the literary, particularly dramatic, milieu of this period.

REFERENCES

1. John Lehmann, qtd: Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p13.
2. Navins and Commager, *A Short History of the United States* (New York: Alfred A., 1968), p.466.
3. Baruch, *The public Years*, p.227.
4. Hal Draper, "The Student Movement of the *Thirties*", *As We Saw the Thirties*, p.156.
5. Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson & co. Ltd., 1974) p.24.
6. Harold Clurman, *The Naked Image: Observation on the modern Theatre* (New York The Macmillan co., 1966), p.271.
7. F.L .Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), p. 293.
8. Mussolini article of "Fascism" in the *Encyclopedia Italiana*, 1932, published in English under the title *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, 1933. p.118,
9. *Ibid.*, p.238.

