



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <http://jls.tu.edu.iq>

Analytical Study of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*: Counterintuitive Conspiracy

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Keywords: - Hellman -Conspiracy -Martha -Mary -Karen	Abstract Despite writing only twelve plays, Lillian Hellman is a principal voice in the American theatre. She is a famous American playwright who has outlined her position in the male dominated society. In her plays, Hellman employs a profound and rational view that binds husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and child, teacher and pupil. Having a sharp insight, enables her to create strong female characters during a time when the American theatre tended to concentrate only on males. Hellman has formulated her dramas cautiously, tackling social matters that reflect her aptitude to present characters who are able to improve themselves through the development of the action. Probing the actual motivations of the counterintuitive conspiracy plotted by school pupil against her teacher, is the aim of this study.
Article Info	
Article history:	
Received: 2 -1-2022	
Accepted: 25-2-2022	
Available online	

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تحليل أدبي لمسرحية ليليان هيلمان (ساعة الأطفال): مؤامرة على غير المتوقع

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<p>الخلاصة: على الرغم من كتابة اثني عشر مسرحية فقط ، فإن ليليان هيلمان هي صوت رئيسي في المسرح الأمريكي. إنها واحدة من أبرز الكتاب المسرحيين الأمريكيين ، وربما الوحيدة التي جعلت لنفسها مكانا واضحا في المعيار الدرامي الذي يسيطر عليه الذكور فقط. توظف هيلمان في مسرحياتها رؤية عميقة وعقلانية للصلة ما بين الزوج والزوجة، والأخ والأخت، والأم والطفل، والمعلم والتلميذ. تمكنت هيلمان وبفضل رؤيتها الحادة من خلق شخصيات قوية خلال فترة كان فيها المسرح الأمريكي يميل إلى التركيز فقط على الذكور. صاغت هيلمان عملها بعناية ، وتعاملت مع القضايا ذات الأهمية الاجتماعية وأظهرت مبراً قدرتها على بناء شخصيات مقنعة من خلال الحوار. وبالتالي فإن هدف الدراسة هو التقصي عن أسباب الدوافع الفعلية للمؤامرة الغير متوقعة التي حاكتها تلميذة في المدرسة ضد معلمتها.</p>	<p>الكلمات الدالة:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- هيلمان- مؤامرة- مارثا- ماري- كارين <p>معلومات البحث تاريخ البحث:</p> <p>الاستلام: 2022_1_2</p> <p>القبول: 2022_2_25</p> <p>التوفر على النت</p>
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Lillian Hellman's Literary Career

Lillian Florence Hellman (1905-1984) has attained celebrity status through her distinctive fame in any time of her life, for her literary activities as a bold writer. Hellman is the only woman evaluated as the most important playwright “during 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, an era when Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams reigned” (Burke,104). She provides a practical mode, for her life, which contains abundance to condemn as well as to respect. As a result, she became involved with socialist ideas and communist activity in the 1930s(Alice,10). In her plays, characters generate events and in turn are affected by them . For many American critics, Hellman is “always the benchmark for women playwrights” (Chinoy and Jenkins, 346). Frequently, Hellman asserts that she is a moral writer, and she plans to write “her plays in order to demonstrate what is wrong with life and how a better way of life may be found and won” (Clark, 521). Revealing the deficiency of her society imparts her a substantial opportunity and an outstanding position as an influential voice in modern American drama. Actually, reading Hellman’s drama helps to appreciate her criticism of certain practices prevalent in the educational

system which impels her to write *The Children's Hour* (1934). Freedley and Reeves asserted that "Lillian Hellman has demonstrated greater power than any woman now writing for the stage, an assessment that still prevails"(598). In fact, she succeeds in employing theatre to mirror society's daily problems that may not be realized and expected by many people.

In her writings, Hellman gives women a lion -share in exposing their vices and virtues liberally. A strong moral resentment is so obvious in Hellman's plays, which has sometimes overshadowed the fact that she is a highly skilled technician. Viewed as the predecessor of the southern contemporary women dramatists, bestows her an opportunity to be greatly respected and evaluated. This is evident in her attempts to ridicule the south, as well as the nation. Her intention is not only to entertain an audience, to win celebrity, or to make wealth. She writes to tell both man and woman about the effects of ignorance and wrong thinking. In a word, she is an idealist and an intellectual (Clark, 520). In consequence, her plays are considered as a typical representation of her age.

Hellman's earlier plays are regarded controversial, politically charged drama. Indeed, Hellman's characters, though personally and morally responsible for their actions, are almost always portrayed within a social framework, their purposes rooted in social forces. Hellman does not admire women, but rather portrays them as fully defined individuals shaped by complex political, social and psychological forces. Many critics and researchers have appreciated her way of exhibiting "it is not anti-feminist, that this playwright has created one of the most destructive women characters in the history of the theatre" (Friedman, 81). In most of her plays, the American woman has been portrayed as a harsh individual in a male-dominated society. Consequently, Hellman's plays are best known for probing social and psychological concerns, including the various manifestations of evil. Having a penetrating insight enables her to create tough female characters during a time when American theatre tended to concentrate on men. The term counterintuitive conspiracy is outlined to expose the causes of enmity and hatred among the individuals. In this play, Hellman has experienced a variety of individuals from different gender and age to reveal the act of conspiracy which undermines the strong social ties. Instead of establishing a working relationship between teacher and pupils, the petty conflict may lead to use physical force or humiliating words.

2-The Children's Hour (1934)

Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour*(CH)in 1934, when the United States of America lived under the pressure of the Great Depression. In fact, American people are too busy fighting against poverty and unemployment. Most of the American people and women in particular grumble and they strive to obtain satisfactory living. Thus, women's anxiety motivates and inspires Hellman's thinking and turns out to be her accurate issues. She fearlessly portrays the "woman's need for economic independence, which allows her to control her destiny, and the social constructs that prevent her from achieving such independence" (Burke,107). Metaphorically speaking, Depression has robbed the sense of security from young members of middle class. Consequently, men's responsibilities require earning money and controlling the family finances. No doubt, acquiring money and an appropriate employment are the pillars of a happy, trouble-free life.

In this regard, Hellman did her best to hearten women not to be for all time the man's shadow. However, as women were encouraged to demand more personal freedoms, they began to wear more short skirts, and they looked more civilized. According to Dana D. Nelson's view that during Depression years social disparity was defined not as a flaw in the norms of societal structures, but as an individual's failure(ix). Throughout such crises, the responsibilities of writers turn into exploring people's defects without any sort of cynicism to the other sex. To avoid criticism and condemnation, Hellman has derived the scheme of this play from an authentic issue. Mary Titus states that an "impersonal Scottish lawsuit offered Hellman a safe medium for exploring very personal issues"(217). Actually, Hellman has built *CH* on this incident, but makes two true noteworthy changes. The distinguished changes of these are Martha Dobie's shriving lesbianism and the violent end by committing suicide.

In *CH*, a woman who admits her sexual desirability to another woman is rejected by everyone, including the friend she loves. As a result of unexpected response of her lover, she kills herself. But the play shows no violence and concludes by reassuring that "the one decent and normal woman will not only endure but will no longer have to suffer. The last image of the play is of Karen, smiling, in a new sunlight that she tells us feels very good" (Keyssar,28-9). Deliberately the seeds of unpredicted conspiracy are shattered to defame and cause dejection for oblivious victims. This conspiracy is represented by the rampant lie which reflects the naivety of community to trust children without sufficient acceptable proofs. Mrs. Tilford makes a crucial conclusion to consider what she has heard, and she calls all the parents to tell them about the school and direct them to take away their children from such a nasty location (Brietzke,55). Most striking is Mrs. Tilford's early and unusual response to the fabricated story told by a child. Nevertheless, people's emotions fluctuate in concentration, depending on their views of the severity of the lie, as it destroys confidence and self-esteem to replace it with suspicion.

The sense of counterintuitive conspiracy in this play takes a form of dishonesty which develops to be a perfidious act. The implied conflict between the maturely female teachers and pupil stimulated the latter to seek revenge out of hatred and anger. Therefore, the child's abuse by the teachers particularly when Mary is separated and confined in an isolated room, instils the seed of detestation to invent a serious conspiracy. More drastically, the interference of Mary's grandmother, Mrs. Tilford who promptly trusts the child's fake story. An unexpected reaction of a child has created a sort of shock not only to the teachers but to the audience as well. Psychologically speaking, anyone who is publically humiliated, will welcome the first chance of revenge. Accordingly, the conspiracy theory has many facets, the aim of which is to reach the destruction of the intended persons despite the amount of repercussion and loss.

Barrett Clark argues that the child Mary in *CH* hastens a tragedy because of her wickedness which is considered the concealed motivation against her teachers. Commenting on the issue of Mary's responsibility, Clark says that "a part of responsibility lies with Mrs. Tilford, the child's grandmother, but her responsibility is only indirect and, to that extent, attenuated and weak" (520). Mary is recognized from the beginning as a liar and troublemaker, mainly, when she intentionally missing the study session, and pretending that she brings Mrs. Mortar a bunch of flowers. Mary's teacher, Karen, rebukes her by asserting that " it wasn't necessary to go so far. There was a bunch exactly like this in the garbage can this morning"(11). The signs of

incompatibility and inconvenience are already found and the child is intensely flattering just to get her teacher's gratification. Subsequently the teacher, Karen tries to break Mary's habit of lying, imposes punishment by isolating her. Mary, furiously threatens to inform her grandmother, a major school supporter. The imminent conflict between the teacher and child has been viewed essentially when Karen determines to punish Mary. She says "Well there doesn't seem to be any other way with you; you'll have to be punished. Take your recreation periods alone for the next two weeks. Don't leave the school grounds for any reason whatsoever" (12). The process of provoking the child in a such ill-considered way turns the child into a demon thinking of devising a counterintuitive conspiracy to destroy her teachers. Spying or eavesdropping through the keyhole inflames the child's thinking of devilish scheme.

For that reason, a wide gap is left between the child Mary and her teachers resulting from a ruthless degradation that the child lives. As she has been brought up by so tolerant grandmother who has spoiled her, and her denial of teachers' attempt to restraint her, Mary gets revenge by spreading the rumour that Karen and Martha are lesbians. The counterintuitive conspiracy is so hazardous as it rapidly spreads in form of a false rumour. Although the rumour is an inaccurate, Mary sticks to her charge, and this reveals the diabolic spirit of such a child. Her shocked grandmother takes Mary out the school and convinces the parents of other children to do likewise, without any respect to the teachers' reputation. This type of misunderstanding between the pupil and her teachers can be settled but the grandmother's selfishness has inflated and complicated the matter. Katherine Lederer satirizes the critics' point of views about the theme of this play by asserting that "they misunderstood the playwright's purpose. The play is not about a psychopathic child or about lesbianism as subject or theme. The subject is character assassination"(31). From these chaotic circumstances one immediately discerns the playwright's determination to divulge the secrets of the children's world.

In this play, the conspiracy results from the children's maltreatment, since the children are driven by devilish motivations to offend their teachers. Unexpectedly, Mary spreads the invented lie of lesbianism against her female teachers to protect herself and establish a sort of bargain. In doing so, she deceives her teachers, her grandmother, and her school without heeding to the penalty. Mary's hidden motivations are mysterious to the extent that she insists on being oppressed as she has been trusted by her grandmother. A cruel intention leads to trust a child in such scandalous matter without clear proofs reflects an invisible vengeance. Moreover, exploiting her grandmother's kindness, Mary decides to defame her teachers. She says " Grandma! Please! I can't go back! I can't! they will kill me ! they will, Grandma! They will kill me! "(33). Mary aspires to attain the strongest impulse of her being, believing that the two female teachers threaten her because they dislike her. To enlighten the effect of this fake story, David Krasner affirms that "a student's fabricated story about lesbianism relationship between two teachers who run a girls' school propels the play to its tragic conclusion" (487). Before thinking about initiating a conspiracy, it is necessary to consider its disastrous consequences. Undoubtedly, the person to be blamed is the pupil's grandmother who is able to nullify this conspiracy.

Though Mary is closer to a melodramatic villain with her intensive spite, her excuse of self- protection introduces a mischievous character. Apparently, Mary has been deprived of the parental love, thus she attempts to live it in her grandmother's care and attention who declares how much she loves Mary, " as much as all the

words in all the books in all the world" (35). Mrs. Tilford is more influential and prosperous old woman but she has a quick temper that causes swiftly wrong judgment. Blinded by her irritated mood, Tilford succeeds not only in closing the school but also in ostracizing the two teachers. Actually, Tilford has built her judgment on Mary's lie without expecting the consequences properly. In a society conspires against self-empowerment, the process of education lacks frankness and integrity. Some viewers have confirmed that Mary also looks like Hellman, she not only invents anecdotes, she also stages them, becoming "playwright and director as she forces little girl [Rosalie] to speak lines she provides" (Titus, 219). It is necessary to realize that people are not innocent as they seem to us. Despite their mysterious intentions, women in this play are left in problematic situations.

Interpreting this play fuels imagination and thinking in unexpected manners. In *CH*, Hellman asserts that the motives of spite and conspiracy are not only the invention of children, but also of the adults. Tilford even suspects Martha's care for Karen, "You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don't like being together. You were always like that even as a child"(20). Because of her conspiracy, Mary becomes a character not only of great evil but also of fake rumour that pollutes Karen's and Martha's celebrity. Lovely mutual understanding between Karen and Martha shows that they have determined to deny the child's tricks, and by them, the vicious world of children is investigated. The two worlds of adults and children are evidently scrutinized to create a sense of suspense helps identify the conquering one. In Hellman's *CH*, the victimized individuals are basically depicted as commodities instead of human beings (Armato, 444). Trusting a false story, Mrs. Tilford orders her nephew, Joe, to end his love with Karen, "you must not marry Karen. ... because there's something wrong with Karen- something horrible"(46). In the light of pitiless accusations, Karen's fiancé questions her sexual inclinations, and for this reason she has ended her love. In this regard the unpredicted conspiracy has also defiled Martha's thinking. Countless sparrows of grief or uncertainty drives her to commit suicide. Because of the variety of its topics, David Krasner stresses that *CH* sustains audience interest, retaining its topical relevance throughout the century(119). Without a full awareness of the impact of rumours on destroying the lives of individuals, the culture of moral decadence becomes a phrase of a real crisis that devastates the social fabric.

Severely agonized, Karen expresses her shock of such vicious indictment which is manipulated by Mary and Mrs. Tilford. She blames both by saying "the wicked very young, and the wicked very old"(51). The entire dialogue between the child and her grandmother breathes the very air of conspiracy. Although *CH* dramatizes cruel response to the suspected conduct of the teachers, relationship between Karen and Martha admits "kind of friendship between women—trusting, conscious and intimate—that is rarely dramatized"(Moore, xxiv). However, the extremely defamation that affects them rapidly transcends the school to the surrounding community. Their suspected scandal and indignity are publicly uttered to the extent that they have been confined in their house. Martha claims that "they'd know about us. We have been famous."(70).Morally speaking, if a woman's dignity is violated, it becomes very difficult to change people's view. In a such hostile environment, the way is not prepared to affirm the teachers' innocence.

With blind persistence, the diabolic child sees that the conspiracy alone is not enough, so her thinking is dedicated on blackmailing others to share her deadly

conspiracy. Hence, blackmailing is another warning sign of the ambiguous world of children. Motivated by involving other children in her guilt, Mary has artfully threatens her roommate Rosalie, "it was Rosalie who saw them. I just said it was me so I wouldn't have to tattle on Rosalie." (55). Mary, who is sure that Rosalie has stolen a bracelet at school, makes Rosalie promise that she will be Mary's advocate and say whatever she demands. As a part of her mischievous scheme, Mary uses the insinuating technique which has been regarded beyond her age, just to win Rosalie's testimony against her teachers. Therefore, she threatens "I remember it, because it was the day Helen Burton's bracelet was—it was the day Helen's bracelet was stolen, and nobody knows who did it, and Helen said that if her mother found out, she'd have the thief put in the jail" (56-57). In her controversial play, Hellman argues that if children fall in problematic situations, they instantly think of feverish triumph over their rivals. With the purpose of depicting clarity to her characters, Hellman creates suitable dramatic situations for them, and observes their responses to those situations.

Under such a fearful intimidation, at once Rosalie responds to Mary's threat, "Yes, Yes, I did see it. I told Mary. What Mary said was right. I said. I said it." (57). The modern devil of morality is inwardly incarnated in the character of Mary who surprises most critics by her unusual and spiteful schemes. By her resourcefulness and villainy, Mary is able to entrap her roommate to be accomplice in her conspiracy. She has been judged not only a dishonest for her family, school, teachers, friends, but for her conscience and this emphasizes her complicated and diabolic character. Richard Moody assures that child is dominated by her grandmother and the adults are passive to defend themselves against this demonic pupil (50). In consequence, the world of Hellman has a great place for women to confirm their unexpected schemes and actions. For Hellman, it is the women pursuing the conspiracy since they are moved by their passions to hurt others.

Actually, the essence of rumour has reached the limit of its destructiveness; the power of evil damages the innocent persons. Martha for instance as Doris Falk points out that "Hellman's complicated, half understood feelings must have given her some insight into Martha Dobie." (43). Feeling guilty about the breakup of Karen and Joe, and suspecting that she has concealed sexual feelings for Karen, "I love you that way... maybe the way they said I love you, I don't know. Listen to me! ... there's always been something wrong. Always as long as I remember. But I never knew it until all this happened. ..." (71). Mary's slanderous lie is the main cause of Martha's death. Because of her bewilderment, one suspects Martha's response to the children's accusations as if she was really in unnatural love with her friend Karen. The critic Jacob Adler assumes the truth of the lesbian charge. He says, "Martha comes to realize that the accusations, so far as her desires go, were valid, and she commits suicide." (3). Though Karen and Martha are teachers of the same age, and are supposed to be strong enough against any difficulty, they show different reactions to such defamatory rumour. Accordingly, the idea of suicide has controlled Martha's thinking to the extent that she never consults anyone. Thus it is valid and almost necessary as a part of the conclusion (Holmin, 25). Such sensitive individual falls a victim to the child's diabolic lie without any attempt to exceed this complicated crisis.

Being incapable to live neither with Karen nor within a self which the world treats as leper, Martha kills herself. Her last speech with Karen confirms her helplessness to conquer children's world, "In some way I've ruined your life. I've ruined my own. I

didn't even know. There's a big difference between us now, Karen. I feel all dirty and I can't stay with you any more, darling." (72). Hellman succeeds in creating a cunningly manipulative child and makes it the core of the play and simultaneously divulging the counterintuitive world of children which has been corrupted by trickery and deception. She attempts to present a clear and inclusive examination of human nature and of human life. The unsolved mystery of this kind of conspiracy has surrounded the entire subject of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*.

Conclusion

A glance of reflection on this play authenticates that Hellman has defied the ethical norms of a modern American society. This sort of unfairly indictment compels the school to close and the families withdraw their children. Instead of being faithful, the children turn to be dishonest and fraudulent to the extent that they have scandalized their teachers. Unfairly ostracized by society, the female teachers fall victims to defiled environment which is shaped by rumour, hypocrisy, and conspiring children. In fact, this drama depicts the necessity of tolerance and patience to deal with inflexible situations. Even if the theatre is not designed to be a place of a programmed violence, the victimized individuals are strictly rejected and discarded as contagious disease. Whether the two female teachers are lesbians or not, their reputation and history have been violated. A brief moment of illumination over the child's claim may alter the tumultuous atmosphere of the fake rumour and conspiracy.

The successful relationship between pupils and teachers must be built on mutual respect to enhance the educational system and to avoid a wild rejection. To maintain his/her sublime status, the teacher should be in a true understanding of the educational responsibility to urge pupils to act properly. In effect, tricks and deception are the symptoms of the blunderers who have no aptitude to be truthful. Ignoring the children's capability of defaming adults is a big mistake. As a result, many intelligent individuals fall preys when they look at children as the embodiment of unpolluted innocence. The density of conspiracy as a way of life is intentionally implied in this play to display an unidentified world of children. While countless conspiracy events simply present amusement, they also have a shocking consequence on the actual humankind. The counterintuitive conspiracy is no longer a mere implementation of unfamiliar scheme to creep into the people, but an extra confusing and invasive threat from within. In a similar fashion, conspiracy basis repeatedly occupy unsafe apparitions, and the drama of conspiracy has sometimes added to those evils.

The growing effect of conspiracy is exploited as an effort to emphasize the self-actualization against an imminent threat. The conspiracy term could be seen as a distinguished act of some individuals' viewpoints and principles to achieve their preferred goals. Since children have the same human instincts, it has become necessary to be more careful in treating them. Ultimately, disrespecting or scorning children as if they do not appreciate a proper lifestyle, perhaps lead to disastrous results, for instance mandatory isolation or committing suicide. In this play, Martha's death has created an extraordinary perception that the world of children is more mysterious and doubtful. Metaphorically speaking, Hellman stimulates audience to dive into the world of contradictions and opposites. Her description of the world of children is not merely treacherous but gloomy. In this respect, the play is a notable achievement, for in it, Hellman succeeds in penetrating the children's unpredicted conspiracy that disintegrate the societal fabric. Reconciliation or tolerance is

impossible under the pressure of humiliation and underestimation shown by the two teachers against the diabolic child. Throughout her dramatic career, Hellman intends to pull down the unwelcome structure of outdated social institutions. Moreover, she achieves a remarkable insight into the divided psychological states of women and children under the threat of unpredictable future. As a final point, Hellman's characters are the quintessence of her plays, and to study her characters and children in particular, is to be acquainted with her genuine intentions.

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