Abstract:

The world today is in a delirium of hatred and unceasing conflicts. It takes a lot of energy to overcome the hitches and predicaments that confront us. Consequently, one has to seek refuge in a world of illusion and this is done by weaving a web of lies and dreams. Lillian Hellman’s contribution to the American drama and her dexterity in the psychic explorations of her characters is indispensable. Many of her plays explore the corrupting nature of evil and moral decay of deficient characters. A distinguished playwright of the 1940’s, Hellman has probed the aberrant psychology of her characters entangled in a trap of self-deception. Her “The Autumn Garden” poignantly portrays the dreamers, whose dreams are thwarted in their quest for love, and happiness, driven to consequent mental decay, resulting in a tragedy of futility and despair. This paper discusses “The Autumn Garden” from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, American Drama, Lillian Hellman, illusion.
Introduction:

The place of America women playwright like Lillian Hellman amidst stalwarts like Eugene O’Neil, Clifford Odets, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller cannot be inconsequential. In assessing the status of women playwrights, Rosalind Miles commented that “far from attaining the social-cultural, educational and economic freedom enjoyed by some men, women are denied freedom of action and expression and are still expected to remain self-effacing, supportive and unjudging” (39). A legend of her own time, she explored serious themes. Many of her plays explore the corrupting nature of evil and moral decay of deficient characters. Robert Burstein commented “skilfully constructed and nailed together by short scenes, crisp dialogue and powerful characters” (25) her plays show that she was influenced by Ibsen.

The Autumn Garden

The Autumn Garden (1951) received a wide range of commendation from the critics. The multiplicity of characters in the play leads the critics to call it a Chekhovian play. It was a poignant, reflective drama of human experience. John Mason Brown called it “in many ways the most mature and probing play to come from Hellman’s gifted pen” (29). It is a study of self-deception and the realization that follows, when a group of people have to face the reality that they have wasted their lives. The play is Hellman’s “mature creation of characters capable of exposing their own illusions”. (Rollyson 224) It is autumn not only in terms of the season, but in the lives of many people in the play. They live in a world of illusion, bored with themselves and with others. Hellman’s main concern is to depict a society that lacks motivation. Constance Tuckerman runs a home in a town on the Gulf of Mexico, near New Orleans. Six people play as summer guests at this home. Sophie is Constance’s niece, her late brother Sam’s daughter. She is engaged to Frederick Ellis. Frederick’s mother, Carrie Ellis grew up with Constance, as did Edward Crossman an alcoholic bank clerk who is supposed to be in love with Constance.

Ellises are rich, but Frederick’s grandmother, Mrs. Mary Ellis controls the money. Also spending the summer are the retired army general Benjamin Griggs and his flirtatious, pathetically silly wife Rose. Griggs wants a divorce, but Rose ignores this demand. They await the arrival of the Denerys. Nick Denery is an artist and Constance’s old beau. He had
jilted Constance to marry a rich woman and has never returned since he went to Europe to study art.

Nick arrives and meddles with everyone’s life. He tells Carrie Ellis that Payson a man with whom Frederick spends all his time is a homosexual. Moreover, Nick advises Rose to visit a doctor. When she does, she discovers that beneath her hypochondria, there is a real heart trouble. He tells Constance Tuckerman that Crossman has always loved her. In his drunken state he tries to seduce Sophie. This meddling has enabled the characters to make self-discovery. But their life-long patterns of living cannot be changed.

Griggs decides to stay on with Rose. Frederick is a passive dependent man with a dominant mother. He wanted his mother to pay Payson’s passage to Europe. Now Frederick remains a mama’s boy and never marries. Sophie escapes to Europe with the money given by Nick’s wife Nina. It is a blackmail payment to make the Denerys see Nick’s behaviour for what it is. The people gathered here are nice people, playing blind man’s bluff with reality. They have gathered here to analyse their lives, and search for a meaning in life.

Unveiling Duplicity

Nick is considered to be the deus ex machine whose interference in the lives of the people around him, helps them to open the shutters of self-deception. With his charming manners, he manipulates the lives of other people. His first victim is Constance Tuckerman. As an amateur artist he once painted her when she was young and charming. Now he urges her to be his model. He paints her as an old woman devoid of both youth and beauty. His plan is to display his talent by retrieving the original portrait from Constance and exhibiting the two together. He never allows her to see his new portrait.

Nick’s next target is the Ellises. He informs Carrie of Frederick’s intention of going to Europe with his friend and novelist, Mr. Payson. He insinuates that Payson is a homosexual and has just escaped from a “filthy little scandal in Rome” (499). Due to this Frederick calls off his trip to Europe. Nick pretends to give life to the loveless existence of the Griggs family. He tries to comfort Rose Griggs by flirting with her. He also advocates her to get a certificate from a doctor saying that she is ill, which would prevent her husband from leaving her. His drunkenness leads him to seduce Sophie but she escapes from his clutches and his true character is revealed. Constance, who has been in love with him for a long time, now realizes that she has idolised the wrong man.
Nick compels others to face the truth about themselves and their situation, not in the abstract service of truth, but as an act of psychopathic aggression. He tampers with people’s lives until Nina explodes: “Have you ever tried leaving things alone?” (499). She forces him to confront his own miserable life. He has not been a successful artist; he has not finished a portrait in the last twenty years. Nina and Ben Griggs share the same feeling. Both threatened to leave their spouses, yet neither of them had the courage nor will to do so. They turn a deaf ear to their partners. Even Mrs. Ellis says “Happiest year of my life was when my husband died” (467). Marriage is only for the sake of convenience. When they feel they are uncomfortable in their married life they seek a divorce. Nina, despite her occasional grumbling and defensive outbursts is contended to live in a world defined by Nick. She is docile and tags along with her husband.

**Freud’s Psychoanalysis**

According to Freud, human mind is chiefly dual in nature. Freud opines that “the mental processes are essentially unconscious, and those which are conscious are merely isolated acts and part of the whole psychic entity” (Strachey 16). Freud introduced a threefold division of the mind into conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious mind. This unconscious mind is a chest of thoughts, feelings, impulses and memories that lay exterior to our conscious awareness. Most of the unconscious contents are negative and sometimes destructive and they have a resilient influence on an individual’s behaviour and experience. Repression is the defence mechanism which has a profound influence on the individual’s behaviour. The idea of self-deceit, or willed forgetting, forms the basis for the Freudian concept of repression. (Billig,13). These repressed memories give rise to neurotic symptoms.

**World of Illusion**

The characters move from the real world to a world of illusion. They are hooked to illusion as a defence against the harsh reality of their lives. Constance Tuckerman convinces herself that Nick is really in love with her. When sees the portrait she realises the true character of Nick. She has been keeping the earlier portrait as a symbol of their love, but now it proves false. When she asks Ned (Edward) Crossman to marry her, he says that it is too late. He is no longer in love with her. Now Constance has to remain alone forever. She now realizes that she has wasted her life. Ned feels that if she had reciprocated his love, things would have been different but now he deliberately wastes his life drinking. He feels sorry that he had
deluded her and himself, thinking he was in love with her. At the end of the play, he declares, “Sorry I fooled you and sorry I fooled myself” (545). Constance’s romantic notions about Nick and her dreams about Sophie prove false. She is stripped of her illusions and her dreams are destroyed.

Rose Griggs is a typical Southern lady, always ready to flirt. Though forty-three, she is very social. This spirit keeps her young and gay. Nick advises her that a doctor’s certificate certifying that she has heart trouble, would prevent Mr. Griggs from getting a divorce. Her visit to the doctor reveals that she has a heart trouble. She refuses to acknowledge what the doctor has said. Confronted with the truth she now pleads with Griggs not to leave her for a year. She regrets that she was a fool. She feels that there is nobody in the world to help her except Griggs. She pretends that her children are good and kind, but realizes that they are neither kind nor helpful. The knowledge of her heart condition forces Griggs in turn to live with his wife, a life devoid of love and freedom. His individuality is lost. “I’m all gone. I’ve just looked and there’s no Benjamin Griggs” (541).

Ned Crossman and Benjamin Griggs choose a path which is completely deceptive, self-destructive and unfulfilling. Crossman spends the rest of his life drinking while Griggs is bound with fetters of a dry, hollow domestic life. Both of them realize with disappointment and anguish that they never shape their live in a constructive fulfilling way. Frustrated and self-imprisoned they have lost the will and desire to break the fetters with which they are bound.

Mrs. Mary Ellis is a haughty and dominating woman. Her daughter-in-law is completely under her control. She is very particular about money. She deprives her grandson Frederick, of money and admits “old people are often harsh, Carrie, when they control the purse” (503). She is one of the realists who understands the needs and dreams of everyone around her; but remains a passive observer incapable of doing anything.

Frederick is a passive man completely under his mother’s sway. He remains a mother’s boy. He feels that his happiness is curbed by his mother: “I’ve never had much fun. Never seen the things that I wished to see, never met the people I wanted to meet or been to the places where I could…I’ll come back and you can take up my life again” (502). Though he is twenty-five years of age he regrets that he is still treated as a school boy. He regresses into his childhood. Youth and manhood are only dreams of him.
Frederick is under the illusion that Payson, his friend and a novelist, really needs his help. Later he realises that Payson has used him only for money. The realization comes to him only after he breaks the friendship with Payson. Nick has been the cause for this. Mrs. Ellis says “He is nice and he is nothing” (535). If he had married Sophie things would have taken a different turn in his life but Sophie rejects him.

The young realist, Sophie remains unaffected by Nick’s presence. A displaced outsider, she takes control of her own future in a way that distinguishes her from others. Unhappy with the life at the boarding house, she wishes to see her mother: “I have not been happy, and I cannot continue her. I cannot be what you have wished me to be…” (513). She explains to Crossman that she feels she is lost and is homesick. She refuses to marry Frederick who will always remain a lumbering mother’s boy.

Frustrated with the life at the boarding house Sophie feels marriage will provide some relief. Through Nick’s interference she finds the solution for her problem. She blackmails the Denerys. She demands five thousand dollars. If she does not get this she will spread the false news that Nick has seduced her. She blackmails only to avoid being patronized. She does not want the money to be a charity from Nina.

The characters re-live the past experiences but these do not change their future. They continue to spend their life monotonously. Griggs, Rose and the Ellises go on as before; Constance is left alone to look after the boarding house and Ned Crossman is attached to his bottle. Nick will continue to interfere with other’s lives and Nina has to make amends. Sophie is the only person to escape from this “autumn garden”. It was a happy place for those who were enjoying the season of autumn in their lives.

Hellman portrays the inner life the characters. The transition from the dreams to reality and back to a world of illusion is sharp and highly dramatic. The tenor of life itself is transcribed and appears barren and inconclusive I its progress. In this dull and joyless world, human beings are tossed about helplessly till time puts an end to their meaningless existence. So dreams are the only source of happiness to sustain life. Each human being clings desperately to a dream which makes life worth living to him. Man cannot live without illusion. In order to survive he or she must cling to their dreams.

Constance Tuckerman, Ned Crossman and Mr.Griggs wander aimlessly seeking to unravel the mysteries of their past experiences, but fail and resign themselves to live in their dreams.
When they are compelled to abandon their dreams, they retire gracefully into their old retreat, accepting defeat. Self-awareness and clear perception of others is absolutely absent in them.

Amidst all the people who have wasted their lives, Sophie and Mrs. Ellises manage to act realistically. Bored with this gang of self-deceivers, Mrs. Ellis has a strong grasp of the props of life-power, sensuality and money: “I say to myself, one should have power, or give it over. But if one keeps it, it might as well be used, with as little, mealy mouth less as possible” (503). Sophie, like Mrs. Ellis is too pragmatic to be deluded by self-deception. Fingarette has argued that at root psychoanalysis is a theory of self-deception. She realistically turns Nick’s playful game back on him and exhorts five thousand dollars as escape money.

The other weak and aging characters surrender themselves to “I think as one grows older it is more and more necessary to reach out your hand for the study old vines you knew you were young and let them lend you back to the roots of things that matters” (485) says Nick.

Conclusion

Hellman uncovers the nasty spectacle of the effect of repression on one’s psyche. She plunges deeply into the psyche and inner turmoil of human beings. The play presents the dreamers, whose dreams are thwarted in their quest for love and happiness, driven to consequent mental decay, resulting in a tragedy of futility and despair. Psychologically analysed the characters are in the grip of unconscious motivation. They are dreamers whose dreams are thwarted in their quest for love and happiness, driven to consequent mental decay, resulting in a tragedy of futility and despair. Hellman deft picturization of the psychological depth of her characters has earned a topmost place among her male contemporaries. Her plays are revived even today in London and New York reveals that she continues to occupy a unique place in American theatre history.
References

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