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More Sinned against than Sinning: The 'Fallen' Woman in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Rajeshwar Mittapalli

Professor of English,
Kakatiya University
Warangal - 506009 Telangana
&

Anita Ahmadi

Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of English
Kakatiya University,
Warangal - 506009 Telangana

Lady Windermere's Fan is Oscar Wilde's first successful play and it took the London theatregoers by storm when it was first staged at St James's Theatre on 20 February 1892. Seeking to tell the story of an estranged mother and her innocent daughter it probes the Victorian society's cruel treatment of women who exercised their will and sought life outside home with men of their choice. The men concerned often cheated and eventually abandoned these women and society for its part treated them with utter contempt. Given this situation these unfortunate women had no go other than becoming street walkers or join the notorious work houses. Prostitution entailed many health hazards and social risks. If these women became pregnant the problem further aggravated. The Victorian society, especially the privileged members of the upper class, chose to believe, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that everything was fine with the world and that women of this kind were an aberration in need of the severest punishment in social and economic terms. It never occurred to them that these women might be victims, often unwittingly so, of the social codes and moral norms operative amidst them and that they indeed needed to be sympathised with and supported so that they would rejoin the mainstream society and get a second chance to become useful and productive members.

The unfriendly Victorian social environment and moral apparatus, coupled with certain vested interests, are squarely to blame for this sad state of affairs. Prudery, sexual repression, prevalence of Puritanical attitudes that privileged the institution of family and projected marriage as something sacred to be preserved no matter how much the women had to suffer -- all these resulted in women's subservience and acute suffering. The projection of women as wives, mothers and preservers of values obliged them to bear the additional burden of upholding the same values which rendered their life miserable in the first place.

The Victorian society also monitored the gender relations with a severity that would surprise us today. Sexual restraint, especially on the part of women, was insisted upon and there was a very low level of tolerance of crime when it concerned women's deviant behaviour as exemplified by their running away with their lovers or taking to prostitution. Women were basically grouped under two categories -- angels in the house and whores. There was no chance for them to be themselves with their fair share of virtues and weaknesses. If a woman asserted her will or sought to live independent of men by remaining unmarried or by choosing a career she was promptly branded a whore

and treated as a social outcast. Men, on the other hand, especially those hailing from rich and well to do families, were routinely expected to gain sexual experience by entering into liaisons with women belonging to the lower social strata and no stigma was attached to it. They were however not expected to marry these women, and they did not in fact marry them, because of the real possibility of disinheritance from the family estate.

Eric M. Sigsworth's book *In Search of Victorian Values: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society* gives an objective and elaborate account of the Victorian values that governed and regulated life then. Some of the details it offers are shocking, and they surely offend modern sensibility. Another book, John Guy's *Victorian Life*, which is primarily meant as an educational resource, offers further shocking details, this time illustrated by pictures and photographs, of how life was no better than a nightmare for women, how women were treated as commodity, how they were circumscribed by customs and practices, and how as result they found themselves prisoners in their own homes!

Women of all classes were regarded as the property of their husbands, as were any wages they earned. Until the Property Act of 1882 all of a woman's property automatically belonged to her husband.... Many women were forced to take their children to prison with them if convicted of a crime, rather than abandon them.... Children could be imprisoned in their own homes, a right husbands had even over their wives until 1891. (Guy 23)

Not that the above-mentioned law changed life for the better for women immediately. Their life continued to be pretty much the same for many years to come.

However, in spite all these constraints and drawbacks some women, who defied social conventions but only to regret later, found enough courage to work their way back into society. It however needed great wits and manipulative power as well as the ability to face social censure on daily basis. One such woman is Mrs Erlynne, the estranged mother of the protagonist Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Mrs Erlynne had deserted her home, husband and most importantly her infant daughter twenty years ago and went away with her lover. We do not know much about her life with this man, but we are given to understand that he abandoned her after living with her for some years. She is now left to fend for herself under an assumed name. Her ardent desire is to get readmitted to the respectable London society which she thinks is possible by marrying Lord Augustus Lorton. She has the wits, the looks and the manipulative power needed for this purpose. She realises that she needs money and a degree of financial status too to gain what she wants. She would not hesitate to do anything for gaining money because it would be the royal road for readmission into society. She happens to read in the newspapers that her daughter, now twenty one years of age, has married a rich man called Lord Windermere and comes up with a stratagem to extract money from him. She has the beauty and the brains for the purpose as we have already noted, and she would like to put these resources to good use now. It is her survival tactic and she resorts to it because of the hostile social environment she has to face all the time. She promptly relocates to London and starts blackmailing Lord Windermere by threatening that she would reveal her identity if he does not part with as much money as she wants. Lord Windermere is a good man. He acquiesces and meets her extravagant financial needs because he knows very well that his wife would kill herself out of shame if she comes to know that she is the daughter of such a disreputable woman.

Lady Windermere would certainly react so violently, as feared by her husband, because of her Puritanical upbringing and the Victorian values she has imbibed. She has been brought up by her father's elder sister Lady Julia who instilled in her a sense right and wrong. She confesses to Lord Darlington, in an effort to discourage him from saying flippant things to her, or anybody else for that matter.

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't spoil it by saying extravagant silly things to me. You think I am a Puritan, I suppose? Well, I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it. My mother died when I was a mere child. I lived always with Lady Julia, my father's elder sister, you know. She was stern to me, but she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. *She* allowed of no compromise. *I* allow of none. (Wilde, *Fan* 7)

Lady Windermere was told that her mother had died, when actually she had eloped with her lover. She was not told the truth because it was too shameful and it would have gravely offended her sensibility given the strict moral principles that obtained then. She has no memory of her mother either. She has grown up believing that her mother was her ideal. She has developed a black and white view of life having given completely into the Victorian values. For that reason she is a little naïve and susceptible to psychological manipulation. But her naïvety would do her no harm since she is married to the kindly and tolerant Lord Windermere who loves her and who would go out of his way to protect her from harm and pain, even if it costs him dearly in financial terms. He experiences intense pain when he has to quarrel with her on account of Mrs Erlynne.

Lady Windermere revels in her domesticity and plays the role of a happy housewife to a T. She is a loving wife, doting mother and an excellent host. She is charming at all times, gentle towards everyone, sympathetic even towards people who intrude upon her privacy, and pure and pious in her thoughts -- which are just the right qualities that would endear a woman to anybody. Not surprisingly therefore she is universally loved, not just by her husband but by her friends as well.

* * *

As the play opens we see Lady Windermere readying the house for a ball that night to mark her coming of age, i.e. her twenty first birthday. The Windermers are aristocrats as suggested by the honorifics 'Lord' and 'Lady' in their names and they live in the fashionable King Street which is not far from the Foreign Office and expensive and exclusive clubs. Their city home in Carlton House Terrace is a huge place where they have a battery of servants to render them a variety of services. They also have a country seat called Selby from where they get a regular supply of roses and other agricultural products and it is also suggested that they go there whenever they are tired of city life. They are well off, in fact very rich, and can afford many luxuries. Their life is marked by social visits, parties, balls, luncheons and journeys. Lady Windermere enjoys every bit of it, that is, until she is told that her husband has transferred his affection to a different woman.

As Lady Windermere prepares for the party that night two significant people come visiting her. The first is Lord Darlington, a family friend, whom she has perhaps known only since she got married to Lord Windermere. It can be conjectured that Lord Darlington is much older than her, possibly ten or fifteen years senior to her, since he is

the age-mate of her husband who himself is much older than her. The difference in their age is significant because Lord Darlington is experienced in the ways of the world while Lady Windermere is innocent and has no clear idea of who is sincere and who is not. Lord Darlington is definitely not sincere as a friend or as a man. He is a predatory opportunist who 'set his eyes' on her quite some time ago and has been waiting for an opportune time to win her over. On this particular day he has come to see her only to further his agenda but making it appear as though it is a casual social visit. He has learnt that Lord Windermere has been squandering his money on the disreputable Mrs Erlynne apart from paying her several visits a week, and he thinks that he can use this knowledge to wean Lady Windermere away from her husband and eventually persuade her to run away with him.

Lord Darlington mixes triviality with seriousness when he speaks perhaps to disguise his real intentions. The good natured Lady Windermere does not see through his game; instead, she offers him unsolicited advice on how he should not speak trivialities. Lord Darlington is not to be warded off all that easily. Assuming that she has some inkling of her husband's waywardness he suggests to her that they two could be good friends. He wants 'her' to take him seriously whether the world does so or not. He then gets down to business by eliciting her opinion on what a woman should think of her husband who is cheating on her. He takes care to project it only as a hypothetical case.

LORD DARLINGTON. [*Still seated.*] Do you think then—of course I am only putting an imaginary instance—do you think that in the case of a young married couple, say about two years married, if the husband suddenly becomes the intimate friend of a woman of—well, more than doubtful character—is always calling upon her, lunching with her, and probably paying her bills—do you think that the wife should not console herself? (Wilde, *Fan* 9)

His suggestion here is that Lady Windermere, if she has any knowledge of her husband's supposed affair with Mrs Erlynne, should 'console' herself by developing an affair with him. Since she has no idea of what actually he is referring to, she tells him that she would never approve of a woman being vile even if her husband is vile, that such women should be never forgiven and finally that there should be laws that apply equally to men and women. She has perhaps held these opinions as a matter of routine and as a result of lack of experience. When, as well shall see later on, she finds out the 'truth' about her husband's 'infidelity' she retracts and is more than willing to be like the same woman whom she despises. Disappointed, Lord Darlington leaves but he is hopeful that it is only a matter of few days before he would succeed.

As Lord Darlington leaves Arabella, the Duchess of Berwick and her simple-minded 'monosyllabic' daughter Lady Agatha Carlisle come visiting Lady Windermere. The Duchess of Berwick has all the sweetness and sophistication of a high society lady but she has a mercenary attitude towards life and she is given to scandal mongering. She has two purposes in paying this visit: one is to ensure that the rich Australian young man Mr James Hopper is invited to Lady Windermere's ball that night because she is considering the possibility of his marrying her daughter, and another is to have some vicarious pleasure at the cost of Lady Windermere because she knows that the whole of London is agog with rumours about Lord Windermere's scandalous visits to No. 84A Curzon Street where Mrs Erlynne lives and his supporting her with large sums of money. She plunges into the subject straightaway, and assuming the stance of a well wisher she says,

Ah, what indeed, dear? That is the point. He [Lord Windermere] goes to see her continually, and stops for hours at a time, and while he is there she is not at home to anyone. Not that many ladies call on her, dear, but she has a great many disreputable men friends -- my own brother particularly, as I told you -- and that is what makes it so dreadful about Windermere. We looked upon HIM as being such a model husband, but I am afraid there is no doubt about it.... And the worst of it all is that I have been told that this woman has got a great deal of money out of somebody, for it seems that she came to London six months ago without anything at all to speak of, and now she has this charming house in Mayfair, drives her ponies in the Park every afternoon and all -- well, all -- since she has known poor dear Windermere. (Wilde, *Fan* 12)

The Duchess of Berwick would not perhaps mind the sexual indiscretions of men as long as they entail no financial implications. According to her admission there are three men in her own family with highly questionable demeanour: her husband Duke Berwick who ran after “all kinds of petticoats, every colour, every shape, every material” (Wilde, *Fan* 13) within a year of their marriage; her son who is “excessively immoral” and keeps odd hours; and finally her notorious brother Lord Augustus who is “completely infatuated about her [Mrs Erlynne]” (Wilde, *Fan* 11). But the Duchess finds Lord Windermere’s conduct particularly reprehensible because he is supposedly squandering large amounts of money on Mrs Erlynne. Money matters a great deal for her and, by extension to all Victorian women, because women’s security largely depends on their men’s financial soundness. One of the leading Wilde scholars, Peter Raby, corroborates this reading of the mind of the Duchess.

What makes Lord Windermere’s conduct so particularly scandalous is that he has given away large sums of money -- Berwick was ‘far too principled for that!’ Marriage is here seen as an economic transaction: the woman acquires security, and the wealth to maintain a conspicuous social position; in return, the man’s sexual infidelities are condoned, or at least overlooked. (Raby 146)

The Duchess concludes that all men, without a single exception, are faithless to their wives and that they never grow any better. They may become old but not good. Assuming that she has successfully unsettled Lady Windermere she makes a big show of concern for her and leaves after passing on to her the received wisdom that she should take her husband abroad because he is sure to come back to her, even if slightly damaged. The Duchess expects Lady Windermere to cry but she assures the old lady that she would never cry. It indicates that in the event of her husband’s infidelity turning out to be true she would think of revenge rather than dissolve into tears. A.B. Walkley too understands that she would indeed take such a drastic step. Lady Windermere is not a woman to take her insult lying down. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the staging of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* he brings out this side of her personality.

Lady Windermere is a guileless young bride who, like M. Dumas’ Françillon, believes in an equal law of fidelity for both husband and wife. She has perfect confidence in her husband, but if ever that confidence is betrayed it is pretty clear that she will act on Françillon’s principle of reprisals—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The time comes when she has reason to suspect that her confidence is

betrayed. An unprincipled man of the world—unprincipled, for he divides mankind not into the good and the bad, but ‘the charming and the tedious,’ and ‘can resist everything, except temptation’—with designs of his own upon Lady Windermere, hints to her—only hints, for he holds that ‘to be intelligible is to be found out’—that her husband is too intimate with a certain Mrs. Erlynne. (Walkley 133)

These two visits leave Lady Windermere wondering about what to do. She sets about finding out the truth. If her husband has really given large sums of money to Mrs Erlynne, as she has been informed, it should have been recorded in his bank book. She ferrets out the bank book and checks it. Lo and behold, her suspicion is not unfounded -- the bank book contains entries to the effect that her husband has been regularly transferring enormous amounts of money to Mrs Erlynne.

An inevitable confrontation between wife and husband ensues. While Lady Windermere accuses Lord Windermere of being madly infatuated with the infamous Mrs Erlynne and of squandering monstrous amounts of money, which legitimately belongs to the family, indeed to her, he protests that her honour is untouched, and that he has merely been helping a hapless woman who wished to get readmitted to society after having been alienated from it for a long time on account of some thoughtless behaviour on her part. He tries to explain Mrs Erlynne’s past in the hope that her feelings would be assuaged.

LORD WINDERMERE. ...Mrs. Erlynne was once honoured, loved, respected. She was well born, she had position—she lost everything—threw it away, if you like. That makes it all the more bitter. Misfortunes one can endure— they come from outside, they are accidents. But to suffer for one’s own faults—ah!—there is the sting of life. It was twenty years ago, too. She was little more than a girl then. She had been a wife for even less time than you have. (Wilde, *Fan* 16)

Mrs Erlynne has suffered for long, has been hounded around mercilessly and she cannot take it any longer. She therefore needs to be sympathetically understood and helped out. Lady Windermere would have none of this and when Lord Windermere suggests that Mrs Erlynne should be invited to the ball that night, as part of the process of her readmission to society, she reaches the end of her tether. She forbids him from doing so but when he persists, she vows to insult Mrs Erlynne by striking her across her face, should she dare cross her threshold, with the ostrich-feather fan he has given her as birthday present. Having been negatively reinforced by Lord Darlington that afternoon she even finds the courage to remind her husband that even if she has lost her parents she has friends, many friends, and that he cannot treat her as he chooses. She then tells him unequivocally that from that moment her life is separate from his. In other words, she has already made up her mind to an extent to accept Lord Darlington’s proposal in case he makes it. Her unexpected and firm response leaves Lord Windermere wondering to himself: “My God! What shall I do? I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her” (Wilde, *Fan* 19).

* * *

Three developments during the party move the story forward. Mrs Erlynne, who has been spared the insult of being struck across the face by Lady Windermere because of her inadvertent dropping of the fan at the right moment, earns universal praise for her beauty, grace and charm. She endears herself to everyone, men and women alike, so that

Lord Augustus' devotion to her increases manifold and the Duchess of Berwick's opinion of her undergoes complete transformation:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. ...A most attractive woman, and has such sensible views on life. Told me she entirely disapproved of people marrying more than once, so I feel quite safe about poor Augustus. Can't imagine why people speak against her. It's those horrid nieces of mine—the Saville girls—they're always talking scandal. (Wilde, *Fan* 30)

One of the stratagems of Mrs Erlynne however backfires and has the unintended effect of driving Lady Windermere straight into the sphere of power of Lord Darlington and away from her husband. In order to make Lord Augustus feel jealous she insists on dancing with Lord Windermere, and Lady Windermere unconsciously interprets it as her husband's open declaration of his love for Mrs Erlynne. This psychological moment is seized by the manipulative Lord Darlington to work on the emotions of Lady Windermere. He gets down to the business of swaying her emotions towards him by maligning her husband. He begins by telling her that she cannot, in fact she should not, live with the man who ill-treats her so badly and so openly. She might think that her husband is living with her every moment but he is in reality only pretending and playing fraud on her.

LORD DARLINGTON. ...What sort of life would you have with him? You would feel that he was lying to you every moment of the day. You would feel that the look in his eyes was false, his voice false, his touch false, his passion false. (Wilde *Fan* 28)

If this state of affairs continues she would be required to eventually act as a mask for his indiscretions. For a pure and innocent lady like her it would be psychological suicide. She does not have to tolerate it.

Lord Darlington then offers himself as the best alternative to her husband. He can as well help her like a good friend but he does not believe that friendship is possible between a man and a woman. There can be passion, enmity and worship, but no friendship between them. True to his conviction he packs passion into his words and tells her that he has been in love with her blindly, adoringly and madly ever since he met her. He sets aside her objection on account of society by assuring her that there are moments in life when people have to make choices between "living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely—or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands" (Wilde *Fan* 29). Lady Windermere has that moment now. He even drops a hint that he would marry her and make her an honourable woman. It is just that she has to make up her mind, and quickly at that, and follow his advice.

LORD DARLINGTON. ...Oh! go—go out of this house, with head erect, with a smile upon your lips, with courage in your eyes. All London will know why you did it; and who will blame you? No one. If they do, what matter? Wrong? What is wrong? It's wrong for a man to abandon his wife for a shameless woman. It is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her. You said once you would make no compromise with things. Make none now. Be brave! Be yourself! (Wilde *Fan* 29)

Lady Windermere is still not too sure of herself and she is also clearly lacking in courage to take the bold step Lord Darlington suggests. There is still too much of the Puritan in her. She needs fresh reinforcement, this time in more concrete and practical terms, to find the courage to take the step.

This fresh impetus comes in the form of a conversation between her husband and Mrs Erlynne which she overhears during the party. Mrs Erlynne asks Lord Windermere to make a handsome settlement of 2500 pounds per annum because it might make her ostensibly even more attractive to Lord Augustus whom she intends to marry, but actually it would make her economically independent. She will have the means to support herself in the event of Lord Augustus abandoning her half way through their marriage.

Lady Windermere feels thoroughly insulted and demoralized by this development and therefore she convinces herself that it is meaningless to continue to live with Lord Windermere as his wife anymore. In a moving soliloquy she articulates her dilemma, pours out her anguish, and spells out her decision in favour of leaving home to join Lord Darlington.

LADY WINDERMERE. To stay in this house any longer is impossible. To-night a man who loves me offered me his whole life. I refused it. It was foolish of me. I will offer him mine now. I will give him mine. I will go to him! ...Arthur has never understood me. When he reads this, he will. He may do as he chooses now with his life. I have done with mine as I think best, as I think right. It is he who has broken the bond of marriage—not I. I only break its bondage. (Wilde, *Fan* 33)

She hurriedly writes a letter addressed to her husband and slips out of the house. In spite of what has happened during the hours leading to this development it does come as a surprise that Lady Windermere should leave her home and hearth, husband and child, honour and reputation placing such high premium on sexual fidelity. On perceiving that her husband has been faithless she would like to pay him in the same coin without sparing a thought for the child she gave birth to just a few months ago. It does not occur to her that she has a greater responsibility to her child who is not even weaned yet, and through him to the whole society, which she has to shoulder. It was a time when motherhood was seen as a great moral and intellectual responsibility. Motherhood was also viewed as something that concerned not just one individual but as something that had great significance to the future of the society and the nation at large. Wilde perhaps wanted to suggest that the instinct of maternity was deadened in the English mothers more readily during the Victorian Era than ever before. To add to all this, Lady Windermere has been brought up imbibing high moral values in strictly decorous society and now without much hesitation she is willing to abandon her husband, home, son, character and reputation knowing full well that it would cause the worst possible scandal which would adversely affect her child's future among other things. And she is willing to do all this for the sake a man who cannot be wholly trusted, and one who has the reputation of being immoral to the core! However, as we shall see later, it is only when she is reminded of her responsibilities as a mother that she changes her mind and returns home.

Luckily for Lady Windermere, Mrs Erlynne reads this letter and, her motherly instincts having been instantaneously revived, she embarks on the difficult mission of rescuing her daughter from the certain doom that awaits her. It appears to Mrs Erlynne as if her own life is repeating itself and she would under no circumstances allow her

daughter to face the same fate she herself faced for having made a similar mistake ages ago.

* * *

Lady Windermere has by now left home, child and husband and is waiting for Lord Darlington in his rooms. Her dilemmas however continue to haunt her.

LADY WINDERMERE. ...Oh! it was mad of me to come here, horribly mad. And yet, which is the worst, I wonder, to be at the mercy of a man who loves one, or the wife of a man who in one's own house dishonours one? What woman knows? What woman in the whole world? But will he love me always, this man to whom I am giving my life? What do I bring him? Lips that have lost the note of joy, eyes that are blinded by tears, chill hands and icy heart. I bring him nothing. I must go back—no; I can't go back, my letter has put me in their power—Arthur would not take me back! That fatal letter! No! Lord Darlington leaves England to-morrow. I will go with him—I have no choice. (Wilde, *Fan* 36)

She is unable to convince herself that she has been wise in doing what she has done. Therefore she finds herself on the horns of a dilemma, impatiently waiting for Lord Darlington on the one hand, and willing to returning home on the other. At this point Mrs Erlynne reaches there and immediately begins persuading her to go back to her husband who loves her and to the child whom she should love. Lady Windermere is surprised at this unexpected development and she interprets it as part of deception played on her by her husband and Mrs Erlynne. She is sure that her husband has sent her as his emissary. In case she returns home what awaits her is a life of degradation and endless insults. She is therefore all the more determined to stay there and go ahead with her plans. Mrs Erlynne, for whom it is a do or die situation, uses all her persuasive powers to convince Lady Windermere of how wrong she has been in assuming that her husband has been guilty of infidelity. She promises never to communicate with him in future on any pretext if that is of any comfort to her, and then she goes on to explain that the money he had given her was “not through love, but through hatred, not in worship, but in contempt” (Wilde, *Fan* 39). She then makes a desperate emotional appeal to Lady Windermere urging her not to spoil her beautiful young life on account of her. If she does not still heed her advice she can surely hope for a hideous life in the days to come.

MRS. ERLYNNE. ...You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at—to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don't know what it is. One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays. You must never know that.... I may have wrecked my own life, but I will not let you wreck yours. (Wilde, *Fan* 40)

Mrs Erlynne's words obviously issue from her own difficult experience. They carry the weight of the pain she has been experiencing for a number of years. She is determined to save her daughter from wrecking her life. She has known, and known rather well, what it is to suffer once the protection of matrimony and family is withdrawn. Lady Windermere is a mere girl and she has no psychological strength or social skills to work her way back into society. The doors shall have been permanently shut on her immediately after her

desertion. She might be left to fend for herself leading an ignominious, poverty stricken and degrading life.

No amount of convincing and pleading seems to work, but Mrs Erlynne does not give up hope. She uses the final weapon in her armoury -- to call Lady Windermere's attention to her child whom she has left behind.

God gave you that child. He will require from you that you make his life fine, that you watch over him. What answer will you make to God if his life is ruined through you? Back to your house, Lady Windermere—your husband loves you! He has never swerved for a moment from the love he bears you. But even if he had a thousand loves, you must stay with your child. If he was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you, your place is with your child. (Wilde, *Fan* 40)

That does the trick. The mention of the child and drawing her attention to maternal responsibilities, if not matrimonial responsibilities, works like magic and Lady Windermere dissolves into tears. She would now like to return to her child, her husband and her home. Mrs Erlynne spirits her away from there, putting herself to considerable social risk in the process, because she has a lot of explanation to do for being present in Lord Darlington's rooms at that odd hour in the first place and for the fan which Lady Windermere has inadvertently left behind in her hurry when Lord Darlington, Lord Windermere and other men return from the club.

* * *

The following morning Lady Windermere feels greatly relieved for averting a great disaster in her life and is grateful to Mrs Erlynne for her extraordinary help and exemplary sacrifice. But she is pricked by conscience and would like to make a clean breast of herself to her husband. Again the timely arrival of Mrs Erlynne, on the pretext of returning Lady Windermere's fan, averts the danger of revelation and the damage it would have caused to their relationship. The previous night's sacrifice would have indeed gone waste.

The Windermeres are now reconciled to one another but there is marked change in their attitude towards Mrs Erlynne. Lord Windermere grows to despise her even more after the events of the previous night.

LORD WINDERMERE. [*Holding her hand.*] Margaret, I thought Mrs. Erlynne was a woman more sinned against than sinning, as the phrase goes. I thought she wanted to be good, to get back into a place that she had lost by a moment's folly, to lead again a decent life. I believed what she told me—I was mistaken in her. She is bad—as bad as a woman can be. (Wilde, *Fan* 50)

He has thus lost whatever sympathy he had for her. In his opinion Mrs Erlynne is a depraved woman who deserves only contempt. The degradation she has suffered all these years is well deserved. She does not need to be sympathised with or supported now or in future.

Lady Windermere, on the other hand, grows to like Mrs Erlynne immensely and is willing to part with anything to please her -- her photo with her son, the fan which has been the source of great anxiety and so on. She feels that she owes her very existence to Mrs Erlynne which is ironical because, being her biological daughter, she indeed owes her existence to Mrs Erlynne. In the present instance Mrs Erlynne has once again given birth to her, in the social sense of course. But for her timely help Lady Windermere would have been socially annihilated.

Lady Windermere has learnt her lesson the hard way. In one single night she has traversed the difficult path from innocence to experience. She is no longer sure if people, especially women, can be divided into black and white categories.

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, Arthur, don't talk so bitterly about any woman. I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don't think Mrs. Erlynne a bad woman—I know she's not. (Wilde, *Fan* 51)

The suggestion is that the so called 'good' women, like herself for instance, might have terrible things lurking in their hearts and the so called 'bad' women like Mrs Erlynne may have plenty of nobility although unrecognized and unrewarded. In the end it is impossible to separate one category of people from the other. This is the wisdom she has gained and she would like to cherish it.

A sentimental reunion between the mother and daughter is meticulously avoided at the end of the play or at any other point prior to that. Even Mrs Erlynne allows the truth to be revealed very casually to the audience at the end of the first act and subsequently during her conversation with Lord Windermere. She would not like her identity to be revealed to her daughter because that would do her more harm than good. The young woman is ensconced in the belief that her mother was a noble soul who unfortunately died early. One act of sacrifice, such as saving her from ruin a few hours ago, might not elevate her to the position of a loving, virtuous and self-sacrificing mother. Her daughter has learnt a lesson on account of her and thus she has served her purpose as a mother, possibly more efficiently than a regular mother who brings up her daughter watching over her every minute. What all she could not give her daughter all these 21 years of her life she has more than compensated by her one act of saving her from disgrace and doom. In this context we are reminded of the Duchess of Berwick who takes care of her daughter Lady Agatha Carlisle every single minute but only to unwittingly turn her into an ignoramus, a dimwit, who cannot act on her own and who can speak only in monosyllables because her mental capabilities do not permit her to think independently about anything, including her own life.

Had the identities of mother and daughter been established it would have marred much of the artistic appeal of the play. *Lady Windermere's Fan* has been conceived as a dark drama focussed on social issues affecting the lives of people, especially women, during the Victorian Era. The characters constitute the focal point of the social forces acting on them. Their acts of commission and omission are largely dictated by the moral codes, social norms and ideological currents obtaining amidst them. The characters merely help dramatize them and through their choices and the consequent suffering they bring to fore those sordid aspects of English life which everybody conveniently chose to

ignore. Women's social and economic vulnerability and the grave risks they faced in case of defiance of social and moral norms on their part are just a few of these aspects which Wilde deals with in this play. While doing so he takes care to camouflage criticism with wit and word play. He knows that society is the true villain and it is surely at fault for the tragedies that befall, or nearly befall, his characters. He paints the picture of society in such a way that it would not be interpreted as offensive although the point is well driven home.

Wilde's solution to the problem is clear and unmistakable. He thinks that the Victorian society has lost the moral right to regulate or dictate the lives of people for all the indignities and insults it heaps on them, especially on the women. England is no longer the right place for self-respecting and assertive individuals to live in. It is perhaps for this reason that Mrs Erlynne decides to leave England after her marriage to Lord Augustus and live abroad. England should either change or be prepared to be condemned as a dark, unliveable place where innocent people are persecuted and punished for perceived infringement of moral norms. For many innocent people life here more than qualifies as a dark drama.

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