

Social and Psychological Alienation of Tennessee Williams's Select Women Characters

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams reflects the presence of social aspects of alienation together with psychological alienation. This study foregrounds female protagonists from his famous plays who are predominantly configured as 'Southern belle', the cultural remnants of the formerly dominant land-owning gentry of the Southern United States. But gradually the family has become dispossessed of property and compelled to find a home for itself when faced with the struggle for existence. It is significant to note these Southern belles in Williams's plays are psychologically alienated, whether it is due to psychological fragility or due to the repression of real emotions, these women are unable to achieve sexual harmony. This state may be the reason for the mental cleavage from which they suffer. The predicament of Southern women as projected in the plays of Tennessee Williams is complex. It has psychological and socio-economic drawbacks which contribute to a deep sense of frustration that finally leads them to alienation from the ordinary system of humanity. The main objective of this research paper has been to showcase the agony and angst of these concerned women characters and it tries to find out that the liberation from mental trauma and violence lies within the self.

Keywords: Alienation; Conjugal cacophony; Psychological alienation; Social alienation; Violence.

The readers and critics of the celebrated American dramatist Tennessee Williams often feel inclined to associate him with obscenity, private fallibilities, sensuality, and homosexuality. He is considered a playwright of psychoanalysis and is associated with trauma, violence and extreme sensationalism. His critics often describe him as a man given to excessive indulgence in homosexual desires. The label of homosexuality that has

added to Tennessee Williams's image has led his readers to associate violence with his personality and literary canvass.

C.W.E. Bigsby, one of the well-known scholars of American theatre, argues that "throughout his career, Williams was haunted by a violence which could not be resisted in kind..." (Bigsby 22). He observes that his plays are glutted with images and symbols representing mental predicament and violence in the body and psyche. Critics such as Roger Boxill and Donald Spoto believe that he presents the alienated, the dysfunctional, and other outcasts of society, and that his genius is concerned about their sufferings. Perhaps no post-war American writer can claim to have transformed popular culture on the stage as he does. Famous American literary critic Harold Bloom discussed Williams from the perspective of Marxism, deconstruction, feminism, and to some extent, psycho-feminism which at times brought him into an international arena for the discussion of queer and taboo themes.

In the modern age, dramatists have clarified their aims for composing plays as for example, Williams himself expressed his views on this aspect in his Preface and Forward to the *The Glass Menagerie* thus:

My chief aim in playwriting is the creation of characters. I have always had a deep feeling for the mystery of life and essentially my plays has been an effort to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living. (Williams 13)

But this paper aims at presenting totally different aspects of Tennessee Williams's characters and, for the substantiation of the ideas presented through the portrayal of these characters, it leans basically on his own statement:

I am!

The most preposterous circumstances to all -.... (Williams 105)

This is a crucial statement which this paper wishes to pinpoint besides a discussion of his psychological problems, his desperate need for emotional support, the essence of sexuality rooted deep in his psyche, his tormented self, leading to a hollow-relationship with his family, and his unending search for completeness – to overcome life's predicament.

The chief reason for Williams's stronger focus on revealing characters

rather than on any other part of dramatic structure is his deep interest in exploring the psychology of individuals who do not fit into society. The characters Williams has created are misfits, dreamers, fugitives and outcasts. As V. Rama Murthy rightly asserts:

Most of them are misfits. They look pathetic with selfpity and forlorn hopes, and their nihilistic despair is born out of dissatisfaction in life (Murthy 51).

Tennessee Williams, in his plays, dealt with the turmoil within his characters and his handling of the theme of frustration and agony constantly going on in their minds is peculiar in the sense that he paid due concentration on both the causes – physical and psychological which agitated their pitiable condition. His most celebrated characters on the stage, namely Blanche DuBois, Amanda Wingfield, Catharine Holly, Laura Wingfield, and Maggie, often face the prospect of loneliness and anxiety just because they have lost communication with their family. Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie*, is emotionally shattered after her husband's sudden disappearance. As a result she has become increasingly disconnected from reality and lives in the state of anxiety, fearing that her only son, Tom, will desert her just as her husband did. Similarly, Maggie of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* tries her best to redeem her husband from his peculiar inferiority complex and homosexual inclinations. Further, Blanche DuBois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one of the most popular characters that Williams has ever produced, faces the prospect of loneliness. Though she does not mourn the death of her husband so passionately, like Serafina Della Rose of *The Rose Tattoo*, she does not remain behind in finding social and economic support.

One of the central arguments of this paper is that, beyond the social isolation and economic challenges these women face, a more significant theme emerges: the psychological pressures and inner complexes that shape their experiences. F. Leavitt maintains:

The plight of the individual trapped by the environment, the loneliness and lack of communication between human beings unable to reconcile the flesh with the spirit (Leavitt 13)

It seems that psychological pressure is one of the recurring themes in Williams's plays. He himself clarified in his Prefatory Note to *The Glass Menagerie* that his aim in his plays is to delve deep into the inner workings of the human consciousness and bring out the complexes and tensions

within, that made him reject the Naturalist technique and change over to the employment of expressionistic techniques.

Therefore, it is clear that he desires not only to employ unconventional techniques, but also to focus attention on interpreting his inner psyche. The experiences of his female characters are not usual but are of an unconventional sort. They are not ordinary women, but fugitives and outcasts living on the borderline of despair. These fugitive and broken characters are Blanche, Amanda, Laura, Catharine and Maggie, who refuse to deal with the expectations of the social code. Nevertheless, all his female protagonists cannot be treated as "lost souls" because some of them are liable to retrieve the loss and rehabilitate themselves. Margaret, Amanda, and Serafina for example are aggressive enough to gasp the causes of their alienation, and they stand firm enough to abandon fixed attitudes. On the other hand, Laura Wingfield, Blanche DuBois and Catharine are unable to get themselves exempt from their subjective affirmation made of their intricacies, and hence, they are too fragile to challenge life boldly. These disturbed and suffering women are confronted with utter psychological alienation – because of their own inner tension; and social alienation – because of separation from their families and friends.

George W. Crandell discerns that Williams's dramatic canvass portrays "a group of people in conflict, the result of a psychological crisis experienced by one of the group members" (Crandell429), illustrating his point with examples such as Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Catharine Holly in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), all of which can be added to the list. These plays reflect the struggles and mental predicament of the forlorn who confront the external world and their inner selves and exhibit humour, dignity and psychic trauma. The paper attempts to demonstrate two main feminine predicaments – the psychological and the sociological. Some of these female protagonists experience what one may call 'psychological alienation', while others face 'social alienation'.

The question of identity, "who am I"? appears in almost all of Tennessee Williams's major plays. His characters find themselves merely automations driven by personal as well as impersonal forces. The sense of belongingness, erosion of values, homelessness, conjugal dissonance and physical fragility highlight the futility of existence that these characters grapple with. Alienation is a term that indicates the suffering of an individual who is separated from a group to which he or she belongs. This sense of separation produces a discerning awareness of being alone and the consequent

desire to acquire some support in life and belong to a group. However, in psychological alienation, the issues originate internally due to the development of specific turmoil within the individual's character.

Williams's portrayal of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* showcases psychological alienation because she develops a desire for a refined life, a touch of poetic sensibility, though her means are shrinking. This discrepancy builds in her mind a sense of confusion leading to a breakdown of normalcy. She enters a state of hysterical mendacity with abnormal emotionalism and a frantic desire to escape into a world of fantasy. She withdraws herself into delusions and as her judgements get falsified, she gets into hysterical disorder. In the case of such psychological alienation, she cannot face the disagreeable reality of the world. In fact, Blanche is a fugitive in a double sense. The first is a search for place and position while the other is a state of mind in which delusions cannot interfere. Thus, Blanche's personality is a unique example of total psychological alienation.

Catharine Holly of *Suddenly Last Summer* is another victim of such 'psychological alienation'. She has never been presented in a normal routine. Her alienation is due to the behaviour of her aunt, Mrs Venable, whose son is a closeted homosexual, and who accused her of having an illicit relationship with her deceased son. This made Catharine mentally broken, and she began to experience psychological alienation. She recalled how Sebastian once invited her to accompany him on a summer tour. There, on the summer tour, Catharine comes to realise that Mrs. Venable's relations with her son Sebastian were not pious, and this thing made her hysterical and she started babbling the hideous story about Mrs. Venable and Sebastian. Moreover Mrs. Venable is cruel enough to bribe the doctor attending to her to operate upon Catharine. Thus, her passion for truth-telling becomes the cause of her psychological alienation. It is a sense of helplessness that often contributes to tension in the mind, which in turn causes a feeling of alienation and frustration.

Tennessee Williams reflects the presence of social aspects of alienation together with psychological alienation. This study foregrounds female protagonists who are predominantly configured as 'Southern belle', the cultural remnants of the formerly dominant landowning gentry of the Southern United States. But gradually the family has become dispossessed of property and compelled to find a home for itself when faced with the struggle for existence. Some of these southern women struggle and become enterprising, like Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie*

who desperately waits for financial aid from outsiders such as gentleman callers, and Maggie of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* who fights for her share in the family and leaves no stone unturned to bring her own homosexual husband back to normalcy. Most women in Williams's plays are unable to rehabilitate themselves economically and socially and suffer social alienation. Separation from the mainstream of life with gainful occupation and a family life in which they can find solace, neither Amanda nor Maggie gets it. If the former gets refuge in her fugitive husband's home, the latter only ends up in her marital life at the hands of Brick Pollitt.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura has been described as a 'paranoiac' and her mother Amanda, is a bit of a 'paranoiac'. This is so because both have alienated themselves from their surroundings. The young girl, Laura, suffers from the pain arising from her disability on one of her feet, and she wishes to hide this from the people around her. She resorts to spending her time in the park instead of attending the commercial college; spending her time with her collection of fragile glass objects is an indication of this hysterical disturbance arousing an intense desire to hide. Even her mother Amanda, frequently reflecting on the supposed glory of her girlhood with several suitors approaching for her hand, suffers from the same mental alienation. In other words, mental alienation occurs when the person is unable to reconcile the early desires of her youth. This experience is common, with variations, for Blanche DuBois, Laura, Amanda and Maggie, who try to repress their real feelings through outward efforts.

Maggie's portrayal as an indifferent woman in the play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a result of her emotional alienation. Appalled by loneliness and anxiety, she imagines her future stuck in basic alienation between her world and that of Brick's. She is the only character in the play who challenges Brick's masculinity. She is a passionate and hypersensitive woman trapped by her love for Brick Pollitt. She is frustrated and frantic because the life she is living, a life without natural conjugal relations, has become intolerable for her. She holds that a union of a man and a woman in love is almost necessary to live a successful marital life. Furthermore, Maggie does not like to be a part of debauchery like Blanche, who seeks physical fulfilment with just anyone, so she feels alienated and broken. Her refusal of physical union with her husband, Brick, is one of the reasons for her broken self. According to Kathleen Anne Duggins:

Maggie likes a life of married celibacy and, because of the apathy of her husband; she is not certain where to turn to find an answer (Duggins 84).

It is significant to note that these Southern belles in Williams's plays are psychologically alienated, whether it is due to psychological fragility or due to the repression of real emotions, these women are unable to achieve sexual harmony. This state may be the reason for the mental cleavage from which they suffer. The predicament of Southern women as projected in the plays of Tennessee Williams is complex. It has psychological and socio-economic drawbacks which contribute to a deep sense of frustration that finally leads them to alienation from the ordinary system of humanity.

Furthermore, the predicament of Southern women as brought forward by Williams is caused by the yearning for a group to which they belong, as for example, the group of ordinary married women in the cases of Laura, Blanche, and Maggie. Had they been married normally, they might have felt satisfied of belonging with the established way of life. The absence of this satisfaction of belonging to a home leaves Blanche totally broken. She finds her predicament beyond any normal solution and her violation by Stanley only breaks her frail mental balance. In Maggie's case, she was repressing her real desires with a male-centric complex and hostility to her husband. Therefore, the predicament is not solely caused by inbuilt psychological weaknesses or complexes and the failure of socio-economic opportunities, but sometimes tragedy is caused by the pressure of the environment, as happens in Williams's other controversial play, *Suddenly Last Summer*. The action of this play takes place in a remote gothic arena with two garrulous interfering female characters – Catharine Holly and her aunt Mrs. Venable.

Both the characters suffer from all sorts of mental aberrations. In particular, Catharine Holly a young deranged woman was made responsible for the untimely death of her cousin Sebastian Venable. Similarly Catharine's aunt, Mrs. Venable (mother of Sebastian) retells her son's story to Dr. Cukrowicz, hiding the fact that Sebastian was a homosexual poet and one who was intensely aware of the cruelty and barbarism of the modern world. The recurring 'hauling' of Mrs. Venable and Catharine's 'babbling', provides a terrifying background to the agony and mental trauma of Catharine, who is logged in her own suffering.

Therefore, the predicament of Williams's women characters as presented in the plays is not simply due to a sort of inner alienation or a separation from a neighbouring social group but also due to the presence of some kind of frightening environment, as in the play *Suddenly Last Summer*. Here an attempt has been made to consider only the women characters

and the nature of the predicament which they face, trying to discover the contributory cause to it. Sometimes it is their mental shortcoming and sometimes it is their social shortcoming which generally contributes to their inability to find a place in society or a berth in life. As has been pointed out, Williams has provided contrasts to those women characters that are broken by their predicament, as in the case of Maggie of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, she also overcomes the hostility of her brother-in-law and his family and also the serious homosexual complex of her husband and tries to make her wedded life fruitful. This is that in dealing with the predicament of women characters it is not always a projection of difficulties and a failure. Williams presents some possibilities of women courageously finding a solution.

To make an assessment of the method of approach, a combination of ordinary psychological deductions coordinated with social situations is provided in the texts of Williams's plays. Broadly speaking, the plays we went through from *The Glass Menagerie* to *Suddenly Last Summer* have been considered for taking up the major women characters who face some type of predicament, be it trauma, violence, marital disharmony and alienation, which are the themes of this paper. The main objective of this research has been to showcase the agony and angst of these concerned women characters, and it tries to find out that liberation from mental trauma and violence lies within the self. Williams, through the representation of 'plastic theatre' and 'expressionistic devices', manifests the image of communication, gesture, mute pictures, laughter and cries to pursue the concept of self-liberation.

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