

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

CONFLICT BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY: A FEMINIST READING OF THE SELECT PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

P. Alaguraja¹, Dr. Sp. M. Kanimozhi²

¹Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi



ABSTRACT

In this paper I shall discuss the plight of the women character of Tennessee Williams as they struggle between reality and the illusive world. Women take many roles in our society. They shoulder many responsibilities. But still they have to undergo many situation and hostile environment which they find it not only difficult but also subjugate them and detain them from going to success. Tennessee Williams talk about women as they struggle between the illusion and reality. They are never allowed to live in a reality and so they prefer to live in a fantasy world. They are ready to face the realities of the world.

Key Words: Women, Illusion, Reality, patriarchal, Social, Economic, Political

Introduction

In the patriarchal world, women are traditionally considered as subordinates and forced to don the role of home –maker. Being voiceless creatures, they take different roles such as submissive daughters, responsible wives and loving mothers. Amidst of their routines, they forfeit their unique identity and feel a sense of isolation. But, the postcolonial challenges drastically bring predominant changes in women and their status. They actively participate in social, economic, and political activities. Women in the modern era have touched the pinnacle of higher education and their role in the society is indispensable. But the patriarchal oppression on women folk continues to slaughter them in many ways. In many countries including the English speaking countries, the hostile situation of women in the family, outside the family, within the marital relationship and their workplace are still present. This is indeed a worst thing which is to be pitied about. Tennessee Williams has

exquisitely highlighted the problems and sufferings faced by women in his dramas.

Tennessee Williams, one of the eminent writers of America, was born on 26 March 1911 in Mississippi the American south. Having belonged to the rich tradition of the American south, Williams has deeply travelled into the underside of the mind of the southern characters. It is obvious that Williams has created a number of striking characters. With his remarkable literary talent, he flogs the evilness of American patriarchal society in his writings. He vividly portrays pathetic condition of women who oscillate between domestic responsibilities and longing for self identity.

Most of the women characters in Williams's plays deal with men's unscrupulous attitude towards women. Due to their hostile and circumstances, they want to be liberated from the subjugation of patriarchal society. These patriarchal structures deny their freedom and pay a deaf ear to their voice. He strongly rebukes against gender discrimination which quells women in the name of sexuality. It is

evident through his using of sexual symbols in his plays. According to Williams, sex is the greatest liberator, where the meaning of life is found.

This idea can be seen in all of his women characters. There are a number of women characters who are liberal in the matter of sex. These women do not worry about their promiscuity. For example, Margaret in *Cat on Hot Tin Roof* belongs to this group and feels liberated by allowing herself with a man to test his virility. Likewise, in the play *The Night of the Iguana*, Maxine Faulk indulges herself in sexual matters. Blanche Dubois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, though a refined gentlewoman, turns out as a prostitute.

Tennessee William's women characters are his best dramatic creation because they dominate his entire plays in which they appear. Being representative of certain southern types, they are the most remarkable characters in the theatre tradition. Williams has achieved recognition for creating southern gentle women characters like of Amanda Winfield and her daughter Laura. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams portrays two women characters who are indeed traditional. Both Amanda and Laura are scared to face the reality of the world and live in an illusory world. They are the victims of the tradition which hunts them in the form of memory. Amanda is always thinking about the romance that she has in the past. Left by her husband and impoverished by the depression, Amanda desperately seeks economic and social securities both herself and for her daughter. The sense of insecurity drives Amanda to affluent time of the past- the golden days of her girlhood. She moves into her past to assume the southern behaviour of gentlewoman.

In Amanda's life, the present doesn't make any sense or impact on her. Therefore, she prefers living in the illusive and legendary world of mythological cavalier old south. She is not able to understand the present and if she tries to understand, she doesn't know how to react because she doesn't want to compromise with it. Amanda finds solace in illusion and doesn't want to engage herself in the present therefore; she pushes herself to live in an imaginary past. She is absolutely

obsessed with the past and cannot cart off its shackles. She tries to force the refined tradition and manners on her son also.

For instance, while Amanda and Laura are waiting for Tom to join them at a table, Amanda calls him and says that they "can't say grace until you come to the table" (6). Amanda's use of the word "grace" speaks for her obsession with style, a component of past tradition. Her speech directing Tom how to eat shows her assumed stature:

Amanda (to her son): Honey, don't push with your fingers. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew- chew! Animals have sections in their stomachs which enable them to digest food without mastication, but human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down. Eat food leisurely, son and really enjoy it. A well-cooked meal has lots of delicate flavours that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function. (6)

Likewise, Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* struggles to live by present and prefers to live by the illusive and legendary tradition which is the mythology cavalier of old south. The clutches of the tradition is so much on Blanche that she even forgets the present and prefers to live in the past. Mary Ann Corrigan clearly explains Blanche's condition that "Blanche is both a representative and victim of a tradition that taught her attractiveness, virtue, and gentility led automatically to happiness" (56).

Blanche is compelled to follow the footprints of the tradition in order to get the assured joy and happiness. She is disappointed and can't get out of it because the tradition is her created illusion. When she ignores the reality of her present, the tragedy occupies in her life. Blanche's sister's husband, Stanley confirms that Blanche is a teacher of English.

STANLEY: You're teacher, aren't you?

BLANCHE: Yes.

STANLEY: What do you teach, Blanche?

BLANCHE: English. (14)

Stanley comes to know a lot of information about Blanche through his wife Stella.

STANLEY: You were married once, weren't you?

[The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance.]

BLANCHE: Yes. When I was quite young.

STANLEY: What happened?

BLANCHE: The boy--- the boy died. [She sinks back down]

I'm afraid I'm---- going to sick! (15)

It is understood that Blanche's life is in total confusion that she doesn't have anybody to alienate her. Her visit to her sister is well understood that she wants to come out her past experience and the memory of it. The past chases her throughout her life.

The attitude of Blanche towards places and people is stipulated when she stays in Belle Reve. She criticizes Stella and says that:

"Never, never, never in my worst dreams could I picture--- Only Mr Edgar Allan Poe! -- could do justice! Out there I suppose is the ghoul haunted woodland of weir" (7)

She dislikes staying in the flat because it doesn't have any weird atmosphere which Edgar Alan Poe has used in his writings. Blanche is even forced to sell Belle Rev where, she struggles to hold but fails. She has to see the white -columned mansion turned out as death-bed of her parents, aunt and other relatives. Blanche is reduced to a servant changing pillow cases on an increasingly empty plantation. Although Belle- Reve is lost, she loves to be a prisoner to the land. The tradition of the old south is still in the mind of Blanche that never teaches her how to react or survive in economic crises. The tradition gives importance to only the physical attractiveness. In this process, she refuses to understand the value of the present. She is only conscious of her physical appearance in the

play. She wants to hear from her sister as how she looks:

BLANCHE: You haven't said a word about my appearance.

STELLA: You look fine. (Williams 8)

In this conversation Blanche tries to tell that Stella has put on some weight:

BLANCHE: I want you to look at my figure! [She turns around] You know I haven't Put on one ounce in ten years, Stella? I weigh what I weighed the summer you left

Belle Reve....

STELLA [a little wearily]: It's just incredible, Blanche, how well you're looking.(8-9)

A *Streetcar Named Desire* deals with themes like alienation, violence, illusion, death, love, desire, pride, loneliness, madness and theme of illusion versus reality. The world makes life very tough as all the characters experience in the play. The characters are alienated and suffered by the harsh reality of the world. Blanche who is the main character of play is forced to face the truth of her own lustful feelings. The clash between Blanche and Stanley is understood to be a clash between illusion and reality.

Blanche's past is really miserable. The boy whom she married turns out to be a homosexual. Consequently, he kills himself because he is not able to bear the guilt within himself. Blanche becomes a sexual prevent when she is forced to tied her identity. She thinks that she is trying to compensate for her failure with her husband Alan. She brands the sexual relationship with the young soldiers as a compensation for her failure. She seems to be reliving her part including her promiscuity and dismissed from the school where she has worked.

The critics who write about Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana* focus primarily on the function of the ordinary environment in the play, or else on the principal sexual themes around which the play is structured. However, the connection between the natural environment and the play's concept of sexual expression remains unexplored. The verandah of the Costa Verde hotel-

where the play is set operates as a representative gap in which environment and sex become entangled and co-constitutional.

It is a space in which the characters are encouraged to express their sexuality in measured tones, without allowing raw sexual desires and impulses to completely dictate their behaviour.

Maxine is one of the principal heroines of *The Night of Iguana*, is running a hotel named *Coste Verde* where the entire story takes place. While Maxine's husband Fred does not focus on his dressing sense and code, she is not attracted towards him and consequently she wants to satisfy her sexual desires with men who come to her hotel to stay. Maxine never minds having sexual intercourse even with her co-workers. She is sexual pervert. Her desires are never met. It is sad to find that even her husband Fred who glues away in the middle of the plays as it advances. As a matter of fact, she is obviously a lady with an extreme identity. Faulk's identity gets changed and she becomes more thoughtful and concerned towards Shannon and Hannah.

Though Shannon has got some imperfection and constraints, Faulk still loves him very much that she even pays him for his numerous visits to a psychological refuge. In spite of her financial crisis, her mind is always running towards and she tries to tempt him by her action. She allows him to use his husband's garments. So that he would stay in the inn for a longer period of time. It shows her wilder side of her identity that she is pulled into him. Her opposition towards Hannah whom Shannon loves is exposed thus: Maxine: No, I just mean Shannon. I want you to lay off him honey. You're not for Shannon and Shannon isn't for you. (283)

On the veranda, the characters long "to reach out to one another," as Kenneth Holditch argues in "Acts of Grace", and to connect through frank discussions of their sexual histories (146). Holditch, referring to Williams' one-act version of *The Night of the Iguana* entitled *Two Acts of Grace*, notes that Williams believed that it was essential for human beings to 'connect,' to communicate" (146). Shannon relates stories that involve fornication with

young girls: Maxine explains about her sexually annoyed relationship with her late husband Fred, reveals her sexual attraction for Shannon and confesses to having passionate sexual encounters with Pedro and Pancho, her young and attractive Mexican employees.

Hannah is one of the heroines of *The Night of the Iguana*. Hannah is an American spinster who has dedicated her life to her grandfather. Hannah is a moderately aged lady, who is at first portrayed as "absolutely female." Hannah is a craftsman who paints representations of individuals in the spots that she goes to the world over. Hannah has introduced herself to Charlotte:

Hannah: Why don't just sit down, dear. I'm an artist, a painter. I was just sorting out my watercolours and sketches in this portfolio, and look what I've come across. (261)

In spite of the fact that Hannah appears just to keep granddad alive, she, in the end, winds up amidst a semi-adore triangle between Maxine Faulk and herself. Shannon every now and then attempts to attract her. Hannah is lady who is never attracted by Shannon and his endeavours. She doesn't have any zeal for sex or love. She never allows herself to be devoured by her sexual desires and worldly pleasure. She is quiet aware of what she actually needs and wants in the world. She has got a beautiful understanding of what life is all about. She is very much sincere and bold enough to face all the realities of the world. But Maxine and Shannon are always confused about what they have to choose in their life and what they indeed need. Throughout the play, there is a strain between Hannah and Maxine as Hannah gets the feeling that Maxine does not need her to stay. After Hannah uncovers that she has no fascination with Shannon and, Maxine is acknowledges. They collaborate to secure Shannon and quiet him down. Hannah finds a "Sympathetic interest"(420) in common with Shannon after confiding that she facilitates a man's masturbation in sampan by providing him "a piece of her clothing"(417) In this regard, Tennessee Williams has revealed the mind of human by creating the charterers like Hannah.

Conclusion

Hence one can always perceive the conflict between reality and illusion. Especially with regard to female characters in the plays of Tennessee Williams, if it is identified that women suffer between illusion and reality. They are never allowed to understand the realities of the world. Williams presents a place where the characters are encouraged to express sexuality without surrendering to sexual desires. In this regard, liberty has opened to the character of Maxine and Hannah who has been exposing duality of thinking in this play.

Marital discard, broken relationships, alienation, identity crisis are a common things among the female characters of Tennessee Williams. It is also noted that women are helpless in their works. Even the life of Amanda and Laura can't escape the reality. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* struggles very much to live in the reality rather than in an illusive tradition. So they try to live in the world of fantasy. It is quite an undeniable fact that Tennessee Williams has somehow understood the mindset of people in the modern era. Certainly, the clutches of illusion against reality are so strong, solid, determined, and powerful to take away the happiness from people.

References

- Corrigan, Mary Ann. "Realism and Theatricalism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Tennessee Williams's Named Desire*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.
- Falk, Signi Lenea. *Tennessee Williams*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961.
- Holditch, Kenneth. "Acts of Grace," in *The Night of the Iguana*. New York: New Directions Books, 2009.
- Williams, Tennessee, *A streetcar Named Desire*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt.Ltd., 1999.
- Williams, Tennessee. *Cat on Hot Tin Roof, The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, The Night of Iguana*