



DEPICTION OF SEXUALITY AND DOMINANCE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to depict sexuality and dominance of sexual violence as projected in the dramatic world of Tennessee Williams who is a part of rich and varied literary tradition. This works have been influenced by his own disoriented life which gets reflected in the traumatic life led by his characters. This shows how Williams is chiefly concerned with the duality of life presenting the psychology rather than a philosophy of life.

Key words : *Homosexuality, sexual abuses, psychological Conflict, Liberation, suppression.*

INTRODUCTION

It is generally understood that a notable feature of American culture has been the emergence of a rich and varied literature of the South, in the middle decades of the twentieth century and writers from this area have distinguished themselves in poetry, fiction and drama, in journalism, criticism and even editing. Tennessee Williams is a part of this rich and varied literary tradition. The major influence on William's work has been his own disoriented life. In his *Memoirs*, Williams writes with disarming honesty of his relationship with his mother, Miss. Edwine & his sister. Miss Rose, who has been confined to mental institutions for much of her life. Perhaps, what caused him the maximum torment personally and the fact that made him feel isolated was his homosexuality. However, he hides nothing and his *Memoir's* are refreshingly direct and most of his male characters are homosexual. His own pain and torture get reflected in the traumatic life led by his characters. The homosexual, who is already a

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tormented individual, deserves the sympathy and compassion of others; so felt Williams. This homosexual trait and its consequences mainly influence the relationships of his characters and the consequent violence sexual or otherwise, in his plays.

As regards literary influences, Williams found the Russian dramatist Anton Chekov's works in emotional tune with his own feelings. This influence dates back to his formative years and is candidly brought out in his characters. They are unhappy, defeatist, weak of will and often in capable of action. "From Chekov, Williams appears to have learnt the importance of bringing out the inner experiences and reactions of his characters" (Kernan 108). Another writer whose life and work affected Williams deeply was D.H. Lawrence who lived fully the role of the artist in revolt against the established canons of society. There is much of Lawrence in Williams' concern with suppressed sexuality and in his search for liberation through uninhibited animality. William's man are only D.H.Lawrence derivatives whose lives are replete with animalistic passions and virility, intellectually inferior to the women. In fact, Williams recreated the last days of D.H.Lawrence's life in his short play, *I Rise in Flame, cried the Phoenix*, Both Lawrence and Williams emphasized upon sexuality. They were both the products of incompatible marriages between puritanical women and boisterous, bawdy men. Both writers grew up in a sordid industrial environment. Lawrence, we know, could never forget the soul destroying reality of the colliery – a recurring symbol in his books. Williams was ensconced in an ugly St.Louis slum, which he says,

"... was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and rebellion that have grown into an inherent part of my work"

The essential concern of both Lawrence and Williams lays focus on the relationships between men and women, or men and men.

On the surface, the expression "sexual violence" implies a violent relationship - be it between man and man or men and woman. Secondly, it also involves the violation of womanhood – be it physical or emotional. His plays are replete with homosexuals, lesbians, fetishists, pedophiles, sadists and masochists. Much like their creator, these beings are the misfits of society. As such, they are confronted with the problems of forming any satisfactory – relationship with any other human being. This results in frustration which makes them perpetrate violence either upon their partners or their own final breakdown. Blanche is carried off to an asylum at the end of *Streetcar* and Catherine who may or not be sane, is in an institution in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Shannon has to be tied down *Iguana* and Hannah who confronts him hints at a dark night in her own soul. Added to the insane, is the



world of the drug addicts and nostalgia freaks who are unable to adjust in the real world and prefer to live in a phantasma of hallucinations. Blanche and Shannon belong to this category.

Sexual contact, as shown in Lawrence's works and as outlined in his essays, is much deeper and more intense than the obvious perversions practiced by William's characters. The phoenix image itself – that of a bird arising out of its own ashes (a symbol of consummated love used by Lawrence) shows the essence of sexual conflict. The act of consummation is a living death for the lovers, but they arise out of the ashes, revitalized and renewed. This too, occurs only if the lovers are true and not, 'counterfeit ones; because D.H. Lawrence feels that any marriage which is solely for the sake of the 'trimmings' and show, is an utter failure. A marriage is truly successful only when its consummation, resolves all quarrels and misconceptions, when the lovers emerge phoenix like. Williams' plays to a great extent show agreement with this. *Streetcar Named Desire* shows us two relationships between Stanley and Stella (where consummation is their perfect line of communication) and between Stanley and Blanche, (where love becomes lust, violence and ultimately the rape of the Southern gentle woman). So, one can see the difference here, in the first case, the act of love resolves all misunderstandings and in the latter, the same act is fraught with violence and annihilation.

The term "Sexual violence" here implies violation of womanhood in the plays of Tennessee Williams; as also, the violent, complex mental and physical man – woman relationships in his works. Williams calls D.H.Lawrence his idol in his *Memoirs*; in fact, he wrote a play *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix* based on D.H.Lawrence's life. It thus seems fitting to apply Lawrence's sexual and love ethic in order to explain the complexities in Williams plays. There is a definitely close relationship between the works and beliefs of the two litterateurs. If *Phoenix* gives us a record of Lawrence's love ethic, Williams' *Memoirs* is an intimate account of his life; a frank revelation about his innermost thoughts, his homosexuality Relationships are the prime concern of both Lawrence and Williams. Williams' characters seem to have tingling life of their own. It almost seems as if they grow out of control of the playwright. Unlike Lawrence's characters, Williams' characters do not move along pre-outlined directions, but get themselves tangled into knots that often are destructive. It is because of this that we need some sort of a code or love ethic against which we could measure these characters, hence the use of the Lawrentian sexual ethic. As D.H.Lawrence says in *Phoenix*, there is the known self of man which he 'knows', this personality is kindly, generous, mildly irritating but a genial personality on the whole. It is this self that he shows to the woman he marries. She also in turn shows only her outer self which is shining and according to the lover's specifications. But hidden to both the lovers is the inner self, which is like a jungle. It has strange attractions and revulsions; is animalistic, brutal, lusty, raw and it lets man in for a lot of suffering and torment. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley Kowalski shows these two selves quite clearly. He is different when he is Stella's husband and as Blanche's tormentor. As Thomas E.Porter puts it in *Myth and Modern American*



Drama, Stanley is powerful and attractive and he ‘knows it, with Stella, he plays the role of the traditional husband, lord and master. She, being unimaginative, has accepted the transition from old customs through his touch and attention. With her too, he alternately shifts from the loving husband to heavy handed spouse. We have that scene where Stanley after an argument in the kitchen smashes China, is generally offensive and Stella weeping, runs off. He later repeats and brings her back, crooning lovingly. Stella, has now become like Eunice and the others, Swapping jokes, visiting taverns and bowling alleys, arranging poker parties for their men folk. With Blanche, however, Stanley is always rough, crude and brutally frank – a typical victor and victim relationship. Their scenes are like a battlefield – “the arrival of the invader, a marshalling of forces and enlisting of allies, a reconnaissance of the enemy, the climatic conflict and the defeat of the invader” (P 155).

Leaving aside all the verbal taunts and jeers thrown at Blanche by Stanley, the final conflict which reveals Stanley’s brutish manliness and virility completely is the Rape scene. Here, all masks are thrown off, and the animal in the man comes to the fore. He (Stanley) Corners Blanche, when Stella is in the hospital (We’ve had this date from the beginning ... (2) and molests her physically. This two-facedness is limited not to the man alone; the woman also is equally adept at hiding this tendency; but it shows itself nevertheless. To quote instances from *Streetcar Named Desire* again, there is this penchant for violence in the works of this playwright. Even the mild Stella confesses her excitement when, on their wedding night, Stanley smashed up all the light bulbs with the heel of her slipper. Blanche, the southern flower, the shrinking, delicate, belle, is always playing with fire and she knows it. She fully realizes the danger of playing the coquette with a virile, lusty man like Stanley. He is no “gentleman” like Mitch or Sheep Huntleigh. In fact, it comes as no surprise to the reader, when we see only a token resistance put up by her against Stanley’s assault on her “virtue.” True, she does go around brandishing a broken bottle top like a “tiger” but that, we know, would not deter any determined man, at least of all, Stanley.

Tennessee Williams portrays men and women who suffer dither, who destroy themselves or move towards self-destruction or are the victims of maladjustments, debility or outright malady. Blanche, Brick and Catherine invite violence upon themselves. They cannot face the world and its stresses and they retreat into either the world they know or into an artificial world generated by alcohol or sometimes into a state of emotional breakdown and wonder. So many of Williams’ characters are either mentally ill or heading towards it. The women characters bend down under these stresses, but the males forge ahead vigorously. Where *Streetcar* is concerned, Porter has devoted a whole chapter to the causes of the violent relationship in this play. We see that despite her delicate, shrinking violent attitude, Blanche is attracted to the brutish Stanley, is always acting coy and flirtations with him. And is surprisingly unresistant when he carries her off to bed. This attraction of opposites is between

sentimentality, a delayed gentility, the collapse of a tradition, and in Stanley, a coarse new order, vigorous but rude and boorish.

Blanche invades Stanley's domain armed with tradition and culture. She attempts to win Stella's Support and half succeeds and launches a desperate campaign to win over Mitch, Stanley retaliates by digging out unsavory facts about her past and stand-in Laurel. Blanche tries to undermine him through flirtation flattery; Stanley piqued searches and finds the chink in her armour. The final conflict is in the bedroom where Stanley rapes Blanche, proving his virility. Blanche's dilemma has been partially revealed to us in the play itself. The circumstances, her plantation background, all combine to work against her. As Gains Says in *Myth and Modern American Drama*,

"There is a hint of deeper psychological charm in the heroine of his fascinating age. She is both impulsive and reserved; frivolous even inconsiderate, but charitable, frank, yet coquettish ... heartless as the lady of chivalry, tender as Corellia" (P 117)

Cut loose from a protective society or manifested in a mature woman, these contrasting traits of character lose some of their attractiveness and take on a neurotic tinge. This seems to describe Blanche du Bois exactly. She is the southern heroine faded around the edges, but still very recognizable:

"She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice necklace and earrings of pearl, while the gloves and hat looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong Light" (Streetcar 11).

These lavish costumes are part of her role of a plantation belle Stanley: "Look at these feathers and furs that she came here to preen herself in ... And diamonds: A crown for an empress" (Streetcar 36-37). Though, as Stella points out, the dresses are in expensive and the tiara-made of rhinestone. Blanche is a pathetic creature, schizoid in her attempts to cling on to her youth. She is always tense, nervous, fluttering in confusion. She always keeps up the veneer of intellectualist and virtue. With Mitch, she is coy and old-fashioned, where finances are concerned, she is fuzzy, the typical helpless female when nothing works, she tries to play the coquette with Stanley: "Blanche, I'm going to ask a favour of you in a moment ... Some buttons in back" (P 39). She does not realize that she is playing with fire.

Stanley is not Mitch with whom she flirts successfully. She tries the same trick with a seventeen year old newspaper boy. When the play opens, Blanche has lost both her plantain and her youth, and like Shannon, she has to keep fighting back the break down that is imminent. After the rape, she retreats completely into her make-believe plantain world.

The play *Suddenly, Last Summer* is probably the most violent out of all the morbid works written by Williams. Unlike the plays *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* where violence emanates out of the physical relationships between men and woman, as also between men and men; in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, there is the added violence; in the whole set-up. It is in fact, the scenario and the situation which contributes to the grotesque violence in the play. Sy Kahn's comment about this is highly perceptive. "It is a world with a lot of jungle in it. ... where predatory and rapacious creatures slither and stalk a world that consumes itself to stay alive" (P 87). This description, one finds is exceptionally close to Tennessee Williams' stage directions as to the décor for this play:

"The interior is blended with a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the pre-historic age of giant fern forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colours of this jungle – garden are violent. ... There are "harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and bids, all of savage nature ..."

(Suddenly 113).

So, the stage is set and the reader braces himself for the violence that will undoubtedly follow. In *Streetcar*, the two (the rejecter and the home sexual) remain separate; in *Cat on Attot Tin Roof*, they begin to merge in Brick Pollitt, but in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, the two figures merge into one. Hence the horric punishment meted out to Sebastian. Sebastian decked all in white meets his Doom his punishment for being what he is - a homosexual, who titillates, then, tantalizes and corrupts young boys. This corrupted young generation then carries out its revenge upon its molester, Sebastian. Sexual pervert that he was, Sebastian used his mother, violet and then Catherine as 'procurers' to satisfy his carnal appetites. A weakling himself, he was heavily dependent upon his women – first his mother and then Catherine. Sebastian, like most of Williams and even some Lawrentian man is a weakling and a fraud; incapable of doing anything worthwhile. Like Brick, Pallitt, Blanche's husband and host of others, he is a failure and is heavily dependent on his womenfolk:

Mrs. Venable: When he was frightened and I knew when and what of because, his

*hands would shake and his eyes looked,
... in, not out, I'd reach across table
and say not a word ... until his hands
stopped shaking ... and in the morning,
the poem would be continued until it
was finished" (PP 149-150).*

Mrs. Venable, given evidence too, though unwillingly so of the fact that Sebastian was a fraud and a failure:

*.... he wrote once poem a year which he printed
himself on an eighteenth century hand press
at his atelier in the – French Quarter so
no one but he could see it.... One (Poem)
for each summer that we travelled together.
The other nine months of the year, were really
Only a preparation" (P 116).*

Well, Sebastian could not be accused of being a prolific writer by any chance. To add to his already considerable 'virtues'. Sebastian shared an "unnatural" relationship with his mother Violet which at its best could be called 'love like'. Like all of Williams' middle-aged women, Violet is scared of illness, aging and disfigurement. The play *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* revolves round the taboo subject of homosexuality – implied or otherwise, the other crises arise because of it – mendacity. Once again, as in *Streetcar*, the rejection of a homosexual creates problems for the rejecter and makes him a victim of guilt and trauma, incapable of forming normal relationships. Though in most of his plays, Williams portrays an actively sexual relationship in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, the case is slightly different. Two such relationships are hinted at in the play. One of them (between Brick and Skipper) is the main crux of the problem, and will have to be dealt with in some detail. However, a passing reference can be made of the two bachelors Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, the original owners of the place. Williams in his notes to the Designer, makes a cautious comment about their 'abnormal' relationship:

*"Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old
bachelors Shared this room all their lives
together (The room) ... is gently and poetically
haunted by a relationship that must have
involved a tenderness which was uncommon" (Cat 13).*

The relationship between Brick and Skipper (now deceased) was presumably homosexual, the whole affair is couched in 'ifs' and 'maybes'. Like a few other Williams' women like Baby Doll and Serafina del Rose, Maggie is a Southern wench, very much a product of the contemporary time. She is deeply in love with her husband in spite of his distaste for a indifference to her. Nevertheless, she has confidence in her potentialities and feels certain that he will again see her as the other men do. She is sexually attractive, but apparently not to her husband. The revelations about sex, illness, greed, dislike make *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* a harsh bitter and violent play.

To conclude, Williams' work presents an abnormal psychology rather than a complete philosophy of life and his world is dissolute, weak and fragmented. Tennessee Williams is also chiefly concerned with the duality of flesh and spirit, the fox and moth, with the mammoth figures haunting the background. Even and Williams remains the superior artist and thinker laying focus on sexuality and sexual violence to be projected in his dramatic world.

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