



**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' A *STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINISM**



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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams is one of the most remarkable and prominent playwrights in modern American drama. He is generally regarded as the greatest Southern playwright and one of the outstanding American dramatists in the history of American drama. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a fruitful study from the perspective of Feminism. It is essentially feministic in its emphasis on the social construction of gender and its exploration of the gender with other categories with its emphasis on relations of power and the ways in which they are related to the text and how they change the social and economic conditions. The play gathers an amalgam of feminism with the polarization between male and female characters advocating masculine superiority over feminine.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Hypocrisy, Male Dominated Society, Double Standard, Hypocrisy

RESEARCH PAPER

Tennessee Williams is one of the most influential and commendable dramatists in modern American theatrical history. At their best, his twenty five full length plays combined lyrical intensity, haunting loneliness and hypnotic violence. He is widely considered the greatest Southern playwright and one of the outstanding American playwrights in the history of American drama. Hit theatres in 1947, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a remarkable drama for its sincere portrayal of moral decadence, the explosive power of production and exquisite characterization. It cemented Williams' reputation as one of the distinctive American dramatists, winning him the New York's Critics Circle Award, the Donaldson Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Much has been written about *A Streetcar Named Desire* from the time of its first show. So we should first take a look at the profound criticism done by some of the great critics on this work of art. Avtar Singh asserts "as a socio-historical play, it is indebted to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, as a psychological drama, to Strindberg's *Miss Julie*" (Singh 209). Masood Ali Khan remarks, "The idea of a woman coming to terms with life and shattering the image which is no longer possible in the disintegration of society and the death of the old aristocracy, is the theme of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" (Khan 191). Naresh K. Jain finds "the inadequacy of sex in this drama" (Jain 60). Robert Heilman claims this play as "the drama of disaster" (Heilman 107).

Feminism is a socio-political movement for the freedom of women in a male dominated society. A feminist is one who propagates the cause of women. Toril Moi remarks, "The word 'feminist' or 'feminism' is political label indicating support for the aims of women's movement which emerged in the late 1960" (Moi 204). In India feminism is not as old as Sita but it can also be seen in Sati, the first wife of Lord Shiva. She not only set aside her husband's wish and advice against participating in the Yajna organized by her father; but also avenged her husband and her own insult by jumping into the Yajna. A number of examples can be seen in Hindu mythology where women asserted their supremacy. Be it Sita without whom *Ashwamedha Yajna* was incomplete or Draupadi whose pride and honour was one of the main reasons for the battle of Mahabharata or Mata Gujri Ji whose single verdict made Guru Gobind Singh Ji sacrifice his four sons. So how could the Indian writers ignore this genre?

Western civilization is predominantly patriarchal. Women play a secondary role in all cultural spheres- social, political, familial, religious, legal and artistic. From the very beginning, females are brought up in such a way that they calmly accept their secondary position in the society.

While many feminist critics have considered the literature written by men as biased for its depiction of women as marginalized, docile and subservient to men's interests, emotional needs and their own psychological fears, some of them have also identified male writers, who in their views, have sufficiently managed to rise above the sexual prejudices of their time to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the personality of women and forced upon them their negative or secondary social roles. Now we shall magnify how Tennessee Williams has represented his female characters in the play, what does the work say about gender-bias, and how does it influence the characters by the use of patriarchal language. The centre place occupied by Stanley does not, at all falsify the question about the position rendered to the female characters, particularly, Blanche.

In the very opening of the play, Blanche is first introduced as a symbol of innocence and chastity. The play opens with the coming of the thirty years old Blanche DuBois at the Elysian Fields, who is tastefully dressed "as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district."¹¹ Aristocratic, refined and sensitive, this delicate beauty has a moth like appearance. She has come to this old part of New Orleans, where her younger sister, Stella lives. Stella is married to Stanley, who is Polish by origin, but now describes himself as one hundred percent American. Stella fell in love with Stanley when he was a master Sergeant in the Engineers Corps in the army during war. Now he is a civilian working at an industrial plant where he seems to have bright prospects because of his efficiency and skill.

The first impression that we gain about Blanche from her conversation with Eunice and Stella is that she is an aristocrat who holds herself superior to the surroundings and the dwellers of New Orleans and has come uninvited to Elysian Fields to intrude in the happy conjugal life of Stella and Stanley. Although Blanche has fallen on evil days, and it is this fact which has brought her to her sister's house for shelter, she persists in her airs of superiority. She feels quite contemptuous of the locality in which she finds herself, and she feels contemptuous of the two bed-room apartment in which her sister is living. On her meeting her sister she says: "You sit down, now, and explain this to me! What are you doing in a place like this?"(121). Blanche represents a deep seated attachment to the past. She has lived her whole life in Laurel, a small southern town; her family had aristocratic roots and taught Blanche about some of the finer things in life. Unfortunately, she cannot cope with life outside Laurel.

Thus, the image formed by Blanche, from the very beginning is that of an outsider. Her appearance as well as her outlook towards life is like this setting, which she is unable to change and compromise with till the end. Many critics hold this rigidity of Blanche responsible for her destruction but on a careful perusal of the play we find many socio-economic factors of the patriarchal society which lead Blanche to her sad-fate. The two sisters belong to the plantation background of the Old Southern region of America, Belle Reve, their last home place was a large, white, six-columned house set amid acres of lawn and garden with a periphery of slave cabins and cotton fields. Belle Reve itself is the symbol of patriarchy where gender bias is present since ages. The master of a Southern house is autocratic, prideful gallant, whereas, the mistress is a paragon of domestic virtues. Stanley holds Blanche wholly responsible for the loss of the plantation. He tries to convince Stella and they have been cheated by Blanche by showing her the things in the trunk.

Stella has secured her future by marrying Stanley, who along with being a beast of a man, is possessive for Stella and looks after her well. Blanche, on the other hand, has been the decay of her aristocratic upbringing. She alone had to face the agony of seeing her family members die one by one and the ordeal she had to go through their illness is inexplicable. It is true that the major part of the estate was lost due to the heavy expenditure on illness and funerals. There is a hint of accusation in Blanche's talk, directed against Stella as Blanche complains that she had to face all the hardships alone, which is the hard fact. Thus, Blanche is not exclusively to be blamed for the loss of the plantation. Her problems and despair is caused because of her troubles in the past. She had to pay a heavy price for the family and the plantation being the only working lady in the house.

Analeptically at the age of sixteen, she fell in love and married to a young boy, Allan Grey, whom she sincerely loved to the bottom of her heart. She believed that life without Allan was a sheer bliss. Her faith is shattered when she discovered that he was homosexual. It was her ill-luck that she found her love in a man who found his love not in Blanche but in some other man. Blanche tells Allan that his actions irritate her. Allan feeling ashamed of his actions commits suicide by shooting himself. Blanche cannot get over this and she holds herself responsible for his untimely death. She surrenders her body to various strangers in an attempt to lose herself. She seduces young boys in memory of Allan but her empty heart finds no peace. Blanche is an escapist who hides from bright lights just as she hides from the truth. But the whole fault does

not lie with Blanche alone. Being a human, full of feelings of love and possessiveness, she has the right to demand loyalty from her husband. As a result she becomes permissive in order to find shelter and protection in life.

In reality, Blanche gets involved with a young boy at the school in Laurel in search of love and security. She was dismissed from the job on the basis of violation of moral norms. Although Blanche's act is not permissible, but the authorities were too hard on her. They could have given her a warning and a chance to amend her mistake. But the authorities were quite cruel towards the poor girl who had nobody to stand by her. After Blanche has lost everything in life, her youth, her husband, inheritance, home, employment and nearly all her family, she arrives at New Orleans to stay with her sister because she has nowhere else to go. Now Stanley is suddenly reminded of the plantation and its inheritance. He tries to get information from Blanche regarding the land, its papers and the money from its sale. Thus Stanley shows his selfish attitude while blaming Blanche for cheating him. Being a female, and that too a female without any financial and social support, she becomes an easy victim of Stanley's rude and direct accusation. Stanley's representation of the male-dominated society is quite evident. He is a strong symbol of patriarchy and the antagonism between Stanley and Blanche begins early in the play. As soon as Blanche informs Stanley about the loss of Belle Reve, Stanley becomes suspicious of Blanche and asks Stella for details of how the estate was lost. He then proceeds, without any hitch to ask Blanche about the loss of the estate. Stanley has no sense of responsibility towards her sister-in-law and is simply concerned about material fortunes. She shows absolutely no delicacy when Blanche asks him not to touch the packet of love- letters which she has got in her trunk. He insists upon taking a look at those letters because he suspects that they may be connected with the family estate.

A male character is such, that the evils and misconducts carried on by him can be easily forgiven and forgotten, however objectionable they may be. And in case of women, the society has a totally different yardstick for the moral standards. Stanley is not ashamed of his habit of drinking or hitting his wife. But he certainly uses the right which patriarchy has given him to look into Blanche's past life. He tells Stella that everybody in the town of Laurel knows all about the immoral activities of Blanche and that Blanche is as "famous in Laurel as if she was the President of the United States" (186). Stanley also says that she has been turned out of the school because of her involvement with a seventeen year old boy. Finally, showing his cruel attitude he

says that he will not allow Blanche to stay in his home any longer. Proving his brutality, he gives Blanche the bus ticket, saying that this is her birthday present to her. In fact, all the humiliations are heaped on Blanche by patriarchy. Stanley is a mere instrument through which the male society forces its norms and decisions over Blanche.

Male sexuality in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not limited to Stanley, even though he is the most powerfully presented male in the play. Stanley's atrocity does not end with the decision to turn her out of the house. A few hours later the same night, after leaving his wife at the hospital, Stanley comes home with a plan to take some more revenge upon Blanche. His rape of Blanche is criminal and inhuman and it cannot be justified in any way. Although, Stanley asserts that she has caused it as much as he, yet the ill-treatment faced by Blanche cannot be vindicated. Stanley's rape of Blanche is a much greater evidence of his essential patriarchal brutality. Rape is the ultimate in male brutality in which the male uses sex as a weapon to subdue and humiliate the female.

The harshness of the orthodox male society does not end here. Instead of being sympathetic and feeling sorry for the ruin of Blanche, decision has been taken to send her to a mental asylum. As it is evident, this harsh decision is taken by Stanley who is the male ruler of the house. However, his friends and the ladies in the house are quite moved by the spectacle of Blanche's distraught condition. But no one dares to go against Stanley's decision. In comparison with Blanche, Stella seems to be more in tune with the ways and standards of the male dominated society. Sometimes we feel that Blanche has certain sparks in her which encourage her to gain independence, self-respect and equality in the male-dominated society. She was the only working lady in the family; she alone went through the ordeals of illness, deaths and funerals, she alone made all the efforts to save the plantation and finally earned her own living, though by permissive means. In contrast to Blanche, Stella is realistic and practical. She knows that she is weak and fragile and cannot face the hardships of life alone. Hence, she submits herself to the patriarchal shelter provided by Stanley in the form of marriage. She has adjusted her well according to Stanley's way of living. She certainly expresses her resentment against Stanley's irrational behaviour but cannot defy him.

Psychoanalytical feminism can be well applied in Stella's case. We always use the language of men. Stella is a typical feminine character in accordance to the patriarchal world. She is also an aristocrat but she adjusts herself with the animalistic world of Stanley. Stella is totally

suppressed under the male dominated society and is unable to stand against it for getting equal rights with the men of the society. Stella knows the reality that she cannot live without Stanley's support hence she behaves as the male society wants her to behave and speaks the language of patriarchy. So Stella is fully dependent on Stanley emotionally as well as financially. The success of their married life depends on the acceptance of male domination. She finds her survival difficult without Stanley, hence she refuses to believe Blanche's story of her rape by Stanley. She is even helpless in preventing Blanche from being sent to the mental asylum. Thus she is so dependent on masochistic Stanley that she cannot stand to be away from him for a single night.

Blanche lives in the world of dreams and illusions which has no significance in the real life. She has failed in her own marriage and is foolish enough to break up the well set and smooth sailing conjugal boat of her sister. Stanley smashes dishes, rummages through Blanche's trunk and finally rapes her. These actions swing the sympathies of the audience towards the Southern Belle. But the structure of the play makes a different comment which can certainly be not ignored and that is Blanche's role as the invader. As far as Stanley's world is concerned, she is the outsider, the disruptive influence. Therefore she herself is partially responsible for her wretched condition.

There is no doubt that Blanche's destruction cannot be compensated in any way but only Stanley cannot be wholly held responsible for her ruin. Blanche never leaves a single opportunity to insult Stanley and incites his anger. From the beginning Blanche looks down upon Stanley and regards him as an ape and a "survivor of the stone age." She time and again calls him "Polak" though she knows that it irritates him. Avtar Singh says: "She condescends to the Plebian when she is not actually scorning him. There is compulsive conduct on her part, because she must feel superior to her sister's husband if she is not to feel inferior in view of her helplessness" (Singh 209). Blanche knows that she is morally as well as financially ruined but her ego does not let her bow to others. She is not willing to come to terms with her ego, self respect and vanity.

It is not justified to blame Blanche for her destruction; it is her circumstances which lead to her loose living and behaviour. She is certainly a pathetic figure if not a tragic heroine; she has some virtues in her character just as her faithfulness to Belle Reve, her refinement, her polish and her genuine efforts to settle in life. In this regard she is daring, brave, courageous and dashing; if not praised heartfully, she should not be condemned and denounced at all. In *A Streetcar Named*

Desire, Blanche and Stella are like two sides of the same coin. They behave in contradictory ways – one believes in extreme activeness and the other in complete passiveness. Blanche reacts against dominance and Stella accepts dominance but both of them are unable to get rid of male supremacy. Williams presents through the struggle of Blanche the universal plight of womanhood and that Blanche manifests this universality in her dependence upon men, her realization of her fading beauty and her terror of her aging process. Blanche is a heightened version, an artistic intensification of all women. Her conflicts are representative of not only what every woman encounters but where every man leads a woman to. Precisely the patriarchal hierarchy overpowers women and leads them into an eternal abyss of servility. The play gathers an amalgam of feminism with the polarization between male and female characters advocating masculine superiority over feminine.

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