

A Bohemian Defiance of Gender Roles: Tracing the Catastrophic Journey of Blanche Du Bois in ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ by Tennessee Williams

*Dipali Vilas Salunkhe**

Assistant Professor, Mithibai College, Mumbai, India

**Corresponding email: salunkhedipali72@gmail.com*

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the concept of gender identity manifested in Tennessee Williams’ play ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’. In context of the play, Allan Gray’s homosexuality and suicide creates an initial trauma and guilt for Blanche Du Bois whose tragedy arises from her refusal to adhere to the norms of gender roles prescribed for a woman. Her inability to find a man, stick with him, make a family, to conform, her boldness, her bohemian attempts to look for beauty are beyond the territories charted out for a woman. The characters share toxic and turbulent relationships with each other on account of the conflict between romanticism of individual dreams and inevitable sordid reality of prescribed gender roles.

Key words: Bohemia, Gender Roles, Defiance, Tragedy

Introduction

“They told me to take a streetcar named Desire and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at - Elysian Fields!”

These prophetic lines appear in scene one of the play ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ by Tennessee Williams. In the critical work ‘The Cards Indicate a Voyage on A Streetcar Named Desire’, Leonard Quirino highlights the symbolic contrast of Elysian Fields as ‘the paradise of the happy dead’ for the Greek poets with the Elysian Fields where the exiled Blanche is further hurled into an allegorical death and ostracism from the world of sanity. The year 1947 when the play was first published was the period of prosperity, congruity, emergence and empowerment of the largest middle class population. Post economic depression era almost romanticized the blinkered familial values with their assigned gender roles that suited the narrative. The playwright has repeatedly dealt with the transformed post war American society highlighting issues such as exaltation of

family structure, adherence to conventional gender roles and embracing the plebeian white middle class identity.

Twentieth-century American dramatic tradition of Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder and Clifford Odets was furthered into the Dadaistic, realistic expressionist plays of Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry, Sam Shepherd and David Mamet. The Freudian craze, the urban man's estrangement from the man-made world, the absurdity and tragic nature of life were the prominent themes. Williams' quest of chasing pragmatic ethics of the modern, disorderly, proletarian world underlines the dichotomies such as rationality and absurdity, ethereality and brutality, submission and defiance. His plays portray 'the falling apart' phenomena of his era. Williams' world of characters rejects the domesticity and conformity by blowing up the cover of glorious, almost mythical societal institutions. The counterculture of Rock n' Roll, the rejection of capitalism, the disillusionment of the masses was the Canvas of his plays. The wreckage of contradictions, dissents, discrimination, strife, struggle of identities, and the chaos brewing beneath the surface gave birth to his culturally subversive heroes.

Abandoned for her ill reputation, Blanche the bohemian protagonist arrives in New Orleans after losing her ancestral home Belle Reve due to her ancestors' 'Epic Fornication' and her school teachers' job due to her affair with a seventeen year old. She epitomizes a drifting vagrant bohemian persona who embraces her primal instincts, defies the social norms and refuses to compromise her aesthetic principles. Her morbid past and inability to escape her caged existence leads her into an act of a high class Southern Belle with seductive moves weaving fantasies. Blanche's vulnerability is manipulated by men time and again. Her façade of magic, virginity and aesthetic bohemia is shattered in the jungle like barbaric world of New Orleans flinging her into a state of insanity from where she will never need to escape. Blanche translates her own name as 'White woods, like an orchard in spring', an image of purity and transcendence. However her arrival in the streetcar named Desire symbolises her wanton desires. Her husband's suicide on account of his homosexuality, the Stockholm syndromic sexual tension between Stella and Stanley, the juxtaposition of feminine Virgo Blanche, against the masculine libido of Stanley the goat like 'gaudy seed bearer' unveils the dark side of sexual politics and gender dynamics.

In the words of Leonard Berkman, Blanche's downfall is a 'tragic irony'. It is either 'too much fantasy' or 'too much reality' that leads to her destruction. It begins with a failed marriage on account of Allan's homosexuality and inability to conform to the gender role in her picture of a perfect family. Further damage occurs when he prefers an older man over her. Her unkind disgust towards him instead of compassionate understanding leaves her with a perennial guilt for his suicide. The fleeting affairs with strangers and the jocular narrations she keeps building are of cathartic nature yet they cannot help her overcome her remorse. She shuns Mitch's advances afraid that he may lose interest in her after physical intimacy. She longs for compassion in intimacy which remains unfulfilled. Her impulse for truth emerges from her refined tastes of the better times she has seen. Her present however requires her to live a life of lies and make believe. The veil of her charade lifted by Stanley's masculine, uncultured, brute force is the most violent moment in the play since her illusions are her charm. She believes that "a woman's charm is fifty percent of illusion". She is made to face the mirror which showcases her ugly aging face that she abhors. The confrontation makes Blanche see her reality which she had been trying to flee. The paper lanterns covering the lights are her attempts to live in the bohemian world of magic and art which are torn down by Mitch. "I don't want realism. I want magic" she screams in response.

The times of society Blanche belongs to needs her to have a man in her life under any circumstances. In the world of New Orleans where she has taken refuge, her sister Stella is in abusive love with her husband Stanley, described as 'a richly feathered mail bird' who believes in the Napoleonic code of male ownership of a woman. He is an American expression of male gender. Robert Brustein in his critical analysis of the play titled 'America's new culture hero without feelings' defines Stanley Kowalski as 'an ignoble savage'. His inarticulate, surly, destroyer image turns vile with the rape and mockery of Blanche. When Stella responds to Stanley's cries of forgiveness passionately, she justifies it by saying "...there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark that sort of make everything else seem unimportant". Blanche calls it 'brutal desire', 'the rattle trap streetcar'. The attractive yet cruel driving force of sexuality between Stella and Stanley leads her to submit to Stanley. In Blanche's words, Stanley Kowalski the polish immigrant "...is the survivor of the stone age". She tries to convince Stella to leave him

citing other joys like poetry and music. Stella however cannot get over the conflict of her flesh and clings to her man more fiercely than before.

In Stanley's alpha male like character that gambles, drinks and possesses women by his sexual drive Williams creates a monster that grows stronger and wicked at the sight of his victim. The relation between Blanche and Stanley is of a predator and a prey. Blanche's desperation and self victimization allows Stanley to map out her future for her. In the climax scene he says "We've had this date with each other from the beginning". Blanche who could shun Allan, get in and out from her multiple affairs, frighten Mitch away seems to have lost all the vitality when faced by Stanley. Blanche's exhibitionism and defiance are perceived as a challenge and threat by Stanley who robs her of sanity, dignity and reality. The antagonism which goes beyond ego battle between Blanche and Stanley is rooted in his belief that 'Man is an Executioner'. Theirs is a conflict of Apollonian and Dionysian nature. It is the struggle between reasoning and hedonism with phallic potency.

Blanche's madness is an extension of her constant urge to cloak her ignominious reality. The recurrent theme of 'women and madness' in Williams' works has been explored by Jacqueline O'Connor in her work 'Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams'. Blanche is the ultimate 'Mad woman in the attic' who finds an escape and revolt in this state. The obsession with the virginity of a woman and virility of a man are the reason for Blanche's pitiable attempts to look like a dainty maiden in a crumpled satin gown, silver slippers and a Tiara. Her constant attempts to show herself as a woman of dignity are battered by men. The poignant end of her last sane attempt to be with a man is ramified with Mitch's refusal to marry her since she isn't clean. Her long, elaborate baths are an act of purgatory acts of cleansing. The terror that Stanley evokes in her from the rape reduces her into a crumbling existence. The illusion of romanticism of civilization and order is abolished with her retreat into insanity. In her book 'The Second Sex' Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been defined by men and that if they break away from this they are alienated. In her world of bohemia, Blanche journeys from her poetic sensibilities, pure desires, longings and guilt to the ultimate spiritual death. She succumbs to the wild and passionate desires against the norms. Blanche seeking sexual freedom beyond marriage, flirting with men, refusing to submit and breaking every code of conduct prescribed to a woman is perceived to be preposterous

for which she is made to pay the price. Blanche is a rebel in a world of Stellas and Eunices who submit to their drunken, aggressive husbands as a practical solution. Blanche's feminine fragility, pretence, weakness and disillusionment pitted against the garish, primitive machismo results in the defeat and withdrawal into the phantasmagorical journey of redemption alluded to in the epigraph of the play which reads:

“And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice”

Conclusion

The term ‘sexual politics’ by Kate Millet discusses the role of patriarchy in the arenas of opportunities, sexuality, violence, family and division of labour. The theoretical equality of genders was questioned and debated by the second wave of feminism. Gender being equated with the anatomical construct of reproductive organs alienated from the psychosocial identity of an individual has been a root cause of gender issues. The defiance of gender roles and embracing one's identity beyond one's socio-cultural framework leads to the tragic downfall of Blanche. The juxtaposition of the romanticized good wife's image prescribed in the manuals for happily married life with a woman like Blanche who is indefinable creates a threat to the norms of subjugation that preach minimization of female voice degrading her existence to a mere gender role play of a domestic goddess. The darkness of reality engulfing the fragile fantasies of Blanche is a powerful metaphor presented by the play. Equity, equality, awareness and understanding of gender related issues through education can be an important step towards a better society that will have a place for Blanches and Stellas who can break free of their illusions and live their realities without having to resort to escapism.

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