

The Post-war American Society: A Feminist Critique of a Streetcar Named Desire

Barnali Devi

M.A. English
Cotton University
Guwahati- 01

E-mail: devibarnali28@gmail.com

Abstract—The two world wars shattered considerable chaos in the peace and tranquility of living beings across the terrene. Human transmission gave serious ways to malfunction the thoughts, societal connections remained no longer unblemished. There was a notable change when it came to the delineation of gender equilibrium in terms of power relations be it in mutual and detached loops. The titular "male picture of supremacy" quite clearly became an unbidden guest in the prevailing air of the society. There was an emergence of a changing picture of male hegemony which even found significant expressions in different literary pieces of the time. Taking the American society into account, "A Streetcar named Desire" by the famous American dramatist Tennessee Williams becomes an all-encompassing whole of the aforementioned issues. This engrossing drama appears to be the perfect platform for a feminist critique of the post-war American society. Although there are numerous other issues, the power relations between men and women as depicted in the drama quite easily become the point of contention. It also comprises the very fact of the representation of American women which posits them to be inferior. This paper is an attempt in order to deal with the issues of the changing society by making a feminist critique. Doing so, the paper also depicts how there was a sheer gap between both the sexes in the society. The hypothesis that this paper argues is that the post-war American society granted the male section the upper hand and as a result there was the relegation of the females. The implications of this can well be found in the central female character of the drama, Blanche Du Bois.

Keywords: drama, gender, power, relation, women.

Introduction:

Women's rights are not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about us; it is also about me and you. Just the two of us...

Toni Morrison

The decennium of the 1950's can be classified as intervening in the antiquity of modern America. In the countenance of authoritative arguments such as drudgery beats, the feminist movement, the tussle in Vietnam, the Americans discerned cynical and timid they had been, during the 1930's and during the World War II.

The delineation of women in any society has consistently been an obvious facet. There are countless sketches in divergent artistic segments with reference to women which very well put forward the outlook of the society- both regarding public and private domain. "The Streetcar named Desire" not only particularizes the different issues related to the filial relations but also blatantly depicts how women get exiled. Blanche, the central character could well become the entity of study in this regard because it is through her character that the drama grasps its significance. Blanche is a mentally troubled person and her severe complexities force her to the brink of insanity. The split personality coupled with her sexually aggressive nature is a very well testimony to her nature. Moreover, her portrayal in the drama to be a violent individual reinforces the view that she is the victim of the so called patriarchy.

Research Methodology:

The paper uses three techniques-

1. Detailed analysis of the polemics of the theory of feminism. Doing so, the paper uncovers the various processes involved subjugation of female characters in the drama.
2. Studying the character of Blanche Du Bois in relation to her split personality. Her identity in turn gets constructed by the various events in the drama. Judith Butler, in her famous book, *Gender Trouble* remarks, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 2006:34).
3. The research is primarily based on qualitative approach. It focuses on the textual analysis of the drama. Also, the research is descriptive in design.

Results and Findings:

1. The post-war American society was a disintegrated one. It was devoid of proper human communications and resultantly human relations were torn apart.

2. Subjugation of women appeared to another significant finding. There as the emergence of a new concept of “male supremacy” with males dominating the females. Characters like Stella and Blanche, in the play are clear preys to gendered-discrimination. The very message of the play, according to Williams is, “If we don’t watch out, apes will take over” (qtd, in Bloom, 37).
3. The difference in the nature between the two female characters, Blanche and Stella emerge out to be another significant finding. While Blanche posits herself to be quite violent in the play, Stella, on the other hand, is the epitome of uninhibited instinctual pleasure received from her husband and other things are of not much importance to her. She opines, “these are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark-that sort of make everything seem- unimportant” (23).
4. The ramifications of feminism is another notable finding in the play. The paper dwells on this theory and it reaches its full throttle with the attempt made in order to critique the various events. The off-shoots “power,” “self-assertion,” “sexual aggressiveness” etc. easily capture one’s eye-ball.

Theoretical Analysis:

Feminist’s critics proclaim that the stereotypes of women are the culturally manufactured and these variabilities are not because of biology, arbitrary and self-pitying as much statutory literature indicates. Blanche Dubois owns a personality which shows two distinct intensities: firstly, she is effervescent, actively wanting to operate others and remain at the centre of the tempestuous development; secondly, she is ceaselessly haunted by the sense of shakiness as it shows in various forms suggesting terror, feverish, intense self-regard, bigotry towards the presence of her brother-in-law in his own house, and most notably, building of fantasy world which functions as proxy world.

“I have always had a deep feeling for the mystery of life, and essentially my plays have been an effort to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of life.”

---Tennessee Williams

The play “A Streetcar Named Desire” came to the scene in an era which visualized a great deal of social anxiety, generating a mood of disillusionment on both societal and individual level. In his quest to seek an unseen verbal and symbolic repertoire, the dramatist of the new generation with all youthful ardor was finding the established canon not only inadequate but also useless and pretentious. Numerous areas of experience, so far considered taboo in the world of American Drama, were prodded and explored with a degree of frankness thereby sending shockwaves among audiences and genteel reviewers. At the same time, it encouraged more and more dramatists to adopt painfully realistic line of writing. For this reason, the plays by Williams evoked widespread reaction of shock and disbelief. In contemporary reviews they were

“cheap white trash” and “much of the dialog is improper and indecent” (St. Louis Star- Times).

A misty-eyed girl finding herself unsheltered to cruel insensitive talk from Stanley and his virile rough ways does not droop, but decides to take him on squarely. Antipathy to this setting begins early on when to an over-kindly Eunice she retorts: “If you will excuse me, I’m just about to drop” (2) meaning by this that Eunice gets on her nerves by her constant talkative chatter and Blanche needs to relax! Soon she again says, “What I meant was I’d like to be left alone.”

Although Tennessee Williams has not been considering a feminist play with a woman being exploited by men in the harshest ways. Like Laura, Blanche is a brittle, egocentric fantasizer – a natal tendency to offer her indefensible self to the charge of a stronger person is quite palpable in her. The play depicts two contrasting situations of two different individuals. If we observe the life of Stella, she appears to be perfectly happy and quite content whereas, if we take account of the life of Blanche, it is a life which is turned upside down. All she knows is the completion of her sexual fantasies and desires. One of the significant factors that led to the disturbed life of Blanche are the false aristocratic ideals by which she is guided. The world that both these sisters come from is a world that is going to lose its own identity very soon. The ancestral plantation of their family, Belle Reve is no longer there and these two sisters are the last two living members of the family. Numerous deaths in the family sent high-voltage currents of insecurity and depression in the life of Blanche and her explanation to her sister, Stella is clearly reminiscent of her feelings,

“I, I, I took the blow in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn’t be put in a coffin! But had to be burnt like rubbish! You just came home in time for funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quite, but deaths-dot always... death is expensive, Miss Stella!” (36-38).

From the beginning Stanley deems Blanche as a holier-than-thou person and talks degrading her to her sister Stella. He has badly- disguised oddity about her personal life which she finds atrocious; for example, his yearning to know about the love-letters which she has been forced to take out from the basal of her trunk. What hits us peculiarly brutish in Stanley’s heavy-handedness is his unwillingness to listen to Blanche’s elucidation, his strong insistence that she reveal the personal effects of her trunk and drawers and having in the end his own way.

A feminist critic might propound that unlike most canonical literary pieces, women have been presented pessimistically. Ultimately women can be seen as fatality of patriarchal society’s curbs, which would have been much more noticeable in the 1940s than the 1960s when the women’s movement happened. Feminist critics would be engrossed and moved by

Tennessee Williams delineation of how much more stilted women were when the play was inscribed.

Conclusion:

The basic issue which concerned Tennessee Williams is the deep unconscious part of human psyche. His plays delve deep into the painful areas of the life of an individual which have become ossified due to the absence of communication. In depicting the isolation of the individuals, mainly through the medium of the high-pitched metaphorical language which the characters in the drama use, the playwright underlines the essential breakdown of communication and the following tragic consequences which result. Blanche DuBois can surely be said to be a “split personality”, a character who simultaneously exists on two opposite planes, and faces the more harrowing challenges from a clash between these sides. The battleground that a person turns into in which hidden urges and motives surface in confused hordes to get locked into bitter fight for dominance gets vividly portrayed in the play. Taking into account the fast-changing notions of morality, truth, femininity and many more other concepts relating the ontological and societal life of human being, Williams has rightly called the play “tragedy of incomprehension.” (1978:109).

In the hindsight, it can be said that the play puts forward the message that human beings are more inclined to lead a happy and satisfying life when they obey the natural bodily instincts. The insanity of Blanche in the play is equally matched by the animal-like behavior by Stanley. In a way, it can rightly be argued that Blanche is punished for the rejection of normal sexual life..

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