

Illusion and Reality in the Subalternized Characters of Tennessee Williams

Abstract:

The paper proposes to investigate the elements of illusion and reality in the realm of subalternism in the characters of Laura Wingfield, Amanda Wingfield from *Glass Menagerie* (1944) and Blanche Dubois from *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947). As can be seen, the plays from which characters are chosen were written at different periods in Williams' writing career when he was at the peak of his dramatic powers. Moreover, both these plays drew a lot of critical attention at the time that they were performed first. The fact that more than half a century has elapsed since they first came to light has neither diminished nor dimmed their dramatic power or relevance or appeal to audiences and scholars all over the world.

Research Questions:

- How could Williams's characters hold an appeal for us?
- What could be causal factors for the ordeal of the characters?
- How do these characters negotiate the circumstances in which they find themselves in?

Introduction:

The term and construct 'Subaltern' has been the most frequent one in the post-colonial contexts all over the world and in particular in the once colonized nations and now free nations. The term 'Subaltern', gained current prominence when Gayatri Spivak came out with an essay titled "*Can The Subaltern Speak?*" in which the term has been used to signify the oppressed class and her argument in the article is that the subaltern cannot speak for himself or herself and she further argues that in any literary activity, the subaltern must be spoken for.

Spivak suggests that the appropriation of the marginalized as part of the postcolonial studies and western academies relegates them to perpetual marginality. Any marginalized individual or a race or a group can be

called the subaltern. For instance, the tribals, lower caste, differently-abled, lower class community may be considered as the subalterns – the marginalized or the other.

The term ‘Subaltern’ came into existence during 1970s by which time Tennessee Williams had already written his most representative works. Though we find several characters and features of subaltern element in his works, the term has hardly been used anachronistically with reference to the works of Tennessee Williams. So, the paper makes attempts to inquire about the term ‘subaltern’ with reference to his work. It needs to be mentioned at this juncture that the marginalized characters, issues and themes which come under subaltern studies are prevalent in the works of Tennessee Williams. Nevertheless, when the topic of marginalization is discussed in the Tennessee Williams’ works, one question is raised whether he intentionally writes about marginality or essentially, he sees all his characters as marginalized.

Characterization & Subalternization:

The characters of Tennessee Williams have caught the imagination of the theatre-going public and scholars and researchers in the academic world. It can be seen that a workable balance is attempted in the choice of the characters selected for a close examination. Though only two characters have been chosen for an intense scrutiny from a plethora of characters in Williams’s oeuvre, the paper would like bring to light that the characters shall be closely examined. But the emphasis of the paper is proposed to be on identifying the representative types that are typical of Williams’ characterization and obsession with such characters that are variously termed as ‘the fugitives’, ‘the misfits’ and ‘the outcasts’. His chief concern lay in dealing with the unseen inner realm of human beings and the psychological trauma that individuals suffer as a result of the demands made by an unforgiving real world on the maladjusted psyches.

Brushing aside the callous brutalities, harsh realities, people indulge in fabricating a world of their own, which is an illusory one. Tennessee Williams in **The Glass Menagerie** traces the effect of illusion upon the individual in adverse circumstances. He does this by exploring the physical, mental and spiritual condition of the Wing-Field family. The members of the Wing-Field family are afflicted with poverty, constant ill health and mysterious psychological maladies. Tennessee Williams writes in **The Glass Menagerie**, “I’ve

seen such pitiful cases in the South barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! – stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room – encouraged by one in-law to visit another – little birdlike women without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life!" (Part 1, Scene 2, p. 16)

The father of the household has escaped from his responsibilities by deserting his wife and escaped from his responsibilities by deserting his wife and children. Every one of the family is haunted by the bleak realities of life. But they all seek an escape from the harsh realities into a world of comforting illusion.

Amanda, the mother, is suffering from nostalgia. She is a middle-aged southern belle. She lives in an illusionary world and is often naive to the realities around her. Her husband is presented only in a blown-up photograph over the mantle. He is presented as a telephone-man who has a craze for travelling long distances and has left his family for good. As a girl she is deceived by his outward smile and appearance.

Amanda lives in her past, but is constantly irked by the adverse present. She lacks a companion to share her views. She has fabricated an artificial, almost Thespian world of her own, to get rid of her desperate conditions. She is haunted by poverty and worries. She recalls nostalgically the glorious days spent in Blue Mountain. She boasts of the day in which she received seventeen gentleman callers. Tennessee Williams writes in **The Glass Menagerie**, "Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted (their) small apartment (Part 2, Scene 3, p. 19). Tennessee Williams compares the gentleman caller to an apparition. He also calls the apartment haunted. This reveals the hidden thoughts of Amanda.

Laura, another character in *The Glass Menagerie* lapses into insanity like Blanche in *A Street Car Named Desire*. These characters upon their discovery that they are sandwiched between their natural hardwired instincts and a puritan code respond by attempting to flee in to glass houses of their creation. Both of them, Laura and Blanche, the study endeavoured to show are out of their depth in a commercialized and competitive world. Lacking all skills to negotiate this brutish world, they refuse to acknowledge the truth about them. What is intriguing is that these characters rarely, if ever, hold the ambient society responsible

for their plight. They do not want to have anything to do with it and attempt flight from it. A good example is *The Glass Menagerie*. Laura has no worldly use or need for anything else apart from her glass animals and observes that ‘they live very well together. The chapter also provided an examination of other characters in Williams’ world who were reasonably well adjusted to the world in which they live. Kowalski, in *A Street Car Named Desire* is one such character who, the study suggested could be seen as a representative of the contemporary America. In contrast to him, Blanche is just the opposite. “I know poetry and how beautiful the sky is, so I am better than you’, she tells Kowalski (Williams: 2001:47). The chapter also contrasted Blanche’s mind-set with her sister’s and showed how yielding she is and how unbending and rigid Blanche is.

Conclusion:

The theme of illusion and reality with the theme of past and present to produce the elegiac play of Sensibility, created by Chekhov at the end of the nineteenth century/is/adopted by Tennessee Tennessee Williamse Tennessee Williams Tennessee Williams in the middle of the Twentieth Century..... (Tennessee Tennessee Williamse Tennessee Williams Tennessee Williams p.51)

Tennessee Williams is the playwright who typically pictures the Twentieth Century America as it is. Though the people seem to be free and happy, they have their own problems of identity, racial discrimination, loss of spirituality, restlessness, frustration and desperation.

Tennessee Williams believe in penetrating into the characters’ inner selves through their dreams, illusions and bizarre reactions. His revelation of inner truth, then, is the result of a penetration beneath the surface to reveal aspects of character, emotion or thought, which the realistic theatre, by its nature, disguises. The reaction of this inner essence of characters, which he achieves by rearranging reality sometimes, is his attempt at a closer approach to the real truth of his characters as contrasted with the realistic reproduction of life as seen through the fourth wall in the Ibsen type of drama. Stephen Stanton rightly observes, “although Tennessee Williams has often been called a realist, everyone has noted his many departures from realism. He is more poetic, more lyric, probably more symbolical”

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