



## Literature

*Elixir Literature* 76 (2014) 28322-28325

**Elixir**  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# The marginalized women in the major plays of Tennessee Williams

Silima Nanda

Director, International Division, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi – 110068, India.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 10 September 2014;

Received in revised form:

27 October 2014;

Accepted: 5 November 2014;

#### Keywords

Predicament,

Marginalized women patriarchal,

Alienated American society.

### ABSTRACT

My article explores the predicament of the marginalized women in the major plays of Tennessee Williams- one of the most prolific American dramatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his three major plays- “The Glass menagerie”, “A streetcar named desire” and “Summer and Smoke” we witness the women who live with a sense of despair- trapped and displaced by the patriarchal norms of the American society. Though Williams does not openly champion the rights of the woman in his plays, he however strongly empathizes with their marginalized existence in the contemporary society. They are portrayed as helpless figures, who have no control over their destinies and are alienated in their social circles. Blanche, Stella, Amanda, Laura and Alma are delicate and sensitive women who struggle their best to adjust with the society- but in the long run are misunderstood, rejected and victimized in the male-dominated American society. They inhabit a world of men, who are indifferent to their needs and to their womanhood. Each of these women loses her place in the world governed by the male characters. The pathos of Blanche, Laura, Amanda and Amanda is that they refuse to acknowledge their state of passivity and continue to struggle for their dignity and social standing even when the battle seems lost.

© 2014 Elixir All rights reserved.

### Introduction

It is observed that the playwrights, especially O’Neill, Arthur miller and Tennessee Williams have depicted the destiny of women against the backdrop of the American milieu. If we look back in history, 1920 was a significant year for the women in America as they were granted political liberty, i.e. suffrage for which they had struggled for years. Their apparent political victory however could not end their suffering as the world wars accompanied with the economic Depression trebled the complications of women’s position in the society. As men returned back from the wars women were thrown out of jobs and they experienced a sense of rejection and internal conflict on question of their identity.

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is one of the most highly recognized and prolific American dramatists of the twentieth century, who best expressed this sense of conflict and alienation in the portrayal of his women characters. He has presented women who struggle in the predominant patriarchal society. Williams’ first three major plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Summer and Smoke* (1948); present the plight of sensitive, helpless women who are victims in Southern patriarchal society, endlessly struggling and searching for their identity and security. Through these plays, Williams makes a critical plea for society to address the predicament of marginalized women in a cruel and insensitive world. Especially in his major plays Williams pairs his delicate and marginalized females with contrasting powerful male counterparts to emphasize their insignificance in the social setting in which they live. Williams confronts modern society directly with the problem of female victimization, because in spite of the fact that we have made considerable progress over the last century, women still remain subordinate to men. The five women in Williams’ first three major plays Amanda Wingfield, Laura Wingfield, Blanche Dubois, Stella Kowalski, and Alma Winemaker\_ are tragic examples of victimized

women. Each has a distinctly unique and unforgettable story struggling to find her place in a culture; stuck in the middle of a stagnant past and a present to which she cannot adapt. Amanda and Laura withdraw into isolation and alienation; Blanche becomes insane; Stella returns to her world of sexual addiction and Alma embarks on her personal journey to sexual destruction. Williams’ emotional and sensitive leanings toward his feminine beings enable him to see life through the women’s eyes with greater appreciation than many of his male counterparts. Amanda like Blanche Dubois of *A Streetcar Named Desire* are depicted as victims of their traditional Southern upbringing,

A detailed analysis of the women in these plays would strengthen the viewpoint. In *The Glass Menagerie* both Amanda and Laura are victims of a Southern patriarchal system not through choice, but because an alcoholic husband and father abandons them and leaves them as destitute. They are the by-products of a broken, dysfunctional home, and as a result, become isolated outcasts. Amanda suffers a bitter blow when her husband deserts her and she shelters herself from the outside world, manufacturing her own illusionary world by clinging to her past of gentlemen callers. Williams refers to Amanda’s role as a single parent fighting a “solitary battle”(258) and who has “endurance”. She has no support system in place, and the pressure of raising a family during the Great Depression leaves her on the verge of emotional ruin. Her daughter too learns from her mother how to create an illusionary world attending to her fragile collection of glass animals and outdated music which she plays on an old Victrola left by her father sixteen years earlier.

Williams’ sympathy towards Amanda is evident in his opening description of the character: “There is as much to be admired in Amanda and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person”. This perhaps

Tele:

E-mail addresses: [snanda@ignou.ac.in](mailto:snanda@ignou.ac.in)

© 2014 Elixir All rights reserved

reflects the love/hate relationship that Williams had with his mother, Edwina. Both women are similar in their marriage outcomes that turned out to be tragically different than they had originally hoped for as Southern belles. Bigsby maintains that Amanda bears the greatest burden in the play because she is twice abandoned by the men she loves. She is abandoned by her husband and deeply wounded by Tom who is utterly disrespectful of her in several of their arguments. Thereby she is a victim not only of society but also a victim within her home. Alice Griffin describes Amanda as a universal mother type who showers love on her offspring and is ready to suffer for their sakes. Amanda tells her son Tom, "I worry so much, don't sleep, it makes me nervous!" (257). Amanda is so anxious for both of her children to be successful that she refuses to face the reality that Laura is not only physically blighted, but also socially and emotionally handicapped. Williams' Amanda has a close semblance to Faulkner's Mrs. Compson in 'The Sound and the Fury' (1929). Both the mothers suffer from a social and sexual decay—against a backdrop of disintegration of a cultural framework experiencing transition.

Amanda's predicament in *The Glass Menagerie* is primarily driven by fear: fear for her future and for Laura's. Tom's inevitable desertion is the main contributing factor to Amanda's neurotic and delusional tendencies because she is sure that perhaps someday Tom like her husband would desert her. She becomes enraged when Tom tells her that he would like to try out his own wings because "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter" (260). She tells him that "instinct" is a dirty word in her vocabulary and appropriate only for animals, and argues that Christian adults should not follow their instincts but rather concentrate on "Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit" (260). Amanda's fear of abandonment and her refuge in the past prevents her from fulfilling the role that her family so desperately needs.

Laura is the tragic heroine in the play because she is a passive and pathetic misfit, one who helplessly suffers the pangs of desertion from an irresponsible and self-centered father addicted to alcohol, and whose mother is an abandoned and maladjusted Southern belle. Laura is fragile and delicate like her animals of glass collection, which remains alienated and retreats from reality of the outside world. She avoids interaction with people and feels most comfortable in self-activities, such as visiting zoo, listening to records, or attending to her glass menagerie. Thus she is a prisoner of her physical ailment which is symbolic of her role in a dysfunctional family. Amanda asks Laura about her failure at the Business School: "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?" (242) and responds to her own question with the comment about their grim reality; "What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. 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!—struck away in some little mouse-trap of a room little bird-like women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life!" (245) Amanda is driven by fear and worry about what would become of them when Tom leaves. She pleads with him: "In these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is—each other. . . ." (258), thereby confirming her feelings of helplessness. Durant Da Ponte attests to Amanda's virtues remarking that there is a certain pathetic heroism in Amanda's efforts to provide for her children which also makes her unforgettable and painfully real. The daughter, Laura has no

escape as she is a cripple since her birth and has to adjust to her mother who clings on to the world of illusion.

In his next play '*A Street Car Named Desire*' the two women, Stella Kowalski and Blanche Dubois are portrayed as the weaker sex, overpowered by Stanley Kowalski, the self-aggrandizing macho hero. Blanche's fall from authority, her subjection is masterfully captured by Williams. Blanche and Stella were raised on the affluent plantation, Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi, and their primary goal in life was according to Southern tradition, to seek the security of marriage. Unfortunately both choose unsuitable mates. Blanche, who is five years older than her sister, marries Allan Grey at a tender age only to find her dreams shattered by her husband's infidelity with another man. Stella, who moves to New Orleans at a young age, chooses Stanley Kowalski, an aggressive, heterosexual man of the wrong social class. Both sisters are Stanley's victims, each in different ways. Stanley Kowalski's personality provides insight as to how men dominate women, convince them of their inferiority, and ultimately destroy them if unchecked.

The setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire* is post World War II, when the American South was steeped in sexist views that were established during the mid-eighteenth century. Male dominance was based on power and control and society dictated that women be attractive and flirtatious in order to please men, the superior sex. Simone de Beauvoir summarizes that the male patriarchal view recognizes 'He' as the 'Subject' and 'Absolute', and 'She' as the insignificant 'other', and that women's primary function is to fulfill the needs of their male superiors (11).

Stella realizes that if she is to remain married and protected then she must accept Stanley's crude jokes, insulting gestures, hostility, violence, as well as his swings between brutality and sexual violence. The gentle lady serves as a foil to Stanley, the brute. Eunice's famous line at the play's dénouement: "Life has got to go on" (217), suggests that Stella, a victim of male dominance, would take her friend's advice, believe her husband's lie about Blanche's rape, and stay with an abusive husband rather than risk the bleakness that life offers her as a single mother. Stella is sympathetic toward her older sister and is protective of her, especially when she observes Blanche's emotional instability. She takes painstaking efforts to make Blanche's stay comfortable, and pleads with Stanley to show kindness to her as well but he totally ignores Stella's request and overrides her feelings as he asserts his male dominance in his power struggle with Blanche. Stella defends her sister by saying, "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. No-body, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (198). Stanley repeatedly mistreats Stella, but because she has so few alternatives in obtaining security, she tolerates his abuse. The husband ensures her dependence on him by giving Stella very little money for spending. (Economic domination is another form of female victimization.) Stella tries to convince Blanche that because Stanley "likes to pay the bills," he does not give her an allowance. But she quickly adds that "this morning he gave me ten dollars to smooth things over" (161). Stanley becomes violent whenever his authority is challenged as evidenced when he smashes a radio in rage. He also physically strikes Stella with his hand on two separate occasions. It is apparent that Stanley's abuse is a recurring problem when Stella wants to escape to her friend Eunice's apartment upstairs. She is clearly a sad victim in a relationship that she thinks is within the boundaries of normalcy. Stella excuses her husband's behavior by stating that he's not really responsible for his actions: "In the first place,

when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's always a powder-keg. He didn't know what he was doing... " (157). At the end of the play, when Stella is faced with believing either Stanley or Blanche about the rape, she tells Eunice that she could not continue to live with Stanley if she were to believe Blanche. She follows Eunice's advice to believe her husband because "life has got to go on". This utterance reflects the indifference and apathy of the male characters in the play. As regards Blanche her failure to save the estate and move beyond her sordid past in Laurel leaves her with only one last hope for the future: to begin a new life with her sister in New Orleans. Unfortunately, she arrives at her new destination as a slave and feels compelled to lie to herself in order to be accepted and secure a respectable husband. She is attracted to Mitch who appears gentlemanly, and she envisions capturing him by being a perfect Southern belle. After Mitch learns the truth about her past, he refuses to show up for her birthday party, for which Blanche later reminds him that his behavior is utterly brutish. Stanley extremely hates Blanche and he is smart enough to realize that psychological destruction will cause her the utmost pain. He calls her "Tiger—tiger" when she puts up a fight against his aggressive advances (215). The ultimate act of violent male domination occurs when Stanley rapes Blanche to exert his animal domination and outrage over a female victim. Jacqueline O'Conner indicates that Blanche represents the supreme example of how culpability and vulnerability are perfectly balanced. Thus Tennessee Williams has masterfully presented women's oppression in male patriarchal society in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Alma's story is one of social isolation and a total lack of preparation for life in the real world. The female victim is the young woman reared in a dysfunctional home by a mentally and emotionally incapacitated mother and a father who is too cold-hearted, busy, and indifferent to be an effective parent. When we first encounter Alma, she is a girl of ten, although her clothes and deportment suggest a miniature adult. It is clear from this description that she is robbed of a normal childhood. Williams also indicates that her mannerisms indicate a saintly and superior human being, which suggests that the joy and capriciousness of a happy-go-lucky child are missing. Alma means "soul" in Spanish (Latin and Italian), which signifies her spiritual nature; she stands in opposition to the flesh, which John symbolically represents. The world of sexual passion is totally foreign and repulsive to her. She cannot handle John Buchanan's rejection when she is finally ready for intimacy with him and rejects her former spirituality by seeking a promiscuous lifestyle. Initially Alma, who abhors sexuality ends up rejecting the purity and refinement that initially, set her apart. In this way she resembles Blanche Dubois who is also ruined by her relationships with men. She too is a victim of a dysfunctional home and a malicious society which causes her alienation. Alma is spinsterish and primarily due to her lack of socialization, especially with people of her own age, makes her a misfit or marginalized. In this sense, she is close to Laura's social maladjustment in *The Glass Menagerie*. Most of the people in town avoid her because they feel she has an affected manner that makes her appear to have an air of superiority. Rosa Gonzales is a striking contrast to Alma in both appearance and behavior that represents a morally loose woman wearing a lustrously feathered hat and diamond and emerald earrings that make her stand out in a crowd. Rosa lacks moral scruples when it comes to satisfying her physical desires and she even leaves her trademark of drawing blood from John during their sexual encounters. He tells her, "You never make love without

scratching or biting or something. Whenever I leave you I have a little blood on me" (1.618). Alma's lack of socialization and inadequate parental nurturing cause her to appear emotionally and psychologically unstable (which is another cause for her being marginalized). Alma feels hurt when John relates that people ridicule her mannerisms: "... for putting on airs a little—for gilding the lily a bit" (1.585). Alma's instability also affects her perception of sex, which she fears and rejects. She has conflicting emotions toward John and while she rejects a sexual relationship with him, she finds herself physically attracted to him. Alma is frustrated that John looks only for sexual fulfillment, and that she cannot convince him of the importance of spiritual love in a relationship, or her ideals in a relationship. Alma is further marginalized by the townspeople who consider her eccentric, and laugh about her affected diction and convoluted vocabulary (such as her using the term "pyrotechnical display" for fireworks) (1.583). Alma and Blanche share many characteristics like they both have delicate personalities, and share an affinity with cultural activities such as music and poetry. Both are teachers: Alma teaches music, and Blanche, English. Alma and Blanche are also similar when they reach the end of their tether and turn to "the kindness of strangers." Alma also shares traits with Laura Wingfield, evidenced in their isolation and loneliness and in their crying out for love. The dividing line between the restraint of Alma's early phase and the promiscuity of her late one is the loss of her hopes and aspirations of a love relationship with John. Thus where Alma leaves off Blanche begins. Alma is destroyed by a callous lover and a malevolent society which alienates her and causes her destruction. Alma believes that she must make a complete transformation and succumb to John's way of thinking in order to gain his love. This makes her a slave to patriarchal superiority. Alma is like so many of Williams' other tragic characters that moves "from integration to degradation, illusion to disillusion, or sexual certainty to confusion" (Timpane 174). Thus Alma is a frail, maladjusted Southern girl who like other Williams' heroines, is a victim of her southern heritage where woman was viewed as either sexless or fallen. Unfortunately, Alma's transformation comes too late, and ironically John adopts a blend of the physical and spiritual. Instead of Alma, he chooses to marry Nellie, who represents a blend of Alma's purity and Rosa's sensuality. Alma's tragedy is that she does not reach a compromise as an individual like John does, which makes her a victim. As the marginalized "other" she is lost and incomplete, while her male counterpart achieves society's forgiveness and completion.

In the long run the viewer's realize that In '*The Streetcar Named Desire*' Stanley's sensuality rips apart Blanche's gentility, in *The Glass Menagerie*, Conner's tenacity and ambition accentuates Laura's fragility. In the same line in *Summer and Smoke*, John Buchanan's carnality contrasts Alma's spirituality. Thus in depicting his female characters Williams is sensitive to the plight of the delicate, weak, and romantic outcast women and empathizes with their victimization in an aggressive male dominant society. Williams thus very realistically portrays the victimization of women. The tragedy of these women is the tragedy of the civilization "which bore them, nourished them, and then cast them out...they are social fossils in an age of commercialism and tawdriness" (Jones 219). Williams' writing displays his sensitivity to the powerless status of women, or the insignificant "Other". Williams has presented figures like Amanda, Laura, Blanche, Stella, and Alma as symbols of women's struggle to obtain equality and recognition as worthy human beings and to end the helplessness and tyranny

caused by male domination. Williams' plays are thus relevant to the predicament of women in the western society even today.

**References:**

- Beauvoir, Simone. *"The Second Sex"*. New York: Vintage, 1998
- Bigsby, C.W.E. "Entering the Glass Menagerie." *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Matthew C. Roudané. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Tennessee Williams: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea, 1987
- Corrigan, Mary Ann. "Realism and Theatricalism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Modern Drama* 19 (1976): 385-396
- Da Ponte, Durant. "Tennessee Williams' Gallery of Feminine Characters." *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Robert A. Martin. New York: Prentice, 1997. 255-275.
- Griffin, Alice. *Understanding Tennessee Williams*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1996
- Hayman, Ronald. *"Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else is An Audience"*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993
- Jones, Robert Emmet. "Tennessee Williams' Early Heroines." *Modern Drama* 2 (1959): 211-19.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- O'Conner, Jacqueline. "Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams". Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1997
- Popkin, Henry. "The Plays of Tennessee Williams." *The Tulane Drama Review* 4 (1969): 49-64. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Oct. 2012.
- Roudane.C.Matthew (Edited). "Before the Fall and after: Summer and Smoke and The Night of the Iguana" *The Cambridge companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge UP,1997.
- Timpane, John. "Weak and Divided People: Tennessee Williams and the Written Women," in *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama*. Ed. June Schlueter. Rutherford: Associated UP, 1989. 171-180
- Williams Tennessee "Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie" Edited by E. Martine Browne, Penguin Books 1977.