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The Dichotomy and Dilemma of the American South in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to explore and reassert the cultural beauty of the American South or the Deep South, as it is sometimes referred to, and the literature that is born out of a unique sense of dislodgement and separation of the southern regions. Southern literature confesses a terrible truth of her history, tradition, socio-political and religious codes, tendencies and manners. It has made up a bulk of the collective American literature today. Tennessee Williams as a southern playwright develops the southern themes in his plays to let the American society reflect on the issues of social and moral injustices, the relevance and the absurdity of Southern ways in a highly developed and modernised American society. Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* directly expose the quaint Southern women, their dilemmas, psychological and emotional conflicts in a scientific, post-depression and post-war America. These plays present the tragic human condition of mental and social dislocation in a brutish and hostile environment of realism, practical thinking and modernisation that resulted in the decay of human values. And people who cannot adapt to the changing ways are destroyed in the end suffering from frustration, loneliness, paranoia and disillusionment.

Keywords: Dichotomy, coquettish, emotional sentimentality, genteel, matriarch, melodramatic, southern belle, tragic reality, quaintness.

No country has ever had more cultural transactions and experiences than the land of America itself. Formerly a British colony, the country fought against the political restraints of the mother country with outright armed resistance and asserted their right to self-government. The American Revolution against the English government resulted in the Declaration of Independence, thus breaking the political tie that had bonded the two countries. But even during the colonial times, the literature of British America had been growing despite its limited availability of literary journals, books, newspapers, magazines etc., and especially in the Southern colonies. Before understanding what is “Southern literature”, a brief idea of how the American nation falls into two sections during the early years of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would be quite necessary. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. points out:

The economic, political, and cultural differences that produced, on the eastern seaboard of North America, sections identifiable as North and South were more than two hundred years in the making.... By the time of the Revolution and the adoption of the Constitution, the Southern colonies had begun to feel a community of interest centred upon the presence in them all of a plantation economy based upon slavery. South Carolina and Georgia were zealous to guard against what they felt was economic and political domination on the part of the Northern states.... With the rise of manufacturing and merchandising centres in the North-east, and the rapid expansion of cotton cultivation in the South resulting from a workable ginning process, a North-South schism became a threat to continued union. That schism-and the consciousness of it-was what made Virginians, Carolinians, Georgians, Tennesseans, and later Alabamians, Mississippians, Louisianans, and Floridians begin to think of themselves as

Southerners. And it was not until then that the call went for a distinctively Southern literature. (3-6)

The socio-economic and political consciousness of the Southerners not only became a distinct geographical designation, it started to identify significant attitudes, ways, culture and customs, and socio-political thinking of the people as a whole. And Southern literature identifies and is the collective development of the body of literature that is characteristically, linguistically and culturally Southern in its treatment of themes and socio-political standings. Southern literature developed during the eighteenth century and continued to exert its influence until the aftermath of the Second World War, though the modern Southern writers and literary personas did not look at the culture and society of the South the way like their predecessors did. The wild, rural, plantation world of the old South with her black slaves stereotyped as being happy in their inferior status was a romantic land of paradise for the early Southerners, where the men were chivalrous and patriotic, and her women, graceful, delicate, pure, dignified and devoted, of good masters and obeying slaves, and a land of vast cotton plantation. The economic independence that the Southerners achieved from the cotton plantation and the slavery interest made them “part of and yet separate from the nation as a whole, and the moral, ethical, and patriotic issues of individual and community identity involved in that position” (Rubin 7).

The literature of the American South is divided into five parts as - Literature in the Colonial South, Literature in the Old South, After the War, The Southern Literary Renaissance, and After the Renaissance. Different forms of literary work of arts such as anthologies, political writings, diaries, travel accounts, public documents, poems, fictions, and plays that are developed and produced starting from the colonial times are grouped under these five parts of the Southern literary scene, identifiable of a collective literary imagination and fervour. The unique feature of the American South was that the South has always given a different and distinct platform of cultural expression, ideas, beliefs, myths associated with the black slaves and a place of historicity unlike the industrial North. The celebrated critic H. L. Mencken, himself technically a southerner has rightly called it as “the Sahara of the

Bozart”, meaning a cultural desert (Mencken 157-168). The South had produced many prominent and well known writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Sidney Lanier, Allen Tate, Mark Twain, Margaret Mitchell, Ellen Glasgow, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Tennessee Williams, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston etc. whose works are popular and enjoyed all over the world, regardless of North and South regional differences. It was so because despite the ‘local colour’, their works reflect the universality of themes, human situations, the defects of the society and its manners, and above all it was their manner and sense of expression that had made their names and their works immortal and memorable.

In the making of American literature, Southern literature occupies a major place and scope for the development of future literary endeavours. Although literature in the South had been making a voice before and after the Civil War, it was during the 1870’s that Southern literature prospered like never before. There is always a sense of fascination, a sort of celebration of the old past, a celebration of heroism and aristocratic attitude that makes Southern literature nostalgic, attractive and peculiar at the same time. But new Southern writers who were born in the last part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century faced an altogether different kind of problem - modernism, economic depression, the horrors and realities of the Second World War. And the new Southern Renaissance writers explored a complex world of history, tradition, religion and manners of the Southern agrarian society in their works and their experiences of a Southern society in modern times. But there is a difference between the literature of the Old South and the literature of the Southern Renaissance writers. The idealization, glamour and elegance of the Genteel Tradition was lost and instead of that, the Renaissance writers focussed mainly on the social injustices, racial discriminations, the decline and fall of the modern man in a very direct and bold manner without losing their sense and feeling of regionality. This is supported by Rubin as he remarks:

There is both ample love and hate in the work of the modern Southerners, because it is their own personal identity that they are, in effect, exploring instead of

uncritically accepting the political, social, and religious standards of the community, the Southern writers of the twentieth century have conducted a searching and often agonizing critique of those values within themselves. The art of these writers have been crafted out of a deep sense of familiarity with the complexity of community life, and they have been powerfully drawn toward that life; yet, at the same time, they have experienced a momentous distancing from that community. (Rubin 416–417).

Tennessee Williams was one such playwright who was born at a time when the American South was undergoing a rapid change. He was a prolific writer and his literary career covers a period of more than forty years. Unlike some Southern writers like Lillian Hellman and Paul Green, Tennessee Williams remained a true Southerner throughout his literary career. And of all the American playwrights, Williams has a unique softness and sweetness with the culture rich American South in the background of almost all his plays. The plays of Williams have certain social and cultural attitudes, of decayed gentry, evils, violence, hysteria, frustrations, loneliness and isolation of different levels. Like a true Southerner, it was his use of language that enthrals and captivates his audiences as he depicted the genteel and aristocratic sensibilities of the South with a poetic and lyrical sympathy.

Of all the works of Tennessee Williams, the plays that best express the elements of Southern attitudes, feelings and manners were *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). These two plays depict the plight and emotional conflict of two Southern women, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Both of them live physically in a modern American society, but wishfully living in the fond memory of the good old Southern days, where the women were treated like queens by the noble gentlemen. They do so because the dream and remembrance of the 'Old South' offer them an escape and a happy illusion to cope with the tragic realities of life and situations. In the case of Amanda Wingfield, her tragic part was that her husband had left the family and the burden of running the family was thrust upon

her, living in a cramped St. Louis apartment with her two grown-up children, Tom Wingfield, who works in a shoe factory, but without any heart in it, and a physically disabled daughter, Laura Wingfield. It is apparent that Laura wears her physical difference as a protective cloak to hide her painfully shy and socially inept behaviour. And as she remained confined at home as a shy and lonely girl, she found her escape and a happy dream in her collection of little glass animals and taking care of them, just like her mother found escape in her fanciful memories of being a southern belle in her times and of her “gentlemen callers.” She used to tell to her children repeatedly, “My callers were gentlemen – all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta – planters and sons of planters!” (Williams 1984, 23). This shows that she has pride in her southern descent and loves to recall each and every incident of her past life as she says:

One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received – *seventeen!* – gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house. (Williams 1984, 22)

Amanda Wingfield is a dichotomous character because there is both beauty and a stark defect in her. Her beauty lies in the fact that she is a strong woman, a matriarch indeed, capable of maintaining a family and keeping it neatly closed at a very turbulent time of depression in America. The family's income is very poor, but Amanda strives to maintain a proper family like any other Southern family would have done in the good old days, like entertaining a gentleman caller. But then, even the new South had changed under the test of times and the old aristocratic sensibilities do not seem to fit anymore in a quickly growing mechanised world of modernity, social and political advancement. Amanda has the strength and talent to endure the terrible realities of existence. Even without her husband, she struggles to stand on her own feet so that she would not have to live on the charity of others. She even invested a little amount of money on a typewriting course for Laura, insisting her to be independent in life. When Tom's

poetic and adventurous ambition pose a threat to the security and financial position of the family, Amanda like a skilled actress gently and yet strongly persuades and pulls him out of his wildest dreams, by reminding him of her lone struggle as she says:

I've had to put up a solitary battle all these years.
But you're my right-hand bower! Don't fall down,
don't fail!"(Williams 1984, 52)

And her weapon was Laura. The subject of Laura, her fragility, her financial and emotional dependence on the members of her family, her need to get married and settled so that she would not depend on them, kept reminding Tom that he was responsible for her life. She was the binding force that kept Tom rooted to the reality of his present existence. This is an achievement on the part of his mother, Amanda, who by begging, pleading and demanding forced him to do something for his sister, Laura.

Amanda can take many roles if she wishes to play and as the situation demands. She can be a very dominating mother, a shrewd saleswoman, a charming Southern belle and a melodramatic woman too. Her defect is that she loves her past and she lives in the blissful memories of a reminiscent past, of her youthful days, of her being a southern belle, with her well-received and countless gentleman callers. Had she not lived in a decayed past, she could have done much better for the lives and the betterment of her children. Unlike her daughter Laura, who in C.W.E. Bigsby's term is "mentally rather than physically fragile" (Bigsby 36), Amanda is skilled and can master anything if she wants to. And even unlike her son Tom, who lives in a poetic world of films, theatres and adventures, she is very realistic and well-focussed as Tom remarks in the play:

Mother was a woman of action as well as words.
She began to take logical steps in the planned
direction. (Williams 1984, 36-37)

In spite of all her talents and abilities, she deliberately forced and even let herself drift to her old days, which will be of no help to her

present life, although it offers her a solace and comfort that none could give to her. One can even say that she is a very selfish woman, forcing to decide the future of Laura to Tom while she remains in the fond memories of a lost bygone era. It is her dilemma of living in a two world society that does not make her a complete human being. The dilemma of living in a society and yet not belonging to it results in social alienation and personal disillusion and Amanda is an example of it. Through the character of Amanda Wingfield, Williams has shown his love and disdain for the American South, where the South is simultaneously charming with her quaint customs and frighteningly cruel with social tensions and problems.

Blanche DuBois is another such southern character. No other character in Williams' dramaturgy has attained the height of emotional sentimentality and tragic reality as her life and character. As the title of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* itself suggests, Blanche is identified to a "streetcar" of human desire, where everyone makes use of her but none owns her. She, again like Amanda Wingfield, seems to have been born in a wrong time and at a wrong place. The character of Blanche has a dreamlike quality as she herself resides in a make-believe world of love, desire and passion. As in the play she remarks:

I don't want realism. I'll tell you what I want.
Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to
people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell
the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be
damned for it! (Williams 2004, 145)

Blanche delights in everything that is rosy, magical and romantic. She is like a lost soul caught in the frenzy between an old and a new world.

Blanche DuBois is a complex character ravaged by poverty, age, frustration and loneliness. When she came to stay at her married sister's two-room apartment in New Orleans, she suffered drastically in the hands of her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski because Blanche and Stanley happened to be persons of two great opposites. Blanche, like any other southern woman, is a worshipper of the traditions of the old South. In short, she is indeed the replica of the southern belle with her

quaintness, flowery and musical language, and her coquettish behaviour towards Mitch, Stanley's friend. The difference in attitudes between Blanche and Stanley is best supported by these lines:

Blanche defines her existence according to the traditions of the Old South. She is completely immersed in that world, whereas Stanley symbolizes the new or modern world that is obliterating that former way of living. (Smith-Howard & Heintzelman 275)

But Blanche is not altogether southern in her behaviour. Of course she has traditional southern beliefs of a well-bred woman. But she cannot stick herself to the southern code of a genteel woman. For instance, Blanche drinks heavily, whether in company or in public, which is not approved of a polite woman in a southern society. Although the tragedy of losing both her parents and then again her husband have made her independent in her attitude, it was modernism and the call of a new South that made her change slightly in her outlook too. So there is always a duality, a two-way world that she has to face.

In the play, Blanche is depicted as a victim of male hegemony, of savagery and brutal forces of a modern American society. In the last scene of the play when she is forced to become a mentally deranged woman and driven to the asylum, under the hostile forces of Stanley, a part of the southern civilisation had gone with her. This shows that the Southern ways, traditions and manners always fail to the changing trends of the American society because the celebrated traditions proved to be outdated and disillusioned with the course of time. And those who lived with those fond memories do not gain anything from the practical, treacherous and realistic world of hatred and lust. Stanley, who is the complete opposite of the delicate Blanche, uses brute force to get rid of her because Blanche with her well-bred mannerisms and decency poses a serious threat to his relationship with his wife, Stella. In the end, Blanche loses in her search for security and in her attempts to get herself married to Mitch. Her dream of living a settled and peaceful life was destroyed by Stanley, who stands as a great rival to everything that she desired for. In the words of Felicia Hardison Londré:

Tennessee Williams intended a balance of power between Blanche and Stanley, to show that both are complex figures whose wants and behaviours must be understood in the context of what is at stake for them. The action proceeds through clashes of these two opposites to the inevitable showdown by which one wins and the other loses. (50).

Blanche is a victim in a modern world because of her southern ideals. She could have been a survivor if she had accepted the modern ways even in a very slight manner, if not wholeheartedly, and transform herself into a strong, independent modern woman that the modern society demands. In the course of the play, she had been struggling and surviving by herself and she could have done so for the rest of her life. Instead, she desired upon the kindness and sympathy of strangers to fill up her lonely, alienated self. But to her, the mercy and kindness of strangers proved hostile and she succumbed to the hostility. Such is the tragic fate of a southern belle who cannot neither belong to the old past nor accept the present society.

The South has been able to keep and maintain its identity because it strives to change and modify with the changing times. The South has seen victory in the American Revolution, bloodshed and defeat in the Civil War, modernism and change in the American union. The new Southern writers have transformed the unrecognizable South of the present in their own language, social attitude and their differing views of the historical past. And Williams’ works convey the message of the conflict between similar and at the same time different societies – the American South and the American North, its beauty and its limitations, the tension that arises out of it which in turn affects human nature and human relationships. Conflicting views, dilemmas and moral issues are the prime flaws that lead to the downfall in the southern heroines of Williams. Using his own southern background, he explores the cultural tendencies and standing of a lost society in a modern world with dramatic excellence, poetic and lyrical sympathy. As such, “[I]t has been said that, Williams’ appreciation of this dichotomous tension in Southern culture was the key to his success. His ability to vividly

(and often brutally) convey Southern cultural myths and simultaneously deconstruct these very same myths is considered his greatest achievement as a writer” (Smith-Howard & Heintzelman 370). Williams, as a social dramatist, probes into the human problems of social conflict and psychological tension that is the product of an aristocratic world of the American South, and its lasting impression on the individuals who live on the fringes of a modern world clinging to a lost utopian world of plenty, leisure and pleasure. This is the dichotomy of the American South and the resulting dilemma that individuals like Amanda and Blanche had to undergo because of the division or contrast between the two societies that are completely different in their structure and social setup.

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