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The significance of Indefinite Nature of Sexuality and Homosexuality: An Exploration of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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ABSTRACT: Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been adapted many times and presented in different ways with different opinions of different people. This study is an effort to have a deep journey into the distressed, troubled, and isolated worlds of the characters of Tennessee Williams. The article tries to present the disastrous dilemma by displaying the contrast in Blanches' life. Earlier in the play Blanche showed the character of being a gentlewoman whereas gradually, in the play it is shown her breakdown because of many reasons.

The research paper is about the important themes of the play which is considered very relevant in the contemporary world as well. It tries to accomplish its purpose through two very different and opposite worlds of two sisters Blanche and Stella. The study of homosexuality is also considered an important theme that plays a significant role in this play. This also presents the analysis of female characters in this play and their negative relationships with men. The dependence on men was one of the major themes that can be concluded through the study of play. It also shows the sympathy of the playwright towards women and their difficulties as they live in a materialistic male-dominated society.

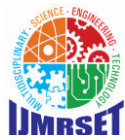
KEYWORDS: Indefinite Nature of Sexuality, Homosexuality, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Women's Negative Relationships with Men, Male-Dominated Society.

I. INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

The Decade of the 1950s can be considered a transactional and the important one in the history of Modern America. Just like many people of the world Americans as well were not able to recover fully from the shattering experience of World War II. Faith was lost in the Human Institution after WWII. Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* demonstrates the tragedy of Blanche Dubois. Tennessee Williams one of the prominent American Dramatists of the twentieth century, presented his opinion on the destruction of the old South along with its traditional values and institution. Every character in the play has their meaning and importance which symbolizes different thought processes and mindsets that prevails in the society at that period and as well as in the contemporary world.

Blanche the protagonist of the play, is represented as a faded Southern Belle who was traditionally regarded as a symbol of honour and the emblem of purity and chastity. She considered herself a higher-class lady and wants others to treat her like that. Every day when we pass on the street, we don't know each other, or we are least interested in entering a new relationship. People seem to be afraid of being social and feel comfortable isolating themselves from others. Eventually its leads to the isolated world, a world where the opinion of others doesn't bother, we are all somehow trapped in a world that is made by us only, and somehow, we are not ready to accept this fact. We call that world a comfort place and didn't bother to look and know what is outside it or maybe we are scared to get out of it. Before reaching the text, one should know that Tennessee William way a homosexual and was not greatly welcomed at that time.

Breaking the rule of the patriarchal society leads to harsh punishment. Allan and Blanche also suffered from this punishment, particularly one led to death and the other to a mental asylum. So, in this study, it is intended to present an analysis of the significance of the indefinite nature of sexuality in this play about the image of light and darkness.



II. AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF SEXUALITY

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been written by Tennessee Williams. This play is one of the most loved plays of all time. He was an American playwright of the twentieth century and his plays reveal a world of human frustration in which sex and violence underlie an atmosphere of romantic gentility. His plays are mostly about people who are misfits in society and about their loneliness, frustration, and their desperation for communication, these players somewhat reflect his own past life. Although his plays used to be filled with themes as social and moral teachings, William used to say that he never used to write plays with a theme in his mind and whenever someone asks about the theme of his play he used to reply, 'It's a play about life.'

The play explores various themes, including the ambiguous nature of Sexuality as one of the major themes. The Characters in the play, predominantly Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski demonstrate composite and multi-layered sexual identities, which lead to the overall tension and conflict within the play. Blanche DuBois, the protagonist, exemplifies a convinced ambiguity when it comes to her sexuality. She is stripped of her psychological, financial, sexual, and cultural identity. After the death of her husband, she was involved in a relationship with many men due to which she lost her job. Blanche Dubois is a woman portrayed with complex sexual history. She was not engaged in relationships with men only but with women as well, which surely indicated the fluidity in her sexuality. The past experiences and desires of the Protagonist Blanche are shown as a source of guilt, shame, and self-deception, which eventually led her to a mental breakdown. It is because the death of her husband unlocked a sluice gate of fear and desire which she possibly was not able to handle. The death of Allen's made Blanche full of fear that maybe she would end up alone and become a spinster. This terror drove her from one man to another in a way to find love and protection.

Blanche DuBois, the protagonist, and the main character of the play is a complicated and disturbed woman who came to live with her sister Stella and her husband Stanley in New Orleans. The past of Blanche is shrouded in mystery, and she is considered a fading Southern belle who finds it difficult to balance her desire and the expectations of society. Blanche association of her love for Allan with young men is further suggested by her relationships following his death. Blanche turned to young men for physical relationships – soldiers from the army camp, the seventeen-year-old student in her class, and the young man who come to collect newspapers. The strange thing about this was she was trying to help them as she could not help Allan and was impressed that they did not reject her just like Allan did.

Throughout the play, her relations with other characters like Stanley and Stella, disclose her struggle with her sexuality and her efforts to cover her past. The relationships of Blanche with men are noticeable by a combination of authentic desire, efforts to regain lost youth, and a need for security and validation. However, at the beginning of the play in scene I, Williams suggested that the sexual history of Blanche is one of the reasons and causes of downfall. Blanche's lifelong pursuing nature of her sexual desires has led to her exclusion from Belle Reve, her banishment from Laurel, and at the end of the play her exclusion from society at large.

Another character of the play, Stanley Kowalski, is presented as a hyper-masculine and sexually aggressive figure. The secularity of Stanley is portrayed as predominantly heterosexual. As we can depict from the play, there are moments where his interaction with his other male friends conveys hints of homoeroticism. Throughout the play, Blanche was sinister by her ancestor's death, which she points to as their "epic fornications." As she disapproved and was not open about her husband's sexuality which forced him to do suicide.

Ultimately, Williams validates that Blanche is not at fault for not knowing how to act on her desire and control them. She was bought up and introduced to a world that make her learn that having sexual desire and even expressing was wrong, she never got to learn how she can deal with all her desires. This is why we can estimate that *A Streetcar Named Desire* cannot be dismissed as a cautionary tale that warns individuals to embrace desire.

This theme was upheld by Tennessee Williams from the beginning of the play with references to Baches first husband Allan, who was homosexual and later committed suicide after his truth was revealed to Blanche. Blanche also had affairs with many men after the death of her husband. At last, we can evaluate and analyse the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* which explores the complications and complexities of human desires that include sexual desires, and how it tends to shape the lives of the characters and their relationship.

Unacceptable Homosexuality:

In the play, it is clearly shown the consequences of being homosexual in that era. Being Homosexual was considered a taboo and things are not very different in the contemporary world. Tennessee Williams was a Homosexual and was not greatly and warmly welcomed in his period. In this play, one can easily depict his way to explore his



sexuality which he was not able to do in real life, so he explored it in his head. He knows that being Homosexual means being different from normal and not being able to lead a healthy and warm life.

Williams was living in the 40s a historical period that influenced him to write this book. Illusions and Perception were used by Williams to show how homosexuals had to circumnavigate life. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a play presented as shallow and without any doubt heterosexual play. The unseen homosexual character of Allen Grey, husband of Blanche, makes homosexuality a bordering topic throughout the play. Though Allan was not a significant and visible character in the plot of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he is one of the important characters through which readers get to know about the living and treatment of homosexuals at that period. In 1947, gay sex was considered a criminal act and homosexuality was depicted as mentally ill until 1973. In the Play, the way Blanche give a description of Allan as does not fit the category of a male stereotype, Blanche remarks that “there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man” In fact, all these differences make Allan different from other men and attractive too.

The courtesy and love of literature make him an ideal mate type for the sensitive, artistic Blanche. Unfortunately, the combination of these two eventually alike souls proves to be catastrophic when Blanche found the truth about his husband that he is a homosexual. Williams created a parallel between Blanche a straight woman and Allen a gay man. The desire of both husband and wife; lead to the same destination, Suicide, and a mental hospital. During that period, Women were forced against their will. The suicide of Allan and committing Blanche to a mental institution were a powerful image, especially to the audience who are gay men and straight women.

Audiences and readers could sympathize with the fate of Blanche and Allan. Unlike other characters in the play especially Stanly and Stella. Blanche and Allan were not able to fit themselves with the patriarchal norms of their time and were therefore punished to that extent which led them, particularly to a mental hospital and death. We depict that there are no gay characters in the play but it’s worth noting that Tennessee Williams himself was a gay man. His personal experiences and perspective likely influenced the underlying themes of desire, repression, and the exploration of sexuality that are present in many of his works.

Critic Views on Homosexuality:

Although if one talks about criticism, one can think about critics like Mark Winchell who are quick to blame Allan for the disastrous effects that his homosexuality has on Blanche, and “for taking the coward’s way out by killing himself,” most critics choose Blanche to blame for having lack of understanding, compassion and for “her judgment condemnation for his homosexuality.” However, Laurilyn J. Harris points out: “Such criticism views the past from the context of the present. Blanche was terrified and horrified by her husband’s homosexuality. However, she never had a thought or intention of exposing her husband with the cruelty. She never made any plot to destroy him. In fact, she herself was the victim of sexuality more than her husband.

Homosexuality and the law:

A Streetcar Named Desire may represent itself to queer understanding, but it would be overly naive to ponder it as a simple metaphor for homosexual desire, by focusing mainly on heterosexual characters, Tennessee Williams displays to the audience that the desire of gays and straight aren’t a foreign concept. His explanation of gender relations and sexuality surpasses the social and political context of 1947, demonstrating its significance in the literary standard or canon. He was not much interested in writing about the second world war which was a trending topic at that time, Williams seems quite different, the enclosure of a political issue that had gained great implications during his lifetime, and which is very close to him: the question of gay rights. Homosexuality was the subject that was very protruding in his private life, it can undoubtedly stand in his work, but never the central theme, and certainly never taken up to be defended or pleaded.

Present scenario:

Though Homosexuality was not accepted at that time and even in the contemporary world nothing much has changed... even today homosexual people are looked down upon. Though major changes had taken place in laws and norms surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage and the rights of LGBT people around the world, public opinion on the topic of homosexuality remains sharply divided by the country, region, and economic development. In many countries, people started accepting them but, in many countries, it is considered a criminal act.



Sexuality: Reel vs. Real:

There is a vast difference between reels and reality. Those who live in reels always try to portray their life as glamorous in contrast to what it is. Their dress, their behaviour, and their overall way to present themselves in front of other people surrounding them as well as themselves change completely. They try to run from the harsh realities of the world and make them believe in their fabricated stories which are neither true nor obtainable, those are just fantasies. Trying to escape from reality and lying to others about themselves can lead one to even more problems and make them suffer even more making reality even worst.

The same can be seen in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where the writer of the play, Tennessee Williams uses the constant clash and battle between reel and reality as a theme throughout his play till the end. Throughout the play, the main character and the protagonist of the play Blanche DuBois loves to live in delusions and tries to run from the harsh realities of her life. She lives in a world of fantasies filled with delusions throughout the play she behaves and acts as if she is still a belle, taking long and frequent baths, and surrounding herself in silky clothes and costume jewels. Although in reality, after a tragedy of the death of her parents and husband and after all her wealth was exhausted, she became broke. She still desires to be treated as a southern belle, but in reality, she was a schoolteacher who lost her job after a rumour of having a relationship with a young student which is not considered appropriate.

Blanche from the start of the play was grouchy, complaining and criticizing her sister, Stella Kowalski, and brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski's apartment and their living condition and the way they live but, she had nowhere to go and was completely broke. She believes that she is staying with Stella by her own choice, rather than necessity, and that she can leave their apartment at any moment with the help of Shep Huntleigh, a millionaire who will help her. She also uses to write Shep lies about her and Stella attending cocktail parties and social events in a telegram. She even lies to Mitch, one of Stanley's friends whom she was attracted to, about her age and hangs a paper lantern over the light bulb in the bedroom where both were having a conversation, trying to create an illusion, and hiding her real age and make herself look attractive and when Mitch removes the paper lantern off the light bulb she started crying saying, "I don't want realism. I want magic!" symbolizing that she is afraid of the living in reality rather like to live in the world of her fantasies where things work according to her. She doesn't want to face the real world and loves to live in her world. She tries to portray herself as a young girl in front of Mitch, an innocent, and naive girl even though she was quite sexually experienced and even tries to seduce the newspaper boy who came to collect membership for the newspaper and kissed him on his mouth, she even tries to flirt with her brother-in-law Stanley, when she requests him to do up the buttons in the back of her dress but he brushes her off. Throughout the play, Blanche tries to run from her harsh reality and make her believe that she is still the same southern belle due to which she used to have frequent clashes with Stanley making his suspicions about her past life later he found out that she left Laurel, her home town, because she was not very well in her home town, she had rumours of her relationship with a young student. After knowing the truth, he told the same to Mitch, whom Blanche was dating. After knowing the truth Mitch started to keep distance from Blanche.

Even after that Stanley drops a few hints to Blanche that he knew her past in Laurel, her hometown, and Hotel Flamingo she endures to talk about Shep and even she told Stanley that Shep is a very cultivated gentleman and if she compares to Stanley who is a "swine" to him he is way better and respectful gentlemen. Upon hearing this Stanley's violent nature started coming out and he tears off Blanche's fabrications by revealing the truth to her that he knew the entire thing about her. Blanche still tries to make her believe that she can escape from this situation and hide by calling Shep, but in reality, she doesn't have his number. Alas! she got raped by Stanley and she ultimately ends up in a mental asylum. The whole time, in the play she lived in her delusion, and when reality hit her, she breaks down mentally and physically. She gets to know that the world is not as simple as it seems to be. At last, she said that "Whomever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Dependency of Women on Man:

Today in the society, most women depend on men for their survival and to achieve their desire, their happiness. Even though the men physically and emotionally abuse them, they still cling to them because they are unable to support themselves and think that this would ensure their safety and their dreams. In the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams attempts to expose and criticize the dependence of women on a man and the treatment of women by men during that era. For both men, was their only means to achieve their desires and happiness. Stella chooses to remain by the side of her husband, Stanley, even though he used to beat her and physically abuse her.

When Blanche told Stella that Stanley's actions were unforgivable, Stella replies to her saying she is sort of "sort of thrilled" by his violent nature and explains to her that the "things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark"



make everything else all right. And she does not want to leave Stanley. Steve and Eunice, Stella, and Stanley's neighbour share the same type of relationship where Steve also used to beat Eunice out of anger, and after some time, they forgive each other.

Sex and violence were paired on both floors of the house. Both Stella and Eunice were dependent on their husbands as they were fulfilling their desire, their lust, and even after Blanche told Stella that she got raped by Stanley, Stella does not believe her sister because if she believed Blanche, she would no longer be able to live with him. This further shows how much Stella depended on her husband, Stanley, because he signifies and assures a much more secure future than her sister, Blanche. Blanche on the other hand side, was also dependent on her husband, but after his husband committed suicide and all his wealth was exhausted, she became broke and after her husband's death, she found protection and comfort in having relationships with strangers.

She also tells Stella that she is worried about her relationship with Mitch, and she wanted to keep him interested in him, as she saw him as a way of escaping from Stella and Stanley's apartment and wants to marry Mitch to restore her security and honour as a married woman. In the entire play, she keeps claiming that Ship Huntleigh, a Dallas millionaire who has made millions from oil wells in Texas would help her escape from the apartment by providing her financial support.

This dependence of her on man for everything led to her downfall she lost everything, she lost her old ancestral home, Belle Reve after the death of her father, she lost her wealth after the death of his husband, and became broke once all her money got exhausted, she lost her job as a teacher and self-respect and had to abandon Laurel, her hometown because she had rumours of her having a relationship with a young student, which is not appropriate and unacceptable. Eventually, she got raped by Stanley, her brother-in-law, and ultimately ended up in a mental asylum. She had a sad ending.

III. CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, Williams effectively validates and determines how the search and quest for desires can lead to additional unhappiness for people in social settings. If individuals are not able to wake up from the illusion and came up to reality, they find it difficult to find their true selves. As described: "Love has no gender" Through this quote, one can depict that sexuality doesn't matter in love but the bond and relationship between the same gender is not considered normal in that era and as well as in the contemporary world. For *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is important and necessary for everyone to face reality, for one to be effective and lead a life to the fullest.

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