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**Feminism in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie***

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Feminism is concerned with the issue of the marginalization of women, i.e. with their being relegated to a secondary position. Feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture i.e. the one organized in favour of the interests of men. Critic Toril Moi observes that Feminist literary criticism is not just another "critical approach on a line with a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry"<sup>1</sup>. In short, feminism represents one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. It is very important component of post-modernist society where people from different classes seek liberty. Feminist criticism, therefore, studies sexual, social and political issues once thought to be "outside" the study of literature. For example, some of the women writers are dissatisfied with the way women are portrayed by men as well as women. The message of the Feminists is not to submit to the patriarchal culture because it does not promote self-reliance, independence and intellect.

A feminist is a person who has conscious political orientation to challenge patriarchy which promotes the domination of men and subordination of women. These ideas were given voice by Virginia Woolf and among active Feminists are included Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Helen Cixous etc. Theoretically, these ideas began in 1960's with the rise of post-modernism where people demand greater equality between sexes and races. It is not merely a theory. It's an action plan also. It is a political discourse against patriarchy and sexism. In the context of *The Second Sex*, "woman has always been the 'other', she is defined with reference to man, not in reciprocity which would make him an object for the subjecthood of women: she is the archetype of the oppressed consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

A large variety of approaches are being developed in the feminist literary criticism these days. Feminist criticism under post-structuralism has developed an approach called "reorientation" which has made clear that different people read a text differently and that meanings in a text are not fixed or constant. In fact, reading of a text is socially and historically situated in the context in which it is written. Elaine Showalter identifies four models of difference:

1. Biological differences
2. Linguistic i.e. the way language is created
3. Psycho-analytical differences
4. Cultural differences, which is the most important

In all these areas, there has been a genuine shift from a negative attack on male writing about women and a shift towards positive delineation of women's redefinition - of women's identity in their own writing. Such "gynocentric" criticism concentrates on female criticism, stylistics, themes, images and literary tradition.

This paper attempts to study Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* from the feminine point of view. Williams introduces us to a large variety of situations and characters which portray "the complexity of their worlds" both inside and outside. They are "victims of their own guilt or illusion as they are prey to the world's brutality."<sup>3</sup> The characters in his play reflect the sensitivity of the playwright and deal with the theme of conflict between two cultures and how sometimes a sensitive, innocent character has to face very brutal environment. The South-American particularly the state of Mississippi is a Delta and known for life full of simplicity and

innocence, a life free from commercialism, hypocrisy and materialism. But town life has all these traits. It is a culture full of the impact of industrialization and township. It is a confrontation between the world of innocence and the world of experience.

*The Glass Menagerie* is an autobiographical play. Tennessee Williams' had a younger sister named Rose, about whom he was over-protective. They were not physically very healthy. Their sensitivity made them prone to many emotional and psychological ailments. They were exposed to very harsh life in school. They were discriminated because they were southerners. Williams was called a 'sissy boy' and he was a little effeminate. So, they had a feeling of withdrawal. These childhood influences work very strongly on Williams and this is shown in his characters also who are very fragile, sensitive and fugitive. The story of the play happened in the life of Tom, 10 years ago in 1935. At present, it is 1945. He narrates the trauma that the Wingfield family underwent. The father is present only in the photograph. He worked with a telephone company and fell in long-distance love and left and deserted his family. For all the practical purposes, dad is dead. Apparently, it is a poignant tale of a family whose struggle ends in surrender and their confrontation with reality results in retreat or withdrawal.

In the absence of a bread winner, Tom has to work in a warehouse against his wishes. He wants to be a poet, he is fond of reading D.H. Lawrence and looks for a life of adventure. He escapes into movies where he finds thrill unlike his dull routine. Therefore, he plays the dual role of a narrator as well as character. There is a frequent quarrel between him and his mother who keeps nagging him. It is difficult for a single parent to control a grown-up son. There is a frequent tussle and verbal dual between the two. She has no sense of Tom's privacy and marches into his room until he is left with nothing he can call his own.

Amanda has a typical puritanical background. She belongs to south and does not like reading D.H. Lawrence. She always puts her best past forward and carries herself decently caught in her present. Her memories of the south are revealed to us through her thoughts and she remembers the pastoral landscape and many gentlemen calling upon her. She must have been much sought after belle. She dwells in the memory of that Sunday morning when she received seventeen suitors on a single day. "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain . . . your mother received . . . seventeen! . . . gentlemen callers!"<sup>4</sup> She cannot forget her youth. There is nothing immoral in receiving suitors but reading Lawrence is immoral as he writes only about sex. So, there is nothing contradictory in her puritanical upbringing. The depressing circumstances and uncongenial environment do no lessen the elegance and gentility of this southern heroine that has been in her right from her birth. That in why, in the mid of the squalor of her environment, Amanda uses dainty white lace handkerchiefs.

The extreme sensitivity of this southern belle makes her easy victim of the male protagonist. Amanda puts on such an expression that it frightens Laura: "Mother, when you're disappointed you get that awful look, on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!"<sup>5</sup> Since Amanda is hypersensitive, it is more difficult for her to endure her humiliating condition. Her financial condition is uncertain as she is dependent on Tom and keeps repeating about her difficult times and financial instability.

Laura is crippled by a childhood disease and so she has an inferiority complex. She retreats into her own world. She spends time listening phonographic records left by her father and polishing her glass menagerie – a collection of glass animals. She dreads contact with the outside world. She is emotionally weak and is a cause of concern for her mother. Amanda is afraid Laura might not settle in life and might remain a spinster. She saves money to send Laura to a typing school so that she might settle with a career. But Laura never went to school and stayed in a park. She plays truant out of fear and complexes. Her greatest fear is that when she walks through the corridor, her foot will slip which will make people laugh. She would never like to be noticed. She always remains in the dark and does not come in the limelight. Her mother discovers that she is not going to school and is terribly outraged.

Amanda thinks that her children lack certain things. Feminists always try to assert the equality of female sex. They do not subscribe to the idea of patriarchy. Feminists believe in emancipation of women who should be economically free also. A woman has to be recognized as an independent individual. Amanda embodies all these traits. Tennessee Williams is a feminist. He is a master of female psychology. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* has beauty with brain. Shakespeare tries to show through his female characters like Viola, Olivia and Celia that female characters are active, free and dominant. Even Nora in *A Doll's House* refuses to be a doll. That is Henrik Ibsen's way of telling that women are free and cannot be kept as pets.

Amanda also embodies a similar spirit. She says that a woman has to have charm, wits and intelligence. She has to be equal if not better. This theory is universally accepted. George Bernard Shaw, William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams are great feminists. They show pictures of liberated women with qualities of head and heart. Amanda is a very agreeable character. She is pitied because she left all the wealthy suitors and married a man who deserts her. When we are made to glorify the past, we are pained by the present which is not so good and beautiful. If present is better than past, then one should never talk about past. Time chases her when she puts forward the implacable fact and warns Tom that "the future becomes the present, the present the past and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it."<sup>6</sup>

We have to appreciate the love, care and the fears of a mother (Amanda). She has genuine fears about Laura (the gentleman callers) and Tom. On Laura's part, she has consciousness about her physical defect. This has crippled Laura, psychologically. She does not want her children especially Laura to face harsh days in future. Inside, Amanda is broken, and haunted by the fear of future. This is what makes her at once positive and negative with her strengths and weaknesses.

Tennessee Williams is a non-realistic playwright. He insisted on using anti-realistic devices. He said that theatre should not be mixed with life. Aristotle's principle was that audience identifies with characters because stage is real. Williams wants to break this identification. "In the Production Notes, Tennessee Williams gives expression to all his dissatisfaction with 'the exhausted theatre of realistic convention.' He would give to his play unusual freedom from convention. With the arrangements of light, music and the magic lantern slides projecting the various legends and images, he wants to produce the special effects and create the right atmosphere for the play."<sup>7</sup> He calls his theatre the plastic theatre which is flexible and not rigid. Williams uses in this play symbolism, music and pure poetic devices. His plays are invariably accompanied by music. Music and lighting are the integral part of a text in Williams plays. Screen is used to break the illusion of reality. He made use of innovative stage devices. In a majority of Williams' plays, there is a strong current of violence which is manifested in several ways – physical, sexual, emotional, verbal. A majority of his characters, especially women are complex-ridden. There are psychological problems. Williams creates effective theatre sensation. His plays are more like movies. Cinematographic technique is also widely used by him.

The lighting in William's plays is unrealistic. It is in keeping with the overall mood of nostalgia, decadence or illusion which he wishes to create. Each character is accentuated with a particular lighting effect for example; the light made to fall on Amanda's face which is aged yet childish is sharp and satirical. On the other hand, Laura is treated somewhat sympathetically. Being treated as a special character, she is required to "remain the visual centre..... The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a particular pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas." ("Production Notes", *The Glass Menagerie* xiii).

Williams also employs visual language to depict his poetic perception. Tom says in the play: "I have a poet's weakness for symbols."<sup>8</sup> In this way, he voices the writer's feelings for visual and verbal symbols present in the play. Williams evokes flower imagery to depict the fragility of his heroines. Laura has "blue roses" to set her aside from the bore and ordinary world and also to stress that she is both very special and usually different from others.

Each of William's heroines is connotated with a befitting symbol. Laura is associated with the fragility of glass in this play, as Tennessee Williams says in his "Production Notes", "when you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken." (*The Glass Menagerie* xiii). It is a very appropriate symbol for a delicate girl like Laura, who takes refuge in her glass collection, her lameness being responsible for her cutting off from the harsh and real world.

Music is employed in Williams' plays to underwrite the heroine's thoughts<sup>9</sup>. It reveals the emotions and sentiments of the character and thus brings out the character to the audience more clearly. There is an ironic refrain from "Ane Marie" when Laura tells her mother: "you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!"<sup>10</sup> Therefore, whenever Amanda puts on that reproachful and martyred look on her face we hear Ane Marie in the background.

Williams' heroines indulge in a type of dialogue which sets them apart from their surroundings. He gives us an example of Amanda's elevated speech to charm the gentleman caller by her southern hospitality: "It's rare for a girl as sweet and pretty as Laura to be domestic! But Laura is, thank heavens, not only pretty but also very domestic..... Well, in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestiges of gracious living! Gone completely....."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, she still remembers the luxuries she had left behind in her past.

Also the title *The Glass Menagerie* is quite symbolic in itself. It is evident that everybody in the play prefers to live in his or her own world made of glass. It is through glass only that they can see the reality and hence move in a world of illusions. As Catherine Hughes suggests, "Everyone in *The Glass Menagerie* is living in a memory or a dream; Amanda with her recollection – or illusion – of how much 'she ought to be loved; Jim O' Connor, with his high school glories, year book predictions of success and future expectations, Laura in her isolation, Tom, eager to escape to join the merchant marine, to write poetry, attempting to kind in motion what was lost in space."<sup>12</sup> In fact, they dwell in a world which is illusory and fragile like the glass and which is likely to break in its confrontation with reality.

Amongst her glass collection the unicorn, says Laura, is her favourite. In a way, this unicorn stands for Laura herself. In his short conversation with her, Jim asks Laura whether the unicorns are extinct in the modern world to which the right answer is positive only. The noticeable thing is that it has only one horn which symbolizes its being on the path of decay. Again when the unicorn is broken, it suggests Laura's indulgence in the contemporary world as a normal human being. But the very next moment we come to know that it is illusory and she is left alone again. All this suggests that even these southerners try to come to terms with the new contemporary world but they cannot due to their strong ties with old world. There remains some peculiarity about them which prevents them from feeling at home with the present social set up.

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