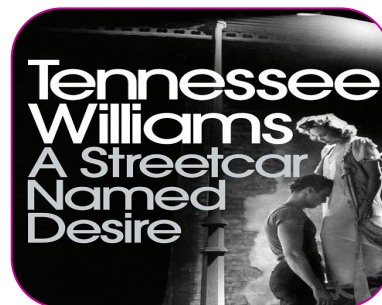




TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' THE GLASS MENAGERIE, A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE, AND SUMMER AND SMOKE VIS-À-VIS ALIENATION AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

In this Paper, the discussion that is being contemplated would be developed: first, with a treatment of the subject-matter through the incorporation of eminent opinions on what is meant by 'alienation'; and in what manner it is related to aesthetic experience of a creative artist. Then, as the argument is built up, its justifiability would be examined in the light of its relationships with the plays of Tennessee Williams. In order to make the discussion authentic, it is desirable to know what is the meaning of 'alienation' and how it is related to aesthetic sensibility of man. The striking feature of Williams' treatment of alienation in relation to aesthetic sensibility stems on the strength of some of the sharply etched individualized characters in his plays under discussion here.

KEYWORDS: Tennessee Williams, Alienation, Aesthetic Sensibility.

INTRODUCTION

'Alienation' etymologically is derived from the Latin root, 'alienus'/'alius', which means 'other' in English language; that is why, in general parlance, one calls a person an alien when it is known that he does not belong to the state or the country to which by birth, the general populace belongs. The feeling of alienability or otherness arises when man socially or/and psychologically starts feeling that he or she is separate from others. There are various factors responsible for such a feeling. Psychological or social exploitation may induce a feeling of separation and alienation in human beings. Since exploitation of human beings on one count or another is from time immemorial; and *ipso facto* the incidence of alienation has affected the lives of a countless number of men and women across the distant era of human history. This point would be re-touched soon when the relationship of alienation with aesthetic sensibility would be discussed with reference to different plays and characters of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. At this stage, it may be observed that the only perceptible change that has set in from the industrial revolution onward in England and Western Europe to the late twentieth century technological advancement in electronics and computerization is the greater complexity in alienated feelings because human existence has gone more and more fragmented; *per se*, the acuity of alienation became unbearably sharp.

Furthermore, as the population all the world over, specially in the urban population has grown frighteningly fast, the average human being finds himself without direction, thanks to the dwarfing of independent thinking by mass media pressures, alienation has become quite widespread leaving its damaging scars on the shriveled and emotively disintegrated faces of city inhabitants. The spreading of false values among the rising generation has wrought on countless number of people. The shrinking frontiers of privacy aided and abetted by the growing iniquitous system of economic well-being have made countless number of people morons, idiots and psychic wrecks. The plays of Tennessee Williams and other American

dramatists in which one can specifically mention the names of Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Lilian Hellman and Elmer Rice among several others are important for understanding alienation.

Man is changing and so is the external landscape; and so, in the context of faith-bereft modern life, one must develop the art of aesthetising the reality that is many-faceted because of the ceaseless change. This is how Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* turns out to be so: 'The smallest daily chores, the most repeated of living action, the local events – doing homework, listening to the Albany train, watching the boy down at the stable, ironing a dress – magnified to equality with the movement of the stars. Whatever is, belongs to an intricately connected and meaningful system. Just as the earth is a speck in an endless succession of planetary units, so each moment of breathing is part of the history of man.'¹

In the modern setting of social life, the divinity in it is not only questioned but is largely side-tracked. It is in this context, the aesthetic sensibility of an artist helps man to maintain his equipoise from beginning till the end. Alienation is all pervasive in the air we breathe. This is due to the vice of commercialism and money-rolling in limitless race which has landed men in doubt for one another due to the alienated persona in each of us. When Matthew Arnold composed these lines:

'And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night'²

he must have had an apprehension that humanity might turn to this colouring and mode of social behaviour owing to the money-oriented values in which man so often finds himself at odds with others. Thus, in this scenario the role of sensitive and creative artists becomes more necessary for average educated human being; otherwise men and women in general are forced to get disintegrated at the level of individuality. For example, O'Neill's plays have turned out to be yeomanly in sharpening the awareness among the literate class all the world over about the gross shortcomings of the modern civilization. American society must feel indebted to such men of literary distinction. In fact, it is through the aesthetic sensibility that such men and women become aware of the complexities of life. Among these complexities, some are curable by reshaping one's personal conduct; and some other are not resolvable by man's ingenuity, one has to willy nilly surrender to the inscrutable forces which are higher than man's intelligence. The aesthetic sensibility frees man from the weird clutches of the confused social environment; and even when, it is for a short duration, it is worth any effort.

One can say that alienation can be meaningfully interpreted *vis-a-vis* individual's sensibility. The subject-discussion here takes into account the inter-relationship between 'alienation and aesthetic sensibility'. Hence it would be fruitful also to know the basic ideas behind aesthetics. Aesthetics in the modern sense has been linked to Alexander Baumgarten (1714-62). "Aesthetics, since Baumgarten's time, has been defined as 'the study of the beautiful in nature and art, of its conditions, and of its conformity to law. 'Thus defined, it has a broad scope, including at least two major modes of approach, the philosophical and the psychological. Philosophers since Plato have been intensively concerned with problems of art and of beauty. They have been pursuing questions like the following: What is art? What is beauty? Is beauty objective? What is the relation of beauty to other value, *i.e.*, What is the relation of the beautiful to the true and to the good?'³ 'Aesthetics' is derived from the Greek word: *aesthesis*. In English it means sense-perception. In its broad meaning, aesthetics is also concerned with the important equations of truth and goodness. One who feels alienated from social environment, naturally reacts to the elements of falsity and ugliness in the atmosphere. Those who are victims of racial discrimination or class differentiation are to aestheticise the factor of ugliness in the life style of their oppressors. If aesthetic element with sensibility is to be linked, it can be said that the concept of aesthetic sensibility primarily connotes an intenser form of human experience that finds acceptability in terms of the extract quoted below:

The modern meaning of sensibility 'was anticipated by Baudlaire. In his essay on Constanti in Guys he suggests that the child, convalescent, and the artist are alike in possessing 'the ability (*la faculte*) of being

vividly interested in things, even those that appear most trivial The child sees everything *afresh* (*en nouveau*), he is always drunk.'

The man of genius is he who adds powers of analysis and expression to the sensibility of the child. We can see here the linking of physical and emotional responsiveness that is the essence of the modern meaning of the word. Baudlaire's view of sensibility involves an emphasis on the physical strain of thought, a special awareness of flux, and a mingling of the senses.⁴

Now, as one prepares to examine 'Alienation and Aesthetic Sensibility' in the plays of Tennessee Williams, one has to take into account his poetic and dramatic efforts 'to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living.'⁴⁰ In his plays the subtle inter-relationship between alienation and aesthetic sensibility gets expressed poetically. 'His lyricism gracefully accentuates the atmosphere of decay which permeates his work. And he writes to suit his severest critic – himself. Other critics have noted that he has never created a character who has recovered from the wounds and desolation of childhood. Williams is nothing if not honest. His best plays are those based on his own life.'⁵ As he has depicted the delicate side of life as also its abnormal aspects, he has been able to create an aesthetic situation of deep import. His first major play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is concerned with a poignant human situation, patterned on his own life experience. It is the story of a Wingfield family living in a dingy St. Louis apartment during the 1930s depression. Amanda as mother of two children: Tom (son) and Laura (daughter) is deeply concerned how to marry her delicate, fragile daughter to a young respectable person. She insistently desires so because she is estranged from her husband and also because both of her children are just teenagers, not strong enough to face the brutal challenges of social life. The fourth character in the play is Jim O'Connor who calls on the family for a dinner. He is given a full-fledged hospitality, for Amanda very much desired him to marry her daughter, Laura. When Amanda found that the visit of Jim to the family has not come to her expectations, there is a general mood of consternation. The tense Amanda upbraids her son Tom for his habit of smoking and going to movies. Laura creates her own fantasy world of romantic music and tiny, delicate ornaments. Like the animals of her collection, she is beautifully fragile – but easily broken. Thus, in *The Glass Menagerie* one finds that there are images of reality and fantasy woven together. The mood of the play is further heightened through the use of screen devices bearing poetic images or legends like the poetic expression of the French poet, Francis Villon: 'Ou sont les neiges d'antan' which in English rendering means 'Where are the snows of the begone days?' The overall impact is of isolation among the main characters; of the play with reference to the reality they are situated in. As the characters are highly individualized, one finds there is a greater shaft of alienated feeling in them towards the reality with which they are unturned. While Amanda (mother) relives in the romanticized past, the son (Tom) has a vague inkling about the future while keeping a poetic distance from the present, while the daughter (Laura) being fragile and almost a cripple resides in her fantasy world.

In scene 6 (*The Glass Menagerie*), before the gentleman-caller, Jim O'Connor arrives at the Wingfield house in the company of Laura's brother, Tom Wingfield, the mother (Amanda) entertains her ailing daughter (Laura) to show receptiveness to the invited guest; but the daughter, in spite of her mother's entreaties, is somewhat lukewarm to the prospective groom:

Amanda : I don't intend to humor your silliness, Laura.

I've had too much from you and your brother, both ! So just sit down and compose yourself till they come. Tom has forgotten his key so you'll have to let them in, when they arrive.

Laura (*panicky*) : Oh, Mother – *you* answer the door !

Amanda (*lightly*) : I'll be in the kitchen – busy !

Laura : Oh, Mother, please answer the door, don't make me do it !

Amanda : (*crossing into the kitchenette*): I've got to fix the dressing for the salmon. Fuss, fuss – silliness ! – over a gentleman caller !

(The door swings shut. Laura is left alone)

(LEGEND on screen : `Terror`)

(She (Laura) utters a low moan and turns off the lamp – sits stiffly on the edge of a sofa, knotting her fingers together.)

Legend on screen : `The Opening of a Door !' (Tom and Jim appear on the fire escape steps and climb in to the landing. Hearing their approach, Laura rises with a panicky gesture. She retreats to the portiers. The doorbell rings. Laura catches her breath and touches her throat. Low drums sound.)

Amanda (calling) : Laura, sweetheart ! The door !
(Laura stares at it without moving,) ⁶

Let this extract from *The Glass Menagerie* be taken as an example in showing Tennessee Williams's attempt to heighten the dramatic message. It is about Laura (sister to Tom), for she is so much affrighted with the world outside, especially in facing anybody else than her brother and mother. The poetry of the dramatic extract lies the way the `feeling-spectrum' of Laura has been projected. Aesthetically, it is a distinguishing mark for Tennessee Williams.

The Glass Menagerie, in terms of Williams's tenderest delineation of feelings for his mother and sister, brought him praise from the New York critics and others when it was first staged. Even George Jean Nathan, one of the hard-headed critics of the time was led to acknowledge that it "provides by long odds the most imaginative evening that the stage has offered in this season;" and according to Brooks Atkinson, this play embodied `pity for people, coolness of perspective, poetic grace.' And playwright Arthur Miller, years later said, `It is usually forgotten what a revolution his first great success meant to the New York theatre. *The Glass Menagerie* in one stroke lifted lyricism to its highest level in our theatre's history, but it broke new ground in another way. In Williams the American theatre found, perhaps for the first time, an eloquence and an amplitude of feeling. And driving on this newly discovered lyrical line was a kind of emotional heroism he wanted not to approve or disapprove but to touch the germ of life and to celebrate it with verbal beauty.'"⁷

The striking feature of Williams's treatment of alienation in relation to aesthetic sensibility stems on the strength of some of the sharply etched individualized characters. In this respect, one can take the example of Blanche DuBois in his play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). The play dramatizes the eternal clash within everyone between the bubbling warm flesh and the eerie spirit. It is the terrestrial dilemma which everyone with sensibility has to face. It goes to the credit of Tennessee Williams that out of the conflicts he faced in actual life, he sublimated them, and through the mysterious alchemy of imagination, he bodied forth plays on the American life in a fascinating manner.

Blanche DuBois, an English teacher for sometime, is literary-minded, sophisticated woman character who comes to stay with her married sister, Stella, residing in a two-storey corner building on a street, Elysian Fields in New Orleans. Stella stays with her husband, Stanley Kowalski, possessing all the characteristics of a powerful male with a very little sense of appreciating a sophisticated young woman like Blanche DuBois. There are other characters too in the play of hardly any importance for the study of alienation, except Harold Mitchell or Mitch. Through the responses, reactions and impressions of Blanche DuBois to her surroundings and in relation to her sister, Stella and her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, one comes to know the awful facets of alienation this sophisticated woman has to undergo. Given to a high-pitched analytical mind, Blanche DuBois cuts into shreds the conventional notions of marital love in terms of defending her action at Belle Reve plantations in the South now in ruin and also in rebutting the reproachful comments of Stanley Kowalski that Belle Reve plantations lost their solvency because of Blanche's acts in promiscuity and her extravagant ways. In fact, the arraignment of accusations by Kowalski against his sister-in-law, and her rebuttals thereof and censorious comments on his crude behaviour stemmed from their incompatible temperament. Eventually, she was molested by Stanley Kowalski and physically disabled, to force her hospitalization. It all shows that Blanche DuBois as sophisticated woman had to undergo a painful experience of alienation and loneliness, apart from her being brutalized bodily by the man who hated her simply because he lacked the graces of culture and education. If in the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the

treatment of alienation in relation to aesthetic sensibility springs from the incompatibility of life responses and attitude to others in Blanche DuBois and in those of her sister, Stella and her husband, Stanley Kowalski, in another play of Williams, *Summer and Smoke*, the incompatibility factor is also there; but it is examined from a different angle. The two main characters in this play are Miss Alma Winemiller and Dr. John Buchanan. When Alma and John were just kids they used to meet in the Town Square in front of a statury. They befriended; and their life pursuits made them separate. However, when they were in their twenties, they resumed their friendship. At this time, Alma has assumed the duties of hostess of the rectory. Similarly, the boy of two decades back has now become the young Dr. John Buchanan, who has returned to live with his father (also a doctor) next door to the rectory. Even as he is a promising doctor, he has a penchant for indulging his senses with booze and women.

Alma and Dr. John Buchanan as grownups develop understanding and friendly feelings towards each other. One day he diagnoses her as having a *doppelganger*: an inner self seeking release. Further, Alma was attacked by a hysterical attack; and Dr. John puts her on to recovery. One day, he took her to Moon Lake Casino (Williams's romantic Mississippi night spot), a gambling, drinking and gaming establishment 'where anything goes.'

Alma cautions Dr. John Buchanan not to go that far and observe sobriety and restraint; otherwise, it would entail unsatisfactory human relationship. When John suggests her to go to a room above the casino, she gets offended, taking a taxi home. From the play, it is also made out that Alma exercised a positively healthy effect on John Buchanan who becoming more sober has set on a promising medical career along with his marriage to Nellie Ewell, also known to Alma. In the same way, Alma's association with John Buchanan also helped her in getting more receptive to life equilibrium.

In the final scene, Miss Alma is again in the park near the stone angel. She strikes up a conversation with a young travelling salesman with whom she sets out for Moon Lake Casino, indicating that she is probably destined to compromise her virtuous dignity. Considering Alma Wine Muller's pursuit of spiritual life from her early childhood, it would be too censorious, rather sinful to hold to the viewpoint that she would offer herself in carnality to everybody at Moon Lake Casino. It would be too much petty and journalistic to lend credence to such a degrading fall. From common experience, it is also verifiable that if a human being has sublimated himself for years at a stretch, it would be really difficult for him or for her to get involved in the coils of carnality. Alma as woman could appreciate Oscar Wilde's romanticized life point: 'All of us are in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.' Hence, in this respect, it would not be possible for her to fall in a gutter. Apropos, the thematic viewpoint on alienation and aesthetic sensibility, it may be observed that the heroic process of sublimation involves the interplay of alienation and aesthetic sensibility. So, in this context, the play, *Summer and Smoke*, carries its own mark. From the standpoint of alienation in relation to aesthetic sensibility, other plays of Tennessee Williams, such as *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *Battle of Angels* (1940), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) are equally important as Tennessee Williams has touched upon human drama in terms of subtly tuned poetic sensibility and in these plays different aspects of alienation find due projection in his plays.

In the life of Tennessee Williams, alienation and aesthetic sensibility worked in tandem. If the writings of Ibsen, Strindberg, Nietzsche and Chekhov acted yeastly on his mind, his strained relations with his family also affected him in many ways. In his attempt to render an aestheticised view of reality at different levels of human experience, he has employed an array of expressionistic literary and theatrical devices : special settings, musical themes, unusual sound and lighting effects – all as a means of leading his audience to see the truth that lurk beneath life's surface. Williams has used these devices to make the members of his audience and readers aware of the complex facets of social reality, like murder, rape, castration, drug addiction, homosexuality, nymphomania and even cannibalism. By tackling these aspects of the contemporary American life on the stage, the talented dramatist has not only introduced a dramatic meaning into the theater of realism in America, but has also helped to break the long-standing taboos

imposed on the American theater, preparing the way for future dramatists who would go further than him in depicting even harsher aspects of violence and sexuality in an aesthetic manner.

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