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Tennessee Williams as an Autobiographical playwright

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Abstract: *Tennessee Williams has challenged the established concept of playwriting by mingling his personal experience in his dramatic output to come with his naked soul and its clash to social one. Throughout his dramatic career he exploited dramatic writing as a medium of expression. He became playwright not out of the need to get the professional success but intense desire to come with his personal life. He used his personal life and resulting sensibility as the material for his dramatic writing. His dramatic life suited to playwriting and playwriting also matched to his life. Directly and indirectly, he depicted his characters having analogue with his personal life and relationship. The study of his plays narrates the story of his life, particularly focusing on his internal make up resulted out of his sensibility to see the reality. The same sensibility furnished him proficiently to recognize the sorrow and suffering of the others in relation to the self. He identified himself with his characters irrelevant to male and female by sharing each other problems to make them universal. His prominent plays such as The Glass Menagerie, The Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke and Cat on Hot Tin Roof deal with his sensibility and personal life. They all narrate the story of the broken relationship that became the integral parts of his personal life. His habit to write about the anguish souls whose life became the tale of disillusion and loneliness has rooted in his personal life. Hence, he has been recognized as the most autobiographical playwright in American drama.*

Key Words: Literary Modernism, Expressionism, Sensibility, Illusion and Reality, Interior Landscape, Plastic Theatre, Brecht's Epic Theatre, Avant-Guard' etc.

I. Introduction

Usually playwriting does not provide legroom within structure to the playwright to come with the personal life or point of views because of its objective nature cherished since ancient time. It is more concerned with the action in an organic manner in which every event is internally connected to the next not to allow any space for the deviation. Aristotle, godhead of dramatic criticism, also denied any scope for such mingling by his rules of three dramatic unities, particularly the unity of action. These rules of the classical critics influenced the writing up to the beginning of the literary modernism. However the classical rules have come in defy with the entry of expressionism in playwriting. In this regard, the Americans were found on the frontline than the English. Although, the journey of American drama begins with the 18th century, however, on the basis of artistic merits, it has attained worldwide eminence and succeeded to acclaim larger critical attention during the 20th century, particularly after the end of the First World War. With the entry of Eugene O'Neil, the American dramatic output came with the new countenance to shatter the conventional concept of play writing. After him, the American

playwrights such as Author Miller, Elmer Rice, Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams, who wrote under the influence of Augustan Strindberg, Eugene Ionesco, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekhov, paved the way for expressionism to lead the playwriting at the new height by breaking the restraints of the classical. They wrote plays to suit to the spirit of the post war state rather than to follow the classical rules. The catastrophe of war, the financial crisis and subsequent disillusionment inspired the playwright to come with the realistic picture of the post war society, particularly dark along with innovative methods of expression.

II. Williams as an Autobiographical Playwright

Tennessee Williams, a leading dramatist of the age, has manipulated number of innovative dramatic techniques to explore the American consciousness and depict the internal reality of his life. The most frequent used techniques such as expressionism, Plastic theatre, Brecht's Epic Theatre, avant guard' and anti-realistic enabled him to come with the inexpressible underlying reality of the traumatized self and society and the personal anguish and defeat of his idealism. He exploited these techniques only to come with his personal life and sensibility to get solace to his broken heart and anguished soul. He becomes a dramatist not by the urge of getting professional success but as inevitable part of his life. Alice Griffin rightly observed that the playwright continued writing not with any hope of making a living at it but because he found no other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression. He was a born dramatist whose dramatic life supplied rare material to shape his plays and nurture his genius. Consequently he has been hailed as the most autobiographical playwrights in the history of American drama as most of his plays come with his personal experience in diverse form to depict the realities of the age in which he born and lived. The diligent reading of his plays comes with the impression that the various happening in his personal life and relationship and sensibility reflected in his major plays. He himself said, "I draw all my characters from myself, I can't draw a character unless I know it within myself." (qtd. Smith, W. J. 86)

The study of his plays narrates the story of his life, particularly focusing on his internal make up resulted out of his sensibility to see the reality. The same sensibility furnished him proficiently to recognize the sorrow and suffering of the others in relation to the self. His desire of expression was so strong that he identified himself with his characters irrelevant to male and female. They were modeled either on the self or the real people associated with his life. Similar to the playwright, they were seen as the disturbed people fail to understand the real nature of the world. They became his mouthpiece as they share his view to life, his attitude to the reality and his ability to cope the reality by escaping at the physical and emotional levels. "Too often the characters are the author's mouthpiece, speaking not from their own inner logic and wholeness, but out of author's own anger and frustration, with an inappropriately poetic reflectiveness." (Spato) His depiction of the female characters in the leading roles also came on the basis of his personal life as he had spent most of his early life in the company of the female.

Williams playwriting is resulted out of the tension of his personal life lived with his unstable family as well as in the antagonist society. He utilizes his theatre as a platform to give a way to the pressure of caustic tension resulting out of the psychic confusion in the hostile time as Bigsby, C. W.

E. writes, "His life became bad theatre; his theatre, a living memorial." (19) He often uses his concealed experiences resulting out of his receptivity to see the surrounding as the base of his writing. He wrote plays that clearly reflected his own tensions and those of times in which he was living as refers "the interior landscape of the most terrible period of my life." (Leverich xix,) The books written by Lyle Leverich, Donald Spoto, Jay Smith, John Lahr and Nancy Tichler that deal with his life and career divulge the verity how his writing is influenced by his personal sensibility and family background. The study of these books records that his life and career is an odd, dark eclipse full with so many ups and downs. He was internally wounded person and feels that writing has a healing power to cure his bloody soul. He himself confessed that his family background and disappointing relationships became the source of his writing and key of his success as a writer. Family strain, mental instability, hypochondria, obsession with sister Rose, strained relationship with father, caring mother with her southern sophistication, unfulfilled emotional relationship with Hazal Cramer, obsession with success and popularity, death of close relatives and friends, the conflict between the love of solitude and the desire for human comfort lead him to express the self ceaselessly. His plays have been highly ingrained in his personal life and its relationship to the world, and could be studied and understood in this perspective. They provided substance for his writing and sharpened his sensibility to see the world with its lives, truth and reality. His characters and their lives bore imprint of his disturbing life and his struggle for survival as his life is very much analogous to stir the writing so the roots of his themes, characters and conflicts of his plays are found in his life. Through his poetic sensibility and artistic skills, he transformed his family members into mythic characters that became very popular in the world of American drama. The very themes, characters, setting, horror and conflicts or duality of his plays are very much rooted in his life. Hence, Williams as a man cannot be estranged from his literary construction. His life became an integral part of his writing is quite evident even by the primary study. Meade Roberts sums , "He created his own dramatic world around him and dealt with it when he could." (Spoto 235). Hence, he has been hailed as the most autobiographical playwright in American drama.

III. The Glass Menagerie

The first artistically successful play, 'The Glass Menagerie', is a "memory play" as narrated from the nostalgic point of view to depict the dramatic lives of the family members who are emotionally dislocated from each other in the same location. The play deals with five major characters, including the absent father, all of whom are derived from his family, while the various events depicted in the play stand in close resemblance to the family happenings. The family migration from Mississippi to St. Louis and subsequent dislocation from pastoral to modern city has been well depicted in the play as the Wingfield family move from Mississippi to St. Louis. The absent father has been modeled on his real father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, with his indifference towards family. He leaves the family in favour of sea adventure and personal liberty. Amanda Wingfield, a mother in the play, is a replica of his real mother, Edwina Dakin. Her real struggle to protect her paralyzed daughter, to bring her son on the track of family responsibility and the most important her false effort to maintain the decorum of the Southern culture has been well depicted in the play through her sketch. Laura, a lonely and

psychologically disturbed sister has been replicated in the play of his real sister, Rose. The close association between the writer and his sister, her fear, physical and mental disability, her distortion from the social trends has been well depicted through the relationship between Tom and Laura. The close relationship in early life, his concern for her in young age and her dramatic dislocation has provided the raw material for the play. Tom, the protagonist of the play who narrates the whole action by using nostalgic sense, is nobody other than the playwright. Through the characters sketch of Tom, Williams takes the advantage to come with the interior landscape of his life with all the ups and down, his points of view to life and effect of the broken family relationship. The indifferent father, the struggling mother and helpless sister narrates the story of writer's personal life and family relationship. His desire to get freedom and escape from the responsibilities and coming back due to his obsession with sister is apparently found in the structure of the play.

IV. A Streetcar Named Desire

Williams has reflected his personal life and perspective not only through the male characters but also through the depiction of the female characters. Here in his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he depicts the journey of his life in search of ideals in the world full with brutality through the character sketch of Blanche. Blanche, the protagonist of the play, feels trapped in the harsh reality and wants to come out of it by searching the ideals. The action begins with her journey from Laurel to Elysian Fields. She undertakes this journey with a purpose to escape from her promiscuous past in search of an ideal Utopia. She is a forlorn, discarded and helpless girl thus undertakes journey with a hope to find shelter, protection and love at the house of her sister. But ultimately all her ideals have been crushed by the harsh reality with the rape by her brother-in-law. At the end, we can find her discarded, invulnerable, hopeless and lonely. Blanche's journey and its tragic end closely parallel the writer's own life. In search of ideals, peace, and identity, the playwright wandered throughout his life but never attained the cherished ideals. He often found himself isolated, rejected, and lonely, and ultimately remained bachelor and dies alone in a hotel without mourning.

V. Summer and Smoke & Cat on Hot Tin Roof

Set in a small southern town in background of puritan culture, the play, '*Summer and Smoke*' depicts the conflict between body and soul that compels the characters to escape from the reality in the realm of idealism. Here the writer depicts the unfulfilled love of Alma for John. C Critics often assumes that the play is based on his unfulfilled love for Hazel Cramer that remains first and last heterosexual love in his life. The struggle between spiritual and physical that governed the life of Williams has been well depicted through the character sketch of Alma. She is a mouthpiece of the playwright to come with his disillusionment and a clash between social ideals and elemental passion. The play can be studied as criticism on the artificial social ideals that compels to suppress the emotions experienced by writer in his life. The theme of emotional and family conflicts, the strained family relationship, alcoholism, greed and personal identity reflected in his play *Cat on Hot Tin Roof* have a root in playwright's life. Here Big Daddy is very much resembled to his real father who discards the family out of his greed. Brick is nothing more

than the writer himself. His isolation from the family members, alcoholism, guilt and conflict between responsibility and love for freedom clearly reflect the personal life of the writer.

VI. Conclusion

The overall discussion reveals the fact that Tennessee Williams exploited his personal life and sensibility to write his major plays. His life that was full with the ups and downs, clashes between various facets, his sympathy for the suppressed, his broken relationships and his desire to replace the artificial life with natural one clearly reflected in his plays. Most of his characters resemble real people who had close relationship with the writer. The events with so many ups and down and experiences in relationship of his family served as a major source for his creative writing and are recurrently portrayed in his plays. He stands as one of the most autobiographical playwrights in American drama as he transformed his personal experiences, family relationships, emotional struggles, and social observations into powerful dramatic works. Rather than merely unfolding his life, he artistically restructured personal experience into universal one in the form of the themes of love, loneliness, desire, identity, alienation, human suffering and above all the clash between illusion and reality. His plays exhibit the fact that playwriting can be exploited as a medium to come with the personal life against the convention and the personal experience as a profound source of creative expression.

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