Twentieth Century Tragic Vision as Picturised in the Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams: A Brief Analysis

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Received: January 09, 2019
Accepted: February 23, 2019

ABSTRACT: In this paper lays emphasis on the tragic vision and pessimistic note existing in the 20th century world about which Tennessee Williams talks at length in his dramatic world. It also explains how tragedy plays a vital role in the life of each and every human individual in the 20th century.

Key Words: tragedy, pessimistic note, vision, individual, dramatic world

Tragedy is “a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion” as defined in the oxford English dictionary. Tragedy in ancient Greece, was referred to lyric songs and dramatic pieces meaning “that branch of dramatic art which treats of sorrowful or terrible events in a serious and dignified style opposed to comedy”. Aristotle defined that tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude through pity and fear effecting proper purgation of these emotions. According to Aristotle, Tragic flaw of a hero is called as hamartia and its transforming or purifying action is called ‘Catharsis’. In the twentieth century these definitions got slowly changed. For instance, Joseph Wood Krutch hinted at in his “the tragic fallacy” that the tragedy is not an expression of despair but the means by which the people of the great ages saved themselves from depression.

As ages change, literary trends also change accordingly. Every age has its own significance in the literary features. Likewise twentieth century tragedy also has its own kind of style and sense. Modern tragedy is different from Aristotle’s or Greece or Shakespeare’s tragedy, the tragic hero might be powerful and in high position in the society whereas the modern definition of tragedy is any commoner can be a tragic hero. Tennessee Williams’ plays are the great example for twentieth century tragedy. Disregarding classic tragedy, American tragedy is of modern kind as rightly expressed by Eugene O’ Neil who is acclaimed as the father of American drama. Tennesse and Arthur miller were equally prominent in the twentieth century American drama of twentieth century. They borrowed sentimentalism and realism from the predecessors of tragedy thereby allowing the plays get foremost attention from the audience. In the words of Sinha,

“The vision of the tragic is a major syndrome of modern American literature and philosophy...typical of this century, the vision is deeply expressive of the psychic anxiety and crisis mentally of our time. This vision which finds spontaneous exposition in the plays Eugene O’Neill constitutes the essential substratum of his tragic view of life consequently, the essential O’Neil has been explored by identifying his tragic vision as the basis core of his self and dramaturgy”

‘Tragedy’ is the part and partial of people’s life. When tragedy is designated in literary works, people get attached to the tragic scenario. Arthur Millur is a Jew, the Nazi and Facist atrocities were designed in his unbearable traumatic life. Nearer home, there was the infernal Maccarthyism let loose. Those like bitterness in life gave him deep understanding and vision of tragedy in life. Likewise in Tennessee Williams, life is designated by the personal and public experience in problems that he faced from childhood of his sickness and his family. The war Williams also C.W.E. Bigsby holds as:

“In intensified his feeling of society as a threat and deepened a sense of security rooted in private experience but intensified by new realities of a post nuclear age. The pieties of pre-war America no longer seemed capable of sustaining the individual or the culture” (P 1-2)

Arthur Miller has a revolutionary vision towards the tragedy. In his work Death of A Salesman, the characters mental state of modern tendency of possessing things and correlate to the social status. Having a
car and refrigerator is a proud moment for Willy Loman in the same times his boss is proud to have a wire-recorder. In relation to the standard of life is measured in the scale of materials they have possessed. The Pulitzer Prize won play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a story of relationship conflicts among the family members of big daddy, a wealthy cotton tycoon. In this play entire family lies to big daddy about his terminal cancer. Similarly daddy lies to the family of the motives against him to secure the estate. The lies used here could ensure the characters greed to be in top of the wealth ladder. To the core, Arthur’s plays were of the central theme of the symbol of modern prosperity-a huge console:

"….a monumental monstrosity peculiar to our times, a huge console combination of ratio-phonograph(H1-F1 with three speakers) TV set and liquor cabinet bearing and containing many glasses and bottles, all in one piece, which is a composition of muted silver tones and the opalescent tones of reflecting glass... this piece of furniture, this monument, is a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide them from such things as the characters in the play are faced with"

Tennessee almost lives in nostalgic journey to the past whereas he could not fit into the constantly changing modern world. The country side transforming into the suburbs in order to adopt the modernity. Williams has effected internal and external factors so as to frame his literary vision. The South West struggle of domination, the rise of the civil war, slavery, federal government’s abolition of slavery, Tennessee’s ancestors suffered hardly of poverty, his father is a womanizer yet successful, the quarrels between his mother and father, introvert timid son, sad daughter constitute his external and internal views on tragic life. Due to his serious medical condition bedridden Tennessee won’t cope with normal people. He is an object to be ridiculed and teased by everyone like his father, his neighbors, his friends and the society. Consequently he made up his mind to think about the world and life. At any degree, rich and poor, weak and strong, he might be weak to overcome the fate of his life, the causes of the society and the struggles of his life. He strongly believes unhappiness (tragedy) is inevitable in life. Remarkably, the themes of his plays were reflecting his real life struggles. “His evolving theme was the individual struggling for freedom overwhelming hopeless odds” (Kataria 7).


Williams' one-act play *I Raise in Flames, Cried The Phonix* and short story you touched me are produced on the inspiration from the D.H.Laurence’s Freudian novels. Sievers points out,” after creating the Lauira-Mathilda character who is all chaste and unawakened emotion, Tennessee Williams went on to explore her later destiny, as the blanche- alma character to whom sex comes too violently after too long a period of suppression” (P376). His play *A Street Car Named Desire* is his one of the best work and considered to be his masterpiece, the quintessence of Freudian sexual psychology in the study of the southern gentleman. Davis Sievers denoted, “ *A Street Car Named Desire* depicts characters who are volatile, colorful, deeply real for our times. With a mastery no playwright has equaled in this century, Williams arranges in a theatrical pattern the agonized sexual anxiety of a girl caught between id and ego-ideal...unconsciously playing the role of the gracious refined lady of the old south-the same ego-ideal which Amanda held for herself”(P377). There is no choice for her to escape from the dilapidated flat in the French Quarters of New Orleans. Stanley affected by his wife's aggressive and flirting behaviors which directed him to crush her. The external battle between Stanley and Blanche is a sexual battle in the same time the internal battle raised within Blanche herself. As Stella says it is the, “things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark” that make her life worthwhile. Blanche yeans for love and attention but Stella still in anxiety. She takes hot baths and consumes more liquor to relieve from her stressful reality.

During her depression, she meets Mitch and become too close to each another. They complement each other and accomplish each other’s needs. Mitch’s Oedipus complex spoiled their togetherness very
sooner. Blanche revealed the truth about rape to Stella and that triggered Stanley's anger. Stanley wants to be free from Blanche. At the end he carefully executed his plan to send Blanche to the hospital.

Williams’ first attempt on full-length play battle of angels (1940) was not recognized but his made his huge success in very next play, A Glass Menagerie. This success encouraged him to produce play after play. His woman characters portrayed were the attractive portion of his plays. The southern gentlewomen and the southern wenches were pictured in most admiring manner. In the essence of tragedy of arousing pity and compassion and triggering tears and laughter were beautifully handled in his masterpieces. In his childhood he admired his mother after he grown up, hatred her of her arrogant nature. He applied this experience in his mother characters in the play. We can see all the mother characters have framed within the role as a domineering, raging and autocratic woman. His love and attachment with her sister Rose shown clearly, “his love for rose bordered on incest and several of his plays dramatize this desire... rose both as a name and symbol constantly recurs in the work of Williams, probably because his emotional attachment with rose always haunted him...the sympathetic portraits of young girls almost always have sensitive rose as a prototype behind them” (Laura, ALMA, Catherina Holly etc). Hence in A Glass Menagerie, his sister as Rose as Laura, his mother Edwina is Amanda and his brother Tom as Tom. His mother character, Amanda was the tragic heroine of the play has both admirable and contemptible characteristics. She faced and came out from lot of unbearable struggles and yet be stronger to face another. She gave her whole life for her children and their prosperity yet they are the depressing. Her daughter struggled to overcome her inferiority though Amanda tried hardly enough to set her up in life. Her son lives for his passion, writing poems and film scripts by his heart. He no longer wants to stay with his family and takes care of them. Instead he wants to leave home and lead his life like a free-bird who wants to have his own identity in life.

Tennessee Williams used the common feature of the American psyche, ‘guilt feeling’ as Tom’s inner conflict. He is physically separated from the family but the influence of them was still making difference in his life. His experiences from the family like poverty, failure, depression and affluence were unconsciously disturb his peace of mind. As Signi Falk says, “The rebel-dreamer failure type is a favorite with the dramatist. The tom wing fields almost seem like autobiographical figures that might have existed before their creator found the golden key to the box office. Tom’s situation is pitiable but his vague longings, his inarticulate hopes and his shiftlessness are so much romanticized that it seems as if the writer were making virtues out of weakness”(P174). The men and women in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof interwoven with self-pity are comfortable in proscribed way. They take pleasure apart from the regular code of morality. As the majority of women and men were feeling contrary to the barbaric industrial society, they are shattered by the fate of sufferings. The tragedy in their lives is left unsolved as ‘failure’.

Works cited