



# Domestic Violence and Silence of Women with Reference to the Broadway Drama by Tennessee Williams “A Streetcar Named Desire” (1947)

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**Abstract**— Early in the twentieth century the state of women in the society or in their household was very much peripheral. Choice of living was a myth that the so called modern society waking up from the Victorian norms was conferring to the women's. Women were the weighing tool for the males to measure up their social standard by subjugating, abusing women physically or psychologically. For the sake of getting voyeuristic pleasure the males used to play with the females from their homes as a puppet without identity and any choice to escape patriarchal abuse. The present paper focuses how the female characters of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the hands of the subjugating males suffered to the core, silence being their key fault. The contrasting form of dealing with male abuse by the two female characters Blanche and Stella are the main focus of the paper. 'Silence' that was considered to be ornament of women's existence was also responsible for violence plotted against women. Blanche's in the drama portrays how women who dared to speak up also gets knock down by the literal streetcar named desire of men.

**Keywords**— *Abusive relationship, Desire, Domestic violence, Modernity, Silence.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence and abuse is a global issue that needs to be addressed properly. Every three out of ten women worldwide confessed that they have experienced physical or sexual violence by their current or former partner in their lifetime. Growing up at some point of time in life each and every individual having a family goes through the scenes of domestic violence whether for breaking familial norms or for defying the societal agenda. But, the violence that one faces in a marital bond after choosing a companion with animalistic instincts cannot be termed as normal. Where one companion suffers and the other merely enjoys being the subjugator, there exists no peace leading to the unending circle domestic violence. In most of the cases of domestic violence; gender stereotype, patriarchal social structure and the conflicting psychological state of the food and shelter earning male of a family seems to be the assailant who gets peace by

dominating their female counterpart mentally and physically. But, the domestic violence is surrounded by a challenge of stigma and silence in women to raise their voice against their so called 'male gods'.

In the context of American society the issue of domestic violence until the late 1970s was almost something that never got noticed. A woman within the four walls of her spouse's property whether beaten or even killed mysteriously was not considered a serious social issue rather a "family matter"; far from considering it as a punishable crime. Women were expected by all around them even the women themselves to shut their mouth off and heal silently behind the closed doors. Thus, all the issues of women were constantly been covered up and same was the case with the issue of domestic violence against women. The classic work of American literature, the Pulitzer Prize winning drama by Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) portrays a grim picture of

the state of women who were part of a vicious patriarchal structure of a society in which there was nothing called individuality in the important women characters like Stella Kowalski and Blanche DuBois. A Streetcar Named Desire unwillingly or willingly normalized women being subjugated and becoming victim of domestic violence in pregnancy and prey of sexual desire of the a beastly male figure. In the play there is a thin line between women being raped by her spouse and by a brother-in-law who has no authority over the woman. The male sexual desire at its height kills the inner spirit of women and pushes to the point where there is no option left other than being silent forever.

## II. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Tennessee William was writing about domestic violence in his drama long before the concept of domestic violence was taken seriously. When the drama was published then only the first wave of feminism was rising up to equalize the prefabricated set up for both males and females. In a country where the female's Right to vote, Right to property and Right for the custody of children was off late been given importance it was not beyond possibility to get inflicted with the domestic violence at the hands of their spouse. Hypersexual male character of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* indicates the American society running after achieving the Great American Dream leaving the basic human instincts aside within the family. The blame game starts only with the woman of the family and thus also ends with the woman in every possible circumstance.

In the Broadway drama *A Streetcar Named desire* Tennessee presents the modern sociological perspective that for the first time was directly highlighting the issue of domestic violence against women at such an elaborate extent. Unfortunately, the theme of desire at large was covering this assumed to be minor matter of domestic violence at par. The crying women characters of the play in their psychological and physical pain does not allows the readers of the play to forget that Blanche as well as Stella was the representative of every next women of that society. Uncontrolled patriarchy at the hands of a beast in guise of charming, sensual man with occasional outburst of severe violence was controlling two women who have everything at their hand except masculinity. Stanley Kowalski, the defamed anti-hero of the play shows his hyper-masculinity in Scene I:

STANLEY: Hey, there! Stella, Baby!

.....

STANLEY: Catch!

STELLA: What?

STANLEY: Meat! (Williams 2)

Thus Stanley's first appearance with the "red strained package" of meat tossed to Stella is evident to what extend Stanley was uncultured in terms of mannerisms. Playing the role of a provider for his own wife showing the ill-temperament Stanley seems to be indulged in violence that mentally unclothes Stella's self-respect.

In Scene II Stanley's greed and ego gets clashed with that of women's right to property. When Stanley hears from Stella that Blanche and she lost their ancestral property Stanley asks her about his share by mention about Napoleonic code:

STANLEY: In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code according

to Which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa. For instance, if I had a piece of property or you had a piece of property- (Williams 18)

Stanley constantly puts stress on Stella for getting the details of the lost property in Scene II itself and violates the privacy of Blanche only for those papers that does not exists;

STANLEY: Then where's the money if the place was sold?

STELLA: Not sold – lost, lost!

[He stalks to the bedroom and she follows him.]

Stanley!

[He pulls open the wardrobe trunk standing in the middle of the

Room and jerks out an armful of dresses.]

STANLEY: Open your eyes to this stuff! You think she got them out of a

teacher's salary? (Williams 18)

In the scene above ignoring it as just another common instance of suspicion could be called a gross mistake as not only Stanley indulges in the act of violating a woman's privacy by blurring the distinction between public and private; but also commits a kind of domestic violence by torturing Stella mentally over a piece of property asking for rights in her ancestors' property.

In *Battered Women, Shattered Lives*, Kathleen Hofeller argues that the low self-esteem of battered wives may also be shown in their selection of a marriage partner—their tendency to “‘marry down’ by choosing men who come from lower socioeconomic groups than they” (80). Same was the case with Stella Kowalski, who leaving her gentry life style and social status; and by giving up the luxuries of Belle Reve marries a working-class aggressive man like Stanley who knows nothing expect enjoying carnal desire. In Blanche’s words in Scene IV Stanley’s socioeconomic background made him “survivor of Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle” (Williams 47) devoid of any humanly instincts.

Tennessee Williams had evolved the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* from the short play *The Poker night*, and the most important scenes of the play occurs within the poker nights. While playing the game of chance and luck most probably the aggression of those males used to reach its height as they tend to forget their being part of a civilized society. By the Scene III the play at the poker party for the first the Stanley physically abuse Stella by hitting her on thighs.

STELLA: Because it is nearly two-thirty. Couldn’t you call it quits after one more hand?

[A chair scrapes, STANLEY gives a loud whack of his hand on her thighs.]

STELLA [sharply]: That’s not fun, Stanley.

[The men laughs, STELLA goes into the bedroom.]

STELLA: It makes me so mad when he does that in front of people (Williams 29).

As in the Scene III Stanley was continuously losing his chances of winning the poker arouses the beast inside the calm and composed man and use Stella as a tool for covering up his outrage starting the as usual blame game upon women for every defeat. This leads Stella to the state of mind where she feels mentally and emotionally exhausted. The domestic violence inside the house when spread out of their premises, it makes Stella embarrassed. Stella’s complaint upon the incident shows it was not the first time she was being abused and humiliated by her spouse. As Williams puts Stanley is the perfect embodiment of masculine power when it comes to sexual superiority over Stella or moral investigation upon Blanche:

[.....Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependency, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out from this complete and satisfying centre are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that in his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer....] (William 13).

Here , the idea of Williams gets clear for a male character like Stanley Kowalski the word desire has only one meaning – sexual desire. Sex as the whole plays only leveler objectifies female characters as object of sensual pleasure. Stanley’s emotional abuse of Stella also includes the violence upon the non-living household objects; such as slamming of doors, the throwing of dinnerware, the hurling of the radio out of the window etc.

The most vulnerable stage of domestic violence in the relationship between the couple happens in the last part of Scene III where drunkard Stanley Kowalski actually strikes his pregnant wife at the poker night. First tossing the radio out of the window Stanley turns to abuse Stella physically. At a crucial stage of pregnancy when a women need the most emotional and physical support of her husband Stella has to gone through that much of violence. The scene evokes emotion of each and every reader/ audience of the drama as the most important significance of the play lies in this episode. Although, William never said that the drama from any angle deals with spousal abuse, marital rape etc. Drunken Stanley bounds her to take shelter in their neighbor’s house without realizing the grave of the crime he had committed.

STELLA: Drunk- drunk- animal thing, you! [she rushes through to the poker

table.] All of you- please go home! If any of you have one spark of decency in you-

BLANCHE [wildly]: Stella, watch out, he’s-

[STANLEY charges after STELLA.]

MEN [Feebly]: Take it easy, Stanley. Easy, fellow. – Let’s all-

I'll-  
STELLA: You lay your hands on me and

[She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow. STELLA cries out. BLANCHE screams and runs into the kitchen. The man rush forward and there is grapppling and cursing. Something is overturned with a crash.]

BLANCHE [shrilly]: My sister is going to have a baby!

Mitch: This is terrible.

BLANCHE: Lunacy, absolute lunacy!  
(William 35-36)

This scene of extreme level of violence against women by a male shows the paradox of a male power worshipping society. Stanley Kowalski's character is the representative of all those effeminate creatures within society who things subjugating women they can gain the ultimatum of power. The abuser only abuses only those from whom they feel threat. It was exactly same with Stanley who constantly wants that Stella should not be influenced by Blanche to speak against him. Thus for making her silent she get help of domestic violence.

The cycle of violence then gets repeated again in Scene X and this time it was not expected by Stanley. Stella completed her course of suffering and it then moved towards Blanche DuBois. Unlike Stella, in Blanche's case due to grave conflict between the two it was not possible for Blanche to subjugate her physically or emotionally thus he tried to violate her privacy and raise her moral issues related to her private life. Fed up with plotting conspiracy after conspiracy against Stella, Stanley decided to destroy Blanche with Sex. Thus, leaving behind every height of cruelty against women Stanley ends up rapping Stella brutally by ripping off her skin and unable to face her own sister. Blanche was forced to become part of the world of lust and brutal desire. Blanche's tormentor evokes fear in her which Stanley wants to see in her:

STANLEY: You think I'll interfere with you? Ha-ha

[The 'blue piano' goes softly. She runs confusedly and, makes a faint gesture. The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step towards her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips.]

STANLEY [softly]: Come to think of it  
– maybe you wouldn't be bad to –  
interfere with....(Williams 96)

At the very moment when Stanley should celebrate his fatherhood he indulged himself in the brutal acts of raping his sister-in-law. This violent behavior of Stanley not only insults pregnant Stella but simultaneously reveals the true horror of Stanley's character. As Blanche is made to face the unpleasant reality so is the audience. The idea of marital rape and battering are adjoined. Researchers of domestic violence found the fact that most often batterers direct violence against their family members moving from the spouse.

The Scene XI of the play which is also the last scene of the play victimizes Blanche pathetically at the hands of her tormentor, the ape-like Kowalski, the representative of Lawrencian vitality and the brutal torturer of the lonely spirit. The penniless woman by the end of the Scene XI out of conspiracy of domestic violence and also by the sister's uncertain decision for ironic security in an asylum once again pushes her to be a prey at the patriarchal cycle of violence towards women mentally or physically. Stanley's last gesture towards Blanche is something symbolic of the brutal rape itself:

STANLEY: You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty bottles

unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern? [He crosses to dressing-table and seizes the paper lantern, tearing it off the light-bulb, and extends it towards her. She cries out as if the lantern was herself.....]  
(Williams 105)

The cruelest of everything happened in the play this scene tops the violence that mentally tormented a character. Blanche's ultimate acceptance of the harsh reality that Stanley not only rip up her paper lantern but also her spirit and zeal to live further. Thus, through the three character of Stanley Kowalski, Stella Kowalski and Blanche DuBois the playwright Tennessee Williams perfectly depicts the vicious cycle of domestic violence against women.

### III. SILENCE OF WOMEN TOWARDS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

'Silence' in women towards matters that concerns to their rights and ability from time immemorial is the key



factor that makes them weaker. In a patriarchal society where women are by no means considered superior or equal to men, women must fight back for everything and anything they want to achieve, no matter that is right to live or to protest against domestic violence. In the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the major women characters of Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski both are victims of domestic violence at the hands of the man of the Kowalski home, Stanley Kowalski. Both the character maintains a mysterious silence and never tried to raise their voice for all those brutality they have to face. Stella out of moral responsibility towards her husband bears the pain of violence even when she was expecting a baby. At the Scene I when Stanley throws the blood strained meat package she ignores the immoral behavior of Stanley with a paradoxical laughter as if she enjoys being treated by her husband in that way.

In the Scene III at the poker night Stella beaten by Stanley leaves the Kowalski apartment and Blanche herself leads Stella's way to get rid of Stanley's violence. But when Stanley gets his sense back he craves for Stella and Stella also instantly forgets the animalistic behavior shown towards her and indulges in lovemaking. This silence of Stella is evident that self-esteem can be compromised for physical desire. In the Scene IV Stella justifies her silence thus:

STELLA: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the

dark- that sort of make everything else seem-unimportant (Williams 46).

In the case of Blanche's rape by Stanley, Blanche did everything that she could do to get rid of the situation. Blanche has no way left other than being silent towards the matter as the crime was committed by her sister's husband. Blanche's sense of guilt for something that she has to approach made her silent over the whole matter. The downfall of Blanche's character was possible only because she maintains her silence and accepted leaving for asylum rather than suffering in the hands of brutal Kowalski. Blanche tried to convince her sister to get united against the barbarism of Stanley but as Stella Blanche at last was also forced to be silent over everything that both of them by enforcing power of masculinity over the two poor women. Williams puts the whole idea of domestic violence in such a way that as if both the characters knew that departing Stanley's company alone cannot make them free from violence imposed upon women as there is a wide world eagerly waiting outside to exploit them mentally and

physically. So, Stanley cannot be considered as the only escape.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

How much we criticize patriarchy for subjugation of women there is no good. Because, in a way it can be seen that subjugation is still there due to women's indecision for raising the voice against patriarchy. Domestic violence is also such a matter, until and unless women themselves do not counter the violence systematically it is not possible to root out domestic violence. The only character in the play that voiced against abuse was the character of Eunice:

EUNICE: You can't beat a woman and then call 'er back! She won't

come! And her goin' t' have a baby! .... You stinker! You Whelp of a Polack, you! I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as the last time! (Williams 38)

If the way Eunice had raised her voice against the violence Stella also did there was possibility that Blanche would have not been raped. Trapped in the cycle of domestic abuse Stella became so much lose spirited that she was unable to ask for any remedy; so much fallen that cannot even win "the kindness of strangers". The play certainly had opened doors in the mid twentieth century to fling the issue of domestic abuse in the newly rising world full opportunity to prevent the myths of dos and don'ts.

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