



# “I saw! I know! You disgust me...”: Manifestation of Homophobia and Patriarchal Oppression in Tennessee Williams’s Play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Received: 07 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 13 Feb 2024; Accepted: 18 Feb 2024; Available online: 28 Feb 2024

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**Abstract**— A western heteronormative society hints at its homophobia in diverse manners, but one of the most ubiquitous internalized notions is that of disgust and rejection. This sort of biased sexism fuels the gradual accretion of suicidal rates among LGBTQ youths. Generating homophobic discourses is one of the ways through which a hetero-patriarchal society demonstrates and maintains its power and oppression against sexual minorities and gender subalterns. Hetero-gender-based violence against women and homosexuals is also not uncommon in any society. Thus, the present paper aims to explore the manifestations of homophobia and hetero-patriarchal oppression against homosexuals and women in Tennessee William’s play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. By delving into the principles of Gender Studies and Queer theories, this paper seeks to investigate the role of compulsory heterosexual and patriarchal norms in the lives of Allan, Blanche, and Stella in victimizing and silencing them violently.



**Keywords**— *Heteronormative, Hetero-patriarchal, Homophobia, LGBTQ, Sexuality*

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Foucault, the idea of sex is not a fixed signifier (Foucault, 1984, P 134). Much in the same manner the idea of gender is also not a fixed signifier but a socially-constructed and socially-accepted phenomenon that resembles little or no truth value about the semblant notions of identity and sexuality. However, the year 1868 marks one of the climatic events in the history of homosexuality for it is in this year that the term ‘homosexuality’ emerges. The terms homosexuality and heterosexuality give rise to precedentedly null and void binary opposition, reckoning to the continual extents of binaries buttressing the Self and Other discourse based on which the colonial ventures dogmatically hypothesized itself. The anthropological expedition of the New World in the late Renaissance and Victorian period mainly, helped the West to acquire knowledge about homosexuality, and androgyny, while these things were so common in the East,

the same thing was undoubtedly beheld as immoral, sinful, and unnatural by the Western culture and norms. The West thus generated the belief system that ‘homosexuality’ is a practice and production of the ‘less civilized’ parts of the world, i.e. the East. Even the political pathologization of homosexuals began in the late nineteenth century and it took an extreme form in the 1940s and 1950s when homosexuals began to come out with their different tastes in sexuality and denied the long-existing socio-political construction of sexuality (heterosexuality). Asish Nandy in this context remarks about Oscar Wilde’s homosexual identity:

“Victorian England was willing to tolerate Oscar Wilde’s sexual identity as long as it was accepted as part of the lifestyle of the marginal sect and not openly flaunted. But by demonstratively using homosexuality as a cultural ideology .....

working out meanings ... in a colony thousands of miles away." (Nandy, 1996, P 29).

Not only in Victorian England but homosexuals even when they were not called so, had an existence as a powerful subculture even in Judaic or Christian worlds, or else why would the "Book of Leviticus" alert the public against intimacy between men? The book writes: "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their heads." (qtd. Bakshi and Dasgupta, 2016, P 47). So, the West started producing anti-homosexual discourses which resulted in homophobia among individuals. Not only anti-homosexual discourses but the endorsement of compulsory heterosexuality in individuals plays a vital role in the oppression of homosexuals and women in a hetero-patriarchal society. Monique Wittig rightfully remarks that "The category of sex is the political category that found society as heterosexual" (Wittig, 2003, P 225). One individual is obliged to acknowledge oneself as a heterosexual within the binary gender system, and this arises from a male-controlled ideology where a heterosexual institution has a strong dominance over the individual's sexual preferences.

Tennessee Williams is considered as one of the greatest literary artists of the American theatre. His plays tend to queer pretext than the text: the queer in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) has already been dead before the play starts. Two of the homosexual characters respectively, Allan in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* have committed suicide. *A Streetcar Named Desire* revolves around the story of Blanche DuBois, a former school teacher, who travels to New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella and Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski after the loss of Blanche's parental home in Mississippi. While in New Orleans, Blanche's peculiar personality and perpetual anxiety are constantly questioned and tested by Stanley, who is determined to unveil Blanche's mysterious past. During her stay in New Orleans, Blanche becomes romantically involved with one of Stanley's friends, Mitch. However, Blanche's anxieties and Stanley's constant questioning and brute behavior send Blanche into a downward spiral after it is revealed that her dead ex-husband is gay. Though it is never explicitly stated that Allan is gay, it is strongly implied.

The quotation, "I saw! I know! You disgust me..." (William, 2009, A 6, P 80) is uttered by the protagonist, Blanche Dubois while talking about her dead husband Allan Grey in scene VI, when she tells Mitch about how she has found out her homosexual husband being intimate with another man in a supposed empty room. And afterward how

this newly acquired truth about her husband's sexual identity drove her to PTSD, resulting in forming internalized disgust against homosexuality and homophobia within her. Later her stay in New Orleans and the heterosexual relationship between Stella and Stanley made her realize that in a heteronormative patriarchal society women and sexual minorities are always on the same verge of continuing to be casualties of ragging, bullying, and consequently silencing by patriarchal agents and compulsory heterosexual normativity.

Therefore, with the help of gender and queer theories, this paper attempts to demonstrate the manifestation of homophobia and patriarchal oppression against gender subalterns and sexual minorities in this play. By analyzing the role of compulsory heteronormativity in the lives of Allan, Blanche, and Stella, this paper intends to discuss various layers of oppression which include verbal and physical modes, and how homophobic attitude itself becomes a means of hetero-patriarchal oppression.

## II. ENDORSEMENT OF COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

Adrienne Rich in her famous essay entitled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" remarks that marriage itself is "an institution founded on male interest and prerogative" (Rich, 1980, P18). The general idea that is still prevalent in society is that it is not possible to be fully a man or a woman without getting married and that there is no way of life for human beings, superior to the married state. This idea reflects how the haven of domestic life was a very dominating image in 1950s America.

The picture of a heteronormative marriage in this play is that of Stanley and Stella. As the famous quote goes "Every woman adores a Fascist" (Plath, 2017, P 244). And that 'every woman' in this play is Stella. We see that Stanley's brutality seems sexy to Stella who adores the violence of Stanley. Stella likes watching her husband bowl. "Well, that's where she's at, watching' her husband bowl," says Eunice [William, 2009, A1, P 10]. And that's where she's at most certainly, rejoicing the performance of her valorous man displaying his mastery of sports with phallic bowling pins and bowling balls that are testicle-like on his brightly coloured cock-like bowling shirt and bowling jackets, her masculine husband who belongs to "a different species" [William, 2009, A1, P24]. Stella seems to get impressed by the masculinity of Stanley and is madly in love with Stanley. She tells her sister, Blanche in Scene IV:-

"Stella: When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!

"Stella: And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby... [She smiles to herself]". [William, 2009, A4 P53]

But this love is innately sexual, that is apparent and quite understandable. The orgasms Stanley provides Stella ultimately narcotizes her and this becomes crystal clear towards the end of the play. In Scene III of the play, Stanley really "hits Stella" [William, 2009, A3, P56]. In Scene Four, she tells a bemused Blanche: "I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of" [William 4.53]. And then surprisingly: "There are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" [William, 2009, A4, P57]. When Blanche confronts her sister by saying "What you're talking about is desire, just brutal desire," [William, 2009, A4, P57]. Stella answers, "I told you, I love him" [William, 2009 A4, P57]. This line expresses her dependence on a patriarchal man for security.

At the same time, Stella as a conservative woman of patriarchal society views Allen's sexuality as something inferior and shameful, she remarks-

"Stella: I mean her marriage when she was – almost a child! (...) But then she found out – (...) This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate." [William, 2009, A7, P86].

She, out of her internalized homophobia, goes on to describe Allan as an immoral, vulnerable, wicked match for Blanche. While Blanche somehow tries to explain and justify Allan's difference (homosexuality) throughout the play, "Stella names it and attaches it firmly by referring to him as a degenerate" (Maglin, Nan, Donna, 1996, P 34).

Remarkably, Stella as a wife in a heteronormative patriarchal society is not at all happy and respected. Perhaps the cruelest moment in the play is when Stella tells Eunice in scene XI of the play that she cannot believe Blanche's story that Stanley raped her. Stella would rather watch her sister getting confined for life in a mental institution than consider even the possibility that her tale of rape is true. At the end of the play when Stanley is undressing Stella and she cries for her sister, then Stella realizes that Stanley's love is innately sexual and political. However, she cannot leave him because she holds an internalized fear that leaving Stanley i.e. a heteronormative patriarch will make her an outcast just like her sister Blanche. She wants to secure her future in the heteronormative society by remaining by her husband's side and this gets denser when she gives birth to a baby boy. This birth is one of the markers of their heterosexual identities, which saves Stanley and Stella's marriage from being a useless and non-reproductive one just like Blanche and Allan's marriage. Thus, a woman has to worship compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy

against her wish to be safe and secure in an ultra masculine patriarchal social set up.

The heavenly image of domestic life had also attracted Allan Grey, for he, despite being a homosexual, tried to enter such a heterosexual relationship. Allan married a young woman hoping that it was the right thing to do in a heteronormative society. Then, he failed to fulfill Blanche's hopes and dreams for their marriage because of his homosexuality. Blanche felt that her marriage became a failure: "I knew I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! [William, 2009, A6 P78]. It is also noteworthy that homosexuality was perceived as a kind of psychological disease by medical professionals until the 1970s. And Allan very possibly regarded himself as ill and tracked a cure in Blanche, but was immensely scared to unveil it to her. The thought of life on the outskirts of society proved to be too much for Allan and he could not live as a homosexual in a heteronormative society because the thought of that life became unbearable: "The reigning heteronormativity drove [them] to neurosis, and then to suicide" (Guilbert, 2004, P94). Compulsory heterosexuality followed by compulsory domesticity made Allan disappoint Blanche and ultimately himself and this became a sight of anxiety and a means of oppression against homosexuals.

It is also noteworthy that earlier Blanche, assumed herself as a failed wife for she could not provide Allan the intimacy she thought she should have. When another man gave Allan that intimacy, Blanche found it difficult to comprehend and treated Allan and his homosexuality as disgusting and exposed his homosexuality in the midst of a crowd, though unintentionally..

Judith Halberstam commented on Allan's sexuality: "Some queers need to leave home to become queer, and others need to stay close to home to preserve their difference" (Halberstam 27). Allan found it difficult to disclose his sexual identity in a toxic masculine heteronormative society and when Blanche did the disclosure, he out of shame and guilt committed suicide. This disclosure made Blanche to regard herself as a criminal because this became the reason for Allan's violent suicide.

However, in a hetero-patriarchal society women and their sexuality too have been subjected to violence and oppression. Blanche Dubois is the most astonishing female character in the socio-political context of the play. She, instead of behaving like a "proper" widow, used to have sex with numerous men and sexual liberty had become her coping mechanism. However, patriarchy easily associates sexual promiscuity in a woman with commonness and vulgarity. After Stanley has "found out" Laurel's "truth" about Blanche, he says: "That girl calls me common!"

[William, 2009, A7, P83]. He continues to mock her by adding: "Well, so much for her being such a refined and particular type of girl!" [William, 2009, A7, P84]. After that Mitch too perceives her as a prostitute and tries to molest her. Even after witnessing the brutalities of heterosexual relationships, the desire to be a part of the compulsory heteronormative society and having a domestic life, haunts her throughout the play. As Judith J. Thompson writes:

"Her romantic attempt to achieve an idyllic union with Allan Grey is reenacted in a diminished version with Harold Mitchell, or "Mitch;" in a fairy-tale version with another "young man;" in a demonic version with the animalistic Stanley Kowalski; in an imaginatively transcendent version with the fantasized "Shep Huntleigh," and, finally, in a tragically ironic version with the Doctor who escorts her to the mental institution". [Thompson, 2002, P33]

### III. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The traditional weapon of violence to generate and maintain any norm plays a crucial role in this play, be it the verbal violence of Stanley or physical violence like the raping of Blanche. These modes of oppression and endorsement of compulsory heteronormativity gradually generate homophobia among individual characters which make them obliged to worship the societal norm of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy in general. Moreover, politically powerless queer identities and maltreated women are always victimized, exploited, or in a sense 'Otherized' (Said, 1978, P 124) in a heteronormative patriarchal society. Thus, the play is about power, especially who has the power to determine. Allan feels hopeless among heterosexuals who would never understand his uniqueness, so he commits suicide. Stanley feels threatened by Blanche. She is intellectually superior, endangers Stella's devotion to him, and she questions his authority and therefore his virility. So, he rapes her—what could be the better way to reassert his masculinity, if not raping and silencing? Vulgarly and cheap machismo ultimately win. Quoting Butler, it can be concluded that both sex and gender produce "regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (Butler, 2008, P 57) Hence, both create a kind of power politics where some controlling myths amalgamate and acculturate the unified power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression.

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