



Impairments and Society: A Study of Maladies with special reference to Tennessee Williams

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Received : November 2018

Accepted : March 2019

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Abstract : *Our attempt in this research paper is to study the ideas of impairment and society and their interrelationship. We have studied different types of impairments such as physical, mental, emotional and psychological, along with their effects on the “impaired” as well as the society.*

The role of literature has always been influential in representing the minority and the neglected section of the society. The way literature portrays social problems and individuals in society becomes crucial as it shapes the way population forms its ideas and perceptions. Literature can also

be the medium to bring forth the plight of such communities who are largely ignored in public discussion.

The plays of Tennessee Williams provide ample scope to study different impairments, the affected characters and the attitude of society towards them. We have dealt with physical impairment, cancer, mental illness and alcoholism. We have also discussed homosexuality as an exception to the heterosexual normalcy, not as a malady but as a social taboo.

Keywords: *Impairment, Malady, Society, Alcoholism, Homosexuality, Homophobia, Schizophrenia.*

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Introduction :

The term 'impairment' brings before us visions such as a crippled man strolling in the park in his wheelchair, or a blind man trying to cross the road or the mother of a 'special' child dragging him to the 'special' school. Impairment or disability is a condition of the body. The medical model of disability holds any sort of impairment in the body as a malfunction of the body. It sees the body of the disabled person as the problem that needs correction or treatment. Medical sciences have held and largely continue to hold the authority over the human body, in common perception.

In reaction to this medical model, came up 'the social model of disability'. The social model of disability deals with disability as a social construction. The construction of disability is a cultural phenomenon that differs in different societies. The social model instead of seeing the disabled person as the problem focuses on the society that is a problem to the disabled person.

To understand disability the social model studies the social construction of normalcy. There are so many different ways we are unconsciously enforcing normalcy. It has been ingrained in our daily lives. The advertising companies, the multinational companies and the fitness industry are enforcing and inventing new notions of normalcy on a daily basis.

The plays of Tennessee Williams provide ample scope to study different impairments, the persons with disability and the attitude of society towards them. We have dealt with physical impairment, cancer, homosexuality as an exception to the heterosexual normalcy, mental illness and alcoholism. Drama as a medium of creating social awareness affects viewers significantly.

The exclusion of the "unfit" or "impaired" in the society is a frequent phenomenon, something that has become a part of the society. These so called impaired are often shunned by the society and are discriminated against. Restrictions and limitations are imposed upon them forcibly. In general, their whole existence is reduced to their impairment.

The concepts of norm and the normal body are important to understand the body of a disabled. Norm is an accepted standard or a behavioural pattern that the majority agrees with or are made to agree with. With the establishment of the term 'norm', normal was brought into existence.

After a considerable period of time, certain concepts gain historicity and become universal. These concepts are usually developed by those in power and accepted by the majority usually as an imposition or through manufactured consent.

Objectives :

We aim to understand the concepts of normalcy and impairment through the portrayal of Disability in Literature with special reference to the plays of Tennessee Williams. Our attempt is to understand the

role of society in the discourse of disability and the role of literature in raising social consciousness related to impairments. Our endeavour is to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To understand the concept of 'Normalcy' and 'Disability'.
- b) To understand the portrayal of disability in literature with reference to Tennessee Williams's plays.
- c) To understand the role of society in the discourse of disability.
- d) To understand the role of literature in representing persons with disabilities and raising social consciousness about disabilities.

Methodology :

- a) Analysis: We have closely analysed the text by paying attention to minute details and keeping in mind the background of the text and issues mentioned in it.
- b) Explication: The research project explicates certain important terms and ideas.
- c) Comparison: For a broader understanding the project compares the works of Tennessee Williams with the works of other writers on thematic grounds.

Interpretation

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was an American playwright who was known for Southern Gothic drama. He used dark humour and grotesque characters in his plays, and the theme of alienation was found in majority of his works. Some of his major works include *The Glass Menagerie* (1943), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955).

He was greatly influenced by literary figures like Anton Chekhov (a seventeenth century playwright and a short story writer), August Strindberg (a Swedish playwright, novelist, poet, essayist and painter), D.H. Lawrence (an English writer and poet whose works represent an extended reflection upon the dehumanising effects of modernity and industrialisation) and Hart Crane (an American poet who wrote modernist poetry that was highly stylised and ambitious). Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi. His father, Cornelius Williams, was a travelling salesman who often criticised his son for his homosexuality. He was encouraged by his

mother, Edwina Dakin, to write. He first wrote after he was afflicted with paralysis in his early childhood. When he was seventeen, his family moved to St. Louis, where they led a hard life at the time of The Great Depression. He went to the University of Missouri, Columbia for his higher education and was named Tennessee due to his Southern accent. He was a homosexual. Thus, the theme of homosexuality has been depicted through many of his characters like Brick in ***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*** and Allen Gray, Blanche's husband in ***A Streetcar Named Desire***.

The characters in his plays act and behave in a peculiar way because of their physical, mental, emotional or sexual orientation.

The Glass Menagerie deals with Laura, a twenty three years old crippled woman who walks with a limp. Due to her condition, she develops a feeling of inferiority and gradually secludes herself from the society. She tries to find an escape in a collection of glass menagerie. Her mother, Amanda, constantly wants her to fit into the society. Her brother, Tom, proves to be an escapist finding rescue in movies, literature and travel. Jim, the caller, comes as a relief to her with sympathy, love, care and understanding only to leave her more disheartened and shattered. Being a disabled woman, she is placed on the lowest level of the hierarchy of the society. Due to her hesitation she couldn't homogenise with her surroundings. The external representation of the internal turmoil of Laura can be signified through her collection of glass menagerie which appears to be unique and symbolises her appearance in the society. She uses ignorance as a tool to get over her inability to attain the ideal state of normalcy and her true identity. She appears to be a sensible woman where she decides to carry her own identity with her, despite her mother's inclination towards the standard of "Southern femininity". Through this play, Williams has dramatised the situation and the inner conflicts going on in Laura's mind.

Tom appears to be an escapist in the text. He is entangled in the problems of his life. He finds escape in movies, literature as well as alcohol. He wrote poetry and Jim used to refer to him as 'Shakespeare'. He couldn't deal with the hardships of his life and finds solace in alcohol. When his mother found the truth about the ways he used as an escaping measure, she stopped him from doing it and forced him to go against his choice.

Alcohol helped him get over his frustration for a short while, whereas in the long term, he decides to leave his family and enjoy a life of adventures, this included all those things which his mother restrained him from doing.

The play ***A Streetcar Named Desire*** centres around the character of Blanche who arrives at her married sister's house in New Orleans on an evening early in May. Early in the play we are made aware of the class difference between Blanche and her sister's new husband, Stanley. While Blanche is a Southern belle from the once prosperous part of Mississippi, Stanley is a blue collar worker of Polish descent who lives in the slum area of Elsyian Fields. The stage is set for the ultimate confrontation between the Patrician and the Plebeian, or between Blanche and Stanley. Most of the conflict in the play, between characters or of ideas, revolves around this theme of class difference and gender roles. Another important aspect of the play is its characterisation. The characters are all unique in their experiences and problems. This gives us enough scope to study various diseases and disabilities in society. Blanche suffers from schizophrenia and anxiety disorder. Blanche and Stanley can be said to suffer from two different types of alcoholism. A considerable portion in the play can be used to study the issue of homosexuality as a non-normative form of sexuality. Blanche Du Bois, the protagonist is schizophrenic and has anxiety disorder. Her discomfiture at her sister's cheap home is evident; still she is ready to adjust in order to be with her sister rather than staying alone. Only her sister, Stella sympathises with her throughout the play attributing this to Blanche's sensitive nature. Blanche's past has been difficult and has affected her mentally and emotionally. Death of her husband when she was very young, the demise of family members, losing her ancestral home and also loss of her reputation, Blanche has had a number of setbacks in her life. Completely helpless and exiled from her hometown she comes to live with her sister on the pretext of vacation.

The play ***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*** opens with the ongoing celebration of Big Daddy's sixty-fifth birthday who is the patriarch of the Pollitt household and also the owner of the largest cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta. All the family members including Big Mama, his wife, Gooper, his eldest son along with his pregnant wife

Mae and five kids, Brick, his younger son and his wife Margaret are present. Amidst this celebration Big Daddy's health report from Oschner Clinic claims that he is healthy. Except for himself and his wife, all other members are aware that it is not the truth and they all know that Big Daddy is dying of cancer. Gooper wants to take control of the family fortune. Brick's indifference towards his familial relations, his extreme dependence on alcohol, unstable marriage, serve as an advantage for Gooper. However, having married Brick, Margaret has found herself a place and she does not want to lose it.

At the onset of the play, Big Daddy and Big Mama are deceived into believing that he is affected by a spastic colon. Big Daddy's cancer is not only a degradation of the body but also of his mental condition. The cancer comes into Big Daddy's life, not as a mere disease but as a shock that shakes his authority and reduces his firmness and turns him into a weak, dependant and decaying individual. Cancer as a disability can also be seen as having various approaches to the characters of the play.

Cancer comes as a shock for the family that Big Daddy is going weak and so there is a need to inherit the position left by him, the authority and property. For Big Mama, her husband's illness was a severe blow. Big Daddy's cancer signifies ultimate death.

Brick is the favourite son of Big Daddy. We see him resting upstairs and not taking part in the function. An athlete, he had broken his ankle the very last night under the influence of alcohol, after he over exerted himself. Having broken his ankle, he is dependent on crutches for movement.

The impositions that are forcefully set up by the society are the cause of his madness and irrationality. The crutches he used can also be viewed as emotional support which may crumble at any moment. Brick wants an existence free of any kind of constraints. When he moves up and down, the production of noise, hints at his extreme dependence on alcohol. It can symbolize his broken psychological state and his self. Thus, broken ankle is painful and needs consideration; he still tries to stay clear of any unnecessary external help. Brick is always under the influence of alcohol or seen with a glass of alcohol in his hands. Having been brought up in a poor household, Margaret is anxious to get hold of the riches. This play shows how fertility and women are co-

related. The difficulty or inability to produce a child is attributed to females. Without a child, the position of Maggie and brick in Pollitt household remains completely doubtful. Brick keeps on insisting how chaste and rare his friendship with Skipper was. And anything beyond friendship did not exist between them. He calls it pure because it was not appropriate or normal friendship that society would accept.

Thematically *The Glass Menagerie* can be compared with Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* which is an English novel written in 1928 depicting the England of the post Great War era. It was at a time England saw an increased number of disabled people in its population with the return of wounded war veterans.

But what is disturbing is the lack of sensibility in his treatment of disability. He treats Clifford's war disability as a matter of fact and almost goes to the point of mocking it. The novel informs the reader of Clifford's impairment in such a manner: "Clifford was shipped home smashed." (Lawrence 16) This kind of language to describe disability is used throughout the novel. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura's disability is treated as the focus of the play. The play explores how her disability has her sense of identity and being and the lives of people around her. In the hands of Lawrence, disability merely turns into a tool to further the plot.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura's family is unlike that of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*. The father in *The Glass Menagerie* remains absent throughout the text. Her mother Amanda tries to fit Laura in the state of normalcy. Thus, she gets her enrolled her in a business school. She appears to be concerned equally towards Laura as well as Tom. Tom had no hope in Laura's case. In a conversation with his mother, he stated,

"I guess she's the type that people call home girls."
(TGM 30)

According to him, Laura being a physically deformed woman cannot perform her duties as a human being. Though he never motivated her, he criticised her in a way or the other.

Likewise, a comparison can be made between Dattani's *Tara* and Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Tara's mother, Bharati in the play *Tara* and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* suffer from different types of

mental diseases. Their condition can be stated as an outcome of many events of their life. These mental conditions portray the different aspects of the life of the two characters. On the one side, we see Bharati who is caged by her own thoughts and cannot bear the fear and guilt inside her. Blanche, on the other hand, suffers from a number of devastating events in her life. Bharati's present condition is the outcome of her decision in the past, whereas, Blanche's tragedy lies in her widowhood without an estate. Both have been subjugated by males on the ground of gender.

Moreover, the theme of suppressed sexuality can be witnessed in both *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai. Despite the cultural differences between America and India, the treatment of homosexuality as a subject remains the same. The background for both the works is a hetero-normative environment which is homophobic.

The failing marriage of Begum Jaan with Nawaab and Margaret with Brick acts as the primary factor, leading to the advancement of the respective plots. Both the marriages took place only because of economic reasons. Both Margaret and Begum Jaan married solely because of the prospect of riches and wealth.

In *Lihaaf*, Nawaab's tendency to neglect Begum Jaan's sexual desires is shown. Her needs were taken for granted, almost as a non-existent entity. Begum Jaan, being grief stricken took up to Rabbo's comfort and massages. The relationship they shared was quite uncommon. The maids who worked in the palace kept talking about this unusual bond. For Begum Jaan, it can be seen as the discovery of her sexuality and acceptance of it. On the other hand, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the constant conflict of Brick with his sexuality can be witnessed. After Skipper's confession and death, Brick turned vulnerable to any discussion related to the matter. He absolutely dismissed any other suggestion of his relationship with Skipper apart from friendship. Thus, after discovering his feelings for Skipper, Brick takes up drinking in order to get over his feelings.

Conclusion :

Our research has primarily focused on the relationship between the human body and society. The body of every individual, as clearly observable and

supported by genetic studies, is different. No individual is the carbon copy of some other person. There are marked differences in our physique, facial features, skin colour, hair colour and mental and emotional behaviour. Our study on the subject of disability studies helped us to understand the causes behind why some differences of the body are considered more marked than others. We came to understand the role of society in constructing disability and normality. These concepts helped us in examining our selected texts with respect to our topic.

The selection of the plays by Tennessee Williams turned out to be a rewarding choice as it gave ample scope to study different impairments. One feature of Tennessee Williams has been that his most tragic characters have been persons with disability. The characters are vulnerable and tragically dependent on others for their needs. He highlights the plight of the minority group in his plays that reflect a society that is unsympathetic and ignorant.

On the basis of this research, following conclusive points can be drawn which can be further elaborated through a closer analysis :

1. Impairments have direct effect on the character : In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the critics have been divided in their criticism of the character of Blanche. Some have greatly mourned her tragic end while others have held her responsible for her own actions. By focussing our analysis on Blanche's mental illness, we gave new dimension to her character that negates the moral question about her character. We see her actions as a manifestation of her illness. Her decision making ability or the lack of it has been a result of her troubled state of mind.

2. Some impairment is visible whereas some go unrecognised : Not all disabilities are same. There are some that are visible like Laura's cripple in *The Glass Menagerie* and Brick's broken ankle in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*. There are others like Blanche's schizophrenia that go unnoticed even to the person's close ones.

3. Disability also becomes a gender issue : The characters of Blanche and Laura depict how disability becomes a gender specific issue as well. Both the

characters are under pressure to marry, so that they are protected and secured in the society but find it hard to find a desirable suitor due to their disability.

4. Alcoholism has a direct social cause : In this research work we have discussed four different cases of alcoholism. Every case is unique. The four cases, Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, are different as far as the causes of alcoholism are concerned and also the effect it has on the individuals.

5. There can be different impact of homosexuality on different characters : In this research work, we see three different cases of homosexuality. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick takes up to drinking alcohol as a result of his depression caused by his sexuality and homophobia. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Allan Gray takes the extreme step of committing suicide for fear of persecution and humiliation. In *Lihaaf*, the suppression of sexuality takes a violent and perverse turn.

6. Very few disabled characters hold authority or have source of income : Lord Clifford is the only character who can be said to have financial independence that is too because of his birth and family. The rest of the characters find it hard to secure a source of income or maintain one.

The research project proves that disability is as much a problem of the society as it is of the person with disability. The hardships of persons of disability are aggravated by the constant discrimination and oppression they are subjected to. Society as a system fails to accept and empathise with disability. For a disabled person to realise his/her full potential, the society and infrastructure has to be more accepting and adaptive to a person of disability.

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