

## THE THEME OF LONELINESS AND ALIENATION IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' 'THE GLASS MENAGERIE'

**N.G. Jadhao**

Department of English  
S.S.S.K.R. Innani Mahavidyalaya, Karanja (Lad), Dist. Washim (M.S.) India  
ngjadhao7777@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*Tennessee Williams, one of the celebrated dramatists in American literature, has achieved unique position in the history of drama written in English Literature. The close study of his dramas reveals many common techniques which occur recurrently in his drama. He has handled the expressionistic and the avant guard (anti-realism) techniques to express the very feeling of American society which came on the wake of the two world wars and the great financial crisis of 1929. It is also noticed that his characters, under the pressure of harsh reality, develop the feeling of alienation and loneliness. They go away from the reality to seek refuge under the shadow of illusion. But the harsh reality never allows them to go away. Naturally their illusion results into disillusion. Ultimately, they live their life with the feeling of isolation, alienation and frustration. The present paper is an attempt to study the very feeling of alienation and loneliness in respect to his famous play, 'The Glass Menagerie'*

**Key Words:** *Expressionistic, Avant Guard, Alienation, Illusion, Disillusion Existentialism, Dadaism, Futurism, Fantasy, Rootlessness, Anti-realism, Naturalism, Plastic Theatre, Epic Theatre, Maya.*

### Introduction

The post-war American drama has succeeded to register its existence in the sphere of literature at the universal level due to its experimental and explorative nature. The decades of 1920s and 1930s gave maturity to dramatic literature to attain international status. Eugene O'Neil's experiments inspired other dramatists to use greater freedom in writing. Dramatists like Eugene O'Neil, Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Elmer Rice have enriched the dramatic literature at the considerable level. They have brought the dramatic literature at the critical level, and forced the world to take the note of their existence. The drama of the nation has made experiment in technique and style. They used the techniques of expressionism,

existentialism, Dadaism, futurism and the avant guard technique in their writing. The second nature as mentioned, it explores the very tendencies of the American culture. The theme of escape, alienation, loneliness, fantasy, dream, illusion, disillusion and the quest for paradise are frequently handled to project the very mentality of the society and its ways of living, believing and thinking. It has been studied by the critics that American dramas of the period are resulted out of dynamic political, social, economical, and overall cultural changes which occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are digging the very ground of the American consciousness and psyche. It is probing into the very American consciousness which came on the wake of materialistic approach to life. The event of 1929's financial depression has left the lasting impression on the

American consciousness. The disaster of the two world wars, American's involvement in the world-politics disturbed the faith of the young generation. The events created a sense of disillusion among the people who were habitual with comfortable living. The very result of the condition was that the society started living wayward life without basic ground. The materialistic attitude of the American society forced the people to live a life without faith. Frustration, rootlessness, loneliness, hopelessness and sexual hedonism became the common tendencies of the age. The American drama has captured the very feelings of the age. It is to be noted that they not only adopted the technique of realism but also the anti-realism that is called 'Naturalism' to project the prevailing tendencies.

### **Tennessee Williams as a dramatist**

Tennessee Williams, one of the leading and innovative playwrights of the post war time, has left lasting impression on the mind of the American society and readers. As gifted with the very dramatic writing, he has introduced the concept of 'Plastic Theatre' in the world of literature in which he blended the Brechtian device of 'Epic Theatre' like the actor narrator, the screen symbolizing consciousness circus music and symbolic lightening effect with the Wagnerian synthesis of the theatrical arts, music, poetic language. He has used the expressionistic method to explore the very consciousness of the individual character. The expressionistic technique is a device in which the writer allows his characters to expose the consciousness without the bondage of time and place. As an expressionistic, he has

avoided the representation of the external reality to explore the internal vision of life. He has used the technique of expressionism to explore the disillusion, the feeling of loneliness, alienation and longing of the American society. He would say that we all are sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skin for life. It is his attempt to bring the solitary confinement into light by using the technique of expressionism.

### **Alienation and loneliness as the Theme**

The close study of Tennessee Williams plays show a struggle of reality and fantasy which goes in the various forms in the mind of his characters. He himself has said, "At the age of fourteen I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable". He would find solace in writing and his characters in illusion and fantasy. Illusion and disillusion go side by side in the life of his characters. He has also shown the struggle of hope and despair in which they are always crushed by the hard reality of life. Naturally, his characters escape from the world of reality into the world of illusion. They live in their own created world far away from the real. While living in the world of illusion, they go away from themselves and the surrounding. They feel lonely in the crowded world. Such a condition is called literary alienation. Most of the plays by Williams handle the same theme of alienation and loneliness.

## **Alienation and Loneliness as the Concepts**

Before getting the feeling of loneliness and alienation in Tennessee Williams plays, it would be better to discuss the very theme of alienation and loneliness. Alienation is taken as a feeling of not belonging. The feeling can be physical, mental, spiritual, psychological or socio-political. It is also remembered that it is fact of life to be alienated to self and surrounding. As far the matter of literary alienation is concerned, it is usually taken as an emotional isolation or dissociation from others. It is also noted that the very term is not a new in the human experience. Since the ancient time it is in practice with various sense. In Indian philosophy, it is taken as a renunciation of all worldly achievement and illusion of 'Maya' to get salvation. It is taken in spiritual or metaphysical sense of achieving a higher state of contemplation. On the contrary, there has been religious concept of going away from the god. It would be taken in Greek-Roman times by physicians' referring to disturbed, difficult or abnormal states of mind. In Latin, alienation means 'mental' alienation. In the history of literature, it is taken an estrangement to self. The term is mostly associated to German Romantics who used the term effectively in their poetry. Hegel, a German philosopher has also handled the term under the title 'Philosophy of Alienation'.

Tennessee Williams was one of the most successful users of the expressionistic technique in drama. His plays are the superb example of the naturalistic drama which deals with the internal crisis which goes in the mind of

his characters. He has used the technique to handle the crisis of post war American society. He handles the theme of loneliness and alienation to project the internal conditions of his characters. His characters live in their own world far away from the harsh reality of life. To avoid the pain of reality, they escape from the world of reality to the world of illusion. Naturally they go away from their self, social life and sometimes from the physical world. They feel estranged in the world. They never try to accept the reality, and fall the victim of illusion which leads them towards frustration and alienation.

## **The Theme of loneliness and alienation in 'The Glass Menagerie'**

The close study of Tennessee Williams plays show that the alienation condition results out of loneliness or solitariness of the modern man dominates his drama as it is a controlling and shaping factor. His play, 'The Glass Menagerie' is also dominated by the alienation and loneliness. The recurrence of the feeling of loneliness of his characters carries them away from the harsh reality of life. They create illusion but when their illusion comes in contact with the reality of life, it collapse into pieces.

The action of 'The Glass Menagerie' is set in memory-both its style and its content are shaped by memory. It is a blending of the seven scenes without close linkage with each others. The play deals with five major characters out of them four appear on the stage and one in the form of photograph hanging on the wall. It is a story of the wingfield family that consists of Mr. and Mrs. Wingfield

and their two children Tom and Laura. Mr. Wingfield is shown by photograph. He does not appear on the stage. He has left his family on its care, and went into the world of his imagination. It is informed that only once he has sent a postcard with inscription 'hello, Goodbye' without address. He leaves his family for the world of loneliness and solitariness. The very attitude of the family head leaves the impression of alienation. He was not happy with the lived life and its relation. Emotionally he was alienated from the other members which results into his escape from the world of relation. It is his very feeling of estrangement forced his to go away from them physically. His feeling of alienation was so strong that he leaves family without any strong reason. He falls in love with long distance and disappears. Physically he is exploring the geographical world and emotionally into the world of psyche. The very attitude of Mr. Wingfield shows his loneliness and feeling of alienation.

Mrs. Amanda Wingfield, wife to Mr. Wingfield, tries to bring the feeling of affirmation by her care to her child but she fails to overcome the feeling of loneliness and alienation which is so strong with the every characters. Whenever she fails she remembers her youth and her life lived in the south as a southern belle. Whenever her present pains her she escape to her loving region and loving memories. It is her imagination and craves for ideal life leads her towards apathy to her husband. Her illusion of the past never allows her to live a peaceful life with her husband. She was alienated from him. She tries many time to adjust herself with him but vain. Ultimately, they are separated from each other forever. Her depression and

loneliness comes in light when she remarks:

**“I wanted to find a hole in the ground and hide myself in it forever.”**

The expression shows her helpless nature.

The strongest expression of the feeling of alienation and loneliness can be seen in depiction of Tom and his sister, Laura. Tom, like his father, wants to go away from all family responsibility. He expresses his desire to leave the world of reality like his father:

**“I would be where he is---gone.”**

The very attitude shows tom's apathy to his family and responsibility. He lives in his world without destination. His feeling of alienation never allows his to go near to his family. He keeps distance from his mother and sister. He always speaks very roughly with his mother. Only at the physical level he is attached with his family but at the emotional, he is far away from them. His feeling of loneliness never allows him to live a normal life. He works in Shoe Company like his father but his mind wanders somewhere. He wants to compose poems and undertake long journey but his reality never allows his to go away from harsh reality. He feels suffocated in the job and wants to go away from. He quarrels with his mother by stating:

**“You think I want to spend fifty-five years down these in that Elotex interior!”**

Tom's feeling of loneliness and alienation resulted out of anguish and boredom can be best seen in his desire:

**“How lucky dead people are! But I get up, I go! For six-five Dollars a month I give up to all that I dream of doing or Being ever! And you say-self’s all I ever think of. Why, Listen, if self is what I thought of, mother.”**

His indifferent attitude to family and his wayward personal life should be taken as a outcome of his feeling of loneliness and alienation. In the opening of the play, when his mother, Amanda, advises him to eat his meal relaxed to get its advantages. Tom expresses his dissatisfaction over mother’s advice. It shows that he is not in a mood to listen to his mother. He eats his meal just like an animal having no cordiality of human beings. His attitude shows his indifference to family and mother’s love. He never tries to understand anybody’s feelings. The very anxiety of mother for her son is resulted out of Tom’s alienation from family and his self.

Tom is not interested in life which he is going to live. He spends his nights by watching movies. He comes late to home. When he is asked by his mother about his real cause of late coming, he replies violently by stating that he is going all the bad places she can think:

**“I am a hired assassin; I carry a tommy gun in a violin case!**

**They call me killer, killer Wingfield. I am leading a double life, a simple, honest warehouse worker by day, by night a Czar.”**

He never speaks rightly or properly to his mother. The statement can be taken as a result of frustration, feeling of loneliness and self estrangement. He is living in his

own world having no relation with the world of relation.

As far the matter of Laura is concerned, we can say that she is the most embodiment of the feeling of isolation and escape. Her physical defect and her hypersensitivity cut her off from society and other members of her family. She also escapes from the world of beauty and charm. She avoids her contact to the external world, even at home she hardly talks to her mother and brother. She lives in her own made world- the world of glass animals. Her inferiority complex forces her to live in the world of glass animal. It is the same complex which makes her indifferent to the proposal of marriage. When her mother says her to prepare for gentleman caller; she replies that she is not interested in such a thing. Her mother recalls her girlhood by stating that she would receive callers, sometimes as many as seventeen. Laura replies in nervous manner:

**“Young girls were different in those times that they are now**

**They knew how to talk”**

Her nervousness forces her to say that she is not popular as her mother was. She is totally out of tune to her age and its charm. Her escape is both physical and psychological. She shows her isolation from common and interesting things of life. She withdraw herself into own world to play the victrola to get rid from the boredom world. She lives in the world of fantasy and light away from the surrounding as well as from self. Her sense of alienation never allows her to mix with people, and enjoy the common way of living.

## **Conclusion**

The very discussion of the drama shows how his characters live their life in isolation far away from the world of reality. It is also noticed that they always escape from the harsh reality for the world of illusion. But ultimately they meet with

frustration when their illusion transforms into disillusion. They feel lonely in the crowded world. To escape from the world of reality, they develop fantastic attitude to life. Their escape can be seen in various forms such as psychological, physical, geographical or social.

## **References**

- Abraham, M.H. (2009).** A Handbook of Literary Terms, Cengage Learning India Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, ISBN 13:978-81-315-0955-5.
- George, M. S. (2011).** Twentieth Century American Literature, Commonwealth Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, ISBN 978-81-311-0255-8
- Mundhra, S.C. (2008).** A Reader's Guide to American Literature, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, ISBN: 978-81-7977-272-0.
- Rajimwale, S. (2012).** Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, Rama Brothers India Pvt Ltd., New Delhi, ISBN:81-7581-275-3.
- Ray, V. & Mohit, K. (ed) (2011).** Studies in American Literature, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., New Delhi, ISBN 978-81-269-0143-2
- Stanlake, C. (1998).** Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective, Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-0-521-51980-9.
- Singh, A. (1998).** Contemporary American Drama, Sangan Book, New Delhi, ISBN 81-7551-045-5
- Tilak, R. (2011).** History of American Literature, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, ISBN 81-85897-04-2
- Venkateswarly, D., Satyanarayan, D. & Karunaker (ed.) (1996).** Perspective on Post-war American Drama, Prestige Books, New Delhi, ISBN:81-7551-014-5.