

The 'Bottle Villa' Of Illusions and Desires: A Critical Study of The Tragic Heroines of Atwood's *Surfacing* and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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ABSTRACT

"Obstinately she tried to control and defy her destiny and to know her story is to be inspired by pity and terror" - Elaine Dundy

The literary landscape resounds with the echoing hollering of the great tragic heroes, whose Homeric lives had made the literary vista resplendent. But amidst the din, there exists the complex caricatures of tragic heroines who stun us with the sheer intensity of the paroxysm that is their lives. Tennessee Williams and Margaret Atwood has given the world two such heroines whose lives are akin to the constrictor knots i.e their lives tighten and strangles them as they try to escape from it. This paper is a novel attempt to collate the tortuous characters of these women who has intrigued the audience with their fascinating psyches.

Key Words: Illusions, Feminism, Madness, Survival etc.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* although may differ in genre they portray the complicated, chaotic and insidious existence of women of an equally chaotic modern world. Set in the starkly contrasting geographies of rural Quebec (Canada) and the boisterous, dynamic corner of New Orleans respectively, the works swarm in the putrid air of psychological perturbation. These magnificent pieces of literature brings to us the truth of human nature whilst unfurling the layers of chaos in the minds of two women battling with reality and illusion and logic and madness. This paper is written with an aim to closely analyses, compare and contrast the two books with much given emphasis on the female protagonists – Blanche Dubois and the unnamed narrator. We have closely followed these characters and have entered into their turbulent psyches so as to delineate the overpowering and exhausting battles these women undertake to merely survive in a world gone wrong. Thus, through this paper we shall bring out the fate of the individuals trapped by their surroundings with the heaviness of loneliness and lack of communication bearing them down leaving them stranded in an island of desolation unable to reconcile the body with the spirit of self.

Blanche Dubois is the tragic heroine of Tennessee Williams's brilliant drama, the apex of his genius – *A Streetcar Named Desire* considered as a "tragedy of incomprehension" (sic). She is a fading southern belle who depends on the compassion of strangers floating adrift in a modern world and she finds solace in the world of her crafted illusions. But her delusions of grandeur when illuminated by the glaring light of reality, it crumbles down like a deck of cards. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* also presents to us a similarly conflicted heroine who remains unnamed to the last page of the novel. She is initially seen lacking the courage to face the bitter realities she goes on to repress all the pain in her mind and projects a false self to the society.

Blanche and the unnamed heroine

"I don't want realism.... I want Magic" (Williams 86). This quote most fittingly delineates the temperament of both the heroines who battles the "paraphernalia of earthiness of daily existence" (Rajimwale 50). They are trapped in a maze of memories, so at every turn they run into these muddles of reminiscences thus spiraling into an abyss of insanity. Thus, for the necessity of the ordeal of survival they erect 'bottle villas' on the foundation of an illusion of lies so as to escape the maze of memories and the haze of insanity. We meet Blanche and the unnamed heroine at the start of their journeys to the favoured destinations. Blanche arrives at the Elysian Fields in search of a purgation from the catastrophe her old life was and a recluse from the bitter whirlwind of death and decline. The heroine of *Surfacing* undertakes a similar journey that leads her to the gates of past that had been knocking away at the doorsteps of her conscience for years. The difference in their journeys pertain to the direction they undertook, Blanche stumbles upon New Orleans as a route of escape, as she is helplessly trying to flee from the shadows of her past. Whereas the unnamed heroine takes up the path of confrontation as she believes her homeland hoists the answers to the questions her life has become. But their destinations present them with the ultimate climaxing of their delirious existence that entails them to the verge of an insidious collapse. When they arrive, they are both shrouded in the dark shadows of their fabricated illusions and they project a hapless pseudo self to the society with the aim of blending in but ironically their false – self fails to comprehend the blurred intersections of reality and fantasy thereby leaving them alienated and ostracized. This

alienation culminates in the advent of a sheer madness that stringently engulfs the vacuity of their existence leaving them grappling for the air of survival. This fabrication of delicate illusions is a reflexive coping mechanism they have assumed to segregate their turbulent and tragic past from their fleeting present. “Madness is the flight of consciousness from painful encounters”(Hegel 236). The madness always descends into the psyche of the survivors of excruciatingly painful and tragic loss, that brings them to the thorny crossroads of mourning and desolation . While Blanche is elusive of her descending madness, the unnamed heroine quite obtrusively spirals into the vortex of ruthless madness.

The ‘Bottle Villa’ of Illusions illuminated by the Shaded Lamps

Fabricating illusions as a survival mechanism is a note of similitude in the two heroines as well as the two works. Apart from the inner battle in the minds of the heroines, there is a clashing, violent duel between reality and illusion. Blanche fabricates illusions to accompany her todays and tomorrows ,thus she builds them as she moves forward so as to guard her from the immediate troubles and threats. Whereas the unnamed narrator’s illusions are a resort to cover up her past, to shield her from her own memories so she treats her childhood as a detached memory that she remembers with a nonchalant yet forced indifference as though she was trying to erase her presence from the past . Blanche’s illusions maneuver to save her from the turbulent future that awaits her and the unnamed heroine’s illusions vainly manage to hide her from the demonic trauma of her past. Blanche flaunts her illusionary extravagance in the grandeur of her physical appearance and in the air of glamour and superiority that becomes her . The heroine of *Surfacing* attributes a nostalgic charm to her scrapbook of illusions that she attaches and detaches in accordance to suit he immediate conveniences. Shep Huntleigh , the trunks of exotic fur and the cascades of pearls and rolls of silk are the shiny illusions Blanche projects in a light veiled by her green paper lantern. Whereas the unnamed heroine craftily weaves a web of illusions with the strands of a fake marriage, an idea of posterity that are pasted over the real pictures of a scandalously futile affair, a painful abortion and an ever persistent insanity. These illusions are significantly smeared over the symbolic plane and even over the other characters of the respective works and the abstraction of such illusionary worlds are accentuated by the overbearing intrusion of other characters as well as by recurring motifs. The green paper lantern in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is symbolic of the illusion as much as the mirror and the camera in *Surfacing* is. The frog in the jar image is the splitting crack in the unnamed narrator’s illusionary world as is the insidious ‘Varsouviana’ music accompanied by the gunshot sequence in Blanche’s pseudo world. The illusion of physical appearance though not evident in the main female character of *Surfacing* ,we see it obtrusively in the make-up laden appearance of Anna who aims to please her husband. Blanche too had resorted to the illusionary world of clothes and cosmetics to lure men to quench her desire that ebbed from the vacuity of her heart that had been hollowed with the death of her young gay husband.

The saga of madness, death and violence

Blanche’s and the unnamed narrator’s encounter with the ominous reality and the swirling advent of madness is a point of contrast and a necessary topic of discourse. The burden of reality is what drove Blanche into the safe haven of illusions and into this world arrives the raw, virile and rough persona of Stanley who flaunts a primitivism that threatens her as it reflects the same strain of vulgar ruthlessness that she hides within herself. Thus, their encounter is also the fateful and fundamental clash between the romantic world of the illusions and the ruthless, ravenous world of reality. However Stanley’s uncouth, rumbustious rashness rather becomes a justification for the necessity of the protective armor of illusion for a troubled woman like Blanche who is holding on to the precipice of life. But the greater truth that remains unknown to Blanche and every other character who erects such defensive walls around them is that these walls shall only constrict them into the dark chambers of desolation and isolation and thus it shall push them over the brink of sanity into bottomless abyss of unchecked madness. But this advent of madness is not brought upon them solely as in the case of Blanche, the cruelties of society as personified in Stanley, accelerates the process. Stanley’s act of rape succeeding Mitch’s metaphorical rape is the last astute step in the undoing of Blanche; the act is a complete cruel, crafty violation of any sense of security and sanity she possessed . Thus finally she is apathetically exposed to the excruciating , blinding light of reality and Blanche blindly surrenders to it . “To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood : their definition of sanity”(Atwood 140). Unlike Blanche , who meekly submits to the painstakingly blaring force of reality, the heroine of *Surfacing* puts up the fight of her life even though it cost her the price of her sanity. She refused to be the victim to the invincible prowess of realism and instead she consciously drowns into the rivulets of madness and swims in its grey waters soiled in the mushiness and mustiness of tragic memories and traumatic experiences. It is as if her journey to her homeland in search of her father is nothing but the metaphor for her journey into the inky depths of her turbulent subconscious . Through and through her journey was a premonition of the impending arrival of a primitive madness, that shall purge her off the pain and sorrow of her past. She reverently embraces the madness in the manner of answering to the unknown yet omniscient force of Nature. Her ascend into madness is reflective of a ritualistic ceremony of uniting with the self. In the novel the narrator voices her opinion of madness as the amplification of something that already exists within us.

"To trust is to let go"(Atwood 141). The unnamed heroine trustingly welcomes this obtrusive amplification of the chaos of her mind and thus paves a way out for the turbulent artificialities of her illusions. In the apex of her psychotic disorientation, she carves out a life that is steeped in the most rustically distorted, vulgarly primitive reality that daringly challenges the assumed notions of reality of the modern world. Her rite of passage through her subconscious evokes a metamorphosis that results in the birth of a rejuvenated woman who with her untainted and novel perspective steps into a world where she has to carve out a place for her. But her return to the real world is resounding with the ominous tones of ambiguity as she in her new form is as unfitting in this world as much as her old form was. However on the stoic planes of optimism, the heroine unlike Blanche submerges not to surrender but to surface. Unlike Blanche, the narrator freely embraces the madness within her because Blanche was coercively forced into the purgatory of insanity by external forces and nature never came to her aid as she was boxed in a delusional, dystopic, dynamic modern world bereft of humanity. But on the susceptible plains of cynicism, the climax of both the works carry the air of similitude. To elaborate, Blanche seeks her exile to the world of madness by exiting through the hallway of ambiguous, ominous, enigmatic uncertainty. And the heroine of *Surfacing*, surfaces from insanity only to step into a world that is equally ambiguous and uncertain, a world that never accepted her, a world that is steeped in a depressingly chaotic madness of mundane existence. Or are they two women who though endowed with the qualities of superior existence, they are endowed to battle with ill-fate as well as the oppressions and conflicts of both the internal and external world, like a never ending game of cards.

As mentioned, the game of cards play a significantly symbolic role in both the works, thus delineating the inevitable presence of chance or fate in the lives of these two women, as chance is what their lives are based upon. Blanche's loss of her job, her family property, her abrupt

wedding, the unexpected death of her husband, her arrival at her sister's house, her tragedy at the hands of Stanley, the foiling of her one chance of happiness with Mitch are all the acts of chance. The unnamed narrator has also lived a life trampled upon by the ominous footsteps of chance: her affair, her abortion, her escape from her homeland only to return there in search of her father and everything she once abandoned. Loneliness, death, violence and madness are all inseparably and intricately woven into the central action of both the works. Death and violence subtly yet disconcertingly pervades the lives of the female protagonists. "Death- I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are"(Williams 88). Blanche's encounters with death have been a continuous charade of the abstraction of the lives of her loved ones. And she is continuously haunted and interrupted by the symbols of death, such as the inscription on Mitch's cigarette case and the Mexican woman selling flowers for funerals. She believes that the opposite of death is desire, thus vindicating herself of her sexual life as she sought her desire through intimacies as a resort to stave off death. Blanche's delicate hold on life is constantly exposed to bashful lashes of violence directly and otherwise. Stanley's violent tempers inflict upon her a chaotic disorientation of her nerves. Mitch's violent outburst and confrontation shatters the last ray of hope in her and it leads her into the booming vortex of Stanley's cruel exploitation that leaves her a scarred and wronged soul physically and mentally. Infact Blanche is a woman who was rallied away into her metaphorical demise by the rancorous violations inflicted upon her vanities and virtues. The shadow of death perpetually chases and closes-in on our unnamed heroine as well. At one point of the novel where the narrator delineates the ramifications of her forced abortion, she says that it felt like they planted death within her. She resentfully saw herself as the perpetrator of an unfair death, a putrid murder, a psychic abstraction of a life that could have evolved into a child. So the ominous vapors of death consistently strangle and suffocate her but she never gives into the venomous clutches of the Grim Reaper, instead she jaunts through the pernicious panorama of madness. Death did not scare her but it disappointed her, the demise of her parents shattered her belief of them as the persevering invincible forces that steered through the perdition of the swampy, marshy lands of rustic Quebec. Violence permeates and persists in the environment and surroundings of our heroine who had been violated and robbed of the bliss of love and motherhood. Violence is symbolically signified in the characters of the Americans and their mortifying act of violence is screened through the insidious motif of the dead heron. The dead heron is a presage that is unanimous of the preposterous violation meted out to both the women characters.

Deception of language, feminist angle and titular appropriation

The suggestible power of language in the lives of the two women is a matter of contrast that calls for a suggestive vignette. Language becomes an ally to Blanche in the sublimation of her illusions that sauvely disguised her pseudo – self and her false sense of security. Her fallacious projection of a stupendous personality is subjugated by the aid of the subliminal power of language. Blanche's elaborately fashioned speeches decked with stunningly moving vocabulary is aimed to subdue the listener's plausible arguments and possible rancour. But Blanche's impressive linguistic charade is a bitter spot when directed at Stanley, a raw man whose earthy stature fails him in comprehending the complexities of language. Language is a symbol of defense Blanche fortifies to aid her in the sturdy erection of her stylized and subjunctive illusions. However it is fascinating as to how she shapes and reshapes her command on language when she deals with different characters, the language stretches from frank to fanciful to fictitious to felicitous to feverish to fiendish. Thus through Blanche, the

dramatist delineates how language closely mirrors the diverse emotions and exultations astutely, thus unfurling the imminent dependence between personality and vocabulary. On the opposing lines, language is a stultifying vocation to our unnamed heroine. The notion of language constantly eludes her, as she views language as a stymying force to complete expression. She believes that language is incapable of sublimating the feelings, the ideas, the notions and perceptions. To her the mind materialized in language is slavish and dishearteningly sleazy and language functions not as an improvident factor but an incendiary factor. And, when she metamorphoses into her subhuman form, she completely abandons the yielding prowess of the stereotypical linguistic charade.

The feminist overtones permeating the premises of both the works is a matter of striking similitude. A Streetcar Named Desire has been viewed by many scholars as a feminist play possessing the predominant properties of the great classics. And Surfacing is a novel for women, about women and penned by a woman that delineates the uncertain and ambiguous fate of women in a male-centric, painfully partial world. Thus both the books take us through emotional, intellectual and social journey of two women – one in quest of permanence and peace, and the other in the spiritual quest of the self; whilst navigating the rocky terrains laid with the boulders of masculine ego and prejudices. Their lives delineate the sinister urge of the patriarchal world to bend and crush the spirits of independent and confident women by seeking to strip them of their feminine dignity and to belittle them by spoiling their image in their own eyes as well as that of the society's. Characters like Stanley of A Streetcar named Desire and Joe and the ex-lover of Surfacing are male stereotypes that aptly fits the afore-said misogynistic world that perpetually propagates gender violence.

The titular appropriation and the symbolic significance of the title is an underpinning topic of uncanny resemblance in relation to both the works. A 'streetcar' named 'Desire' that passes the 'Cemeteries' is what brings Blanche to the 'Elysian Fields'. Thus on the deeper level, desire is synonymous to Blanche's continual quest for joy and bliss and permanence and in her journey she passes the plains of death (death of her loved ones) and reaches the paradoxically idealized world of chaos ironically named as Elysian fields. Thus the title of the play resides as a premonition to the impending tragedy that awaits Blanche. Similarly Surfacing is a title that aptly delineates the climax of the metamorphosis the heroine undergoes to reveal her true self. She dives into the inky waters of madness in search of the cutting rocks of truth and surfaces as a newly born woman. The title is also symbolic of the blissful emancipation of the self of a woman who had been caged in and held by the shackles of illusions and vanities. Thus a poetic justice prevails in both the works through the vindictive relation between the title of the work and its ensuing plot of action.

CONCLUSION

In the light of collating the two brilliantly etched works of literature, that has emerged to become milestones in the arena of literary genius, we have discovered and identified the complex nuances and turbulences that make up the human mind. By analyzing the two female protagonists and their journeys we have delineated the intense drama that occupied their lives and how they arrive at the apex of an environment that closes in on them trapping them at the center of a whirlpool that threatens to scatter and tear up their hopes and desires. This contriving, constricting forces drives them to seek protection under the deceptive and ominous shades of fragily erected illusions that finally betrays them and exposes them to the blaring light of harsh reality. The human mind is a delicate abstractness that calls for attention and care as much as the physical body craves constant solitude. Therefore in these times of hardship and ambiguity when everyday is a battle for survival against a raging pandemic as such, we should remind ourselves to take precautionary measures to safeguard our minds as well as our bodies.

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