



## SEXUALITY AND WOMANLINESS, LACAN AND REVIERE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' BLANCHE DUBOIS (A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE)

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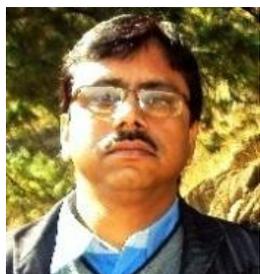
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### ABSTRACT

The terms like 'libido' and 'drive', popularised by Freud while defining sexuality, were later picked up by Melanie Klein and then much later with the appearance of Lacan received a new treatment. Where Freud defines anatomical differences in terms of their psychic consequences, Lacan defines sexual position in terms of getting a place in the social as sexed subjects. Joan Riviere maintains that womanliness is a cover up to conform to social constructions of femininity, a masquerade whereby the woman as a category does not exist. According to Riviere, there is no distinction between womanliness and pretence. Womanliness is a capacity which can only manifest itself in defensive way. So there is nothing like eternal feminine. Following Lacan the sexes cannot be divided into two complimentary and it is because the symbolic sexual distinction takes no account of the lack in the Other. The Other is treated as a symbolic system which works through a constitutive lack via a promise it cannot fulfil. So it often works through a kind of deceit which, if not recognised and controlled, has catastrophic results for self and society. Tennessee Williams' Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* enacted this catastrophe. The present paper seeks to explore the character of Blanche Dubois in the light of the concepts of Lacan and Joan Rivier in the contexts of determining identity independent of biological origins.

The traditional concept of sexuality is grounded on the biological considerations. Psychoanalysis has offered an extended and transformed perspective of understanding sexuality. The traditional concept of normal and perverse have been received a shocking exposure in the light of psychoanalysis in the sense that any clear and definitive distinction between the two is impossible. It is no longer simply the reproduction which sexuality was designed to manifest as its aim, but the satisfaction. The sexual tendencies which may appear to be the most

perverted one happened to be revealed as common and vice versa. Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst, through his works, especially his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), invites attention on the issue of sexuality concerning especially the relation between the body, sex and pleasure. His contribution lies in understanding sexuality as an attempt to realize human relations, pleasure and satisfaction. Freud defines anatomical differences, highlighting the presence or absence of male genital organ, in terms of their psychic consequences.

Initiated by his observation of the female Oedipus complex Freud tends to explore the nature of feminine sexuality, but fails to give a definitive picture which prompts him to describe femininity as a 'dark continent'. The first great debate on feminine sexuality was initiated through a paper by Ernest Jones (1879-1958) which gradually invited responses from many of the women psychoanalysts including Melanie Klein (1882-1960) and Joan Reviere (1883-1962). The issue was received a new treatment much later with the appearance of Lacan.

Tennessee Williams, born on March 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, is one of the most powerful dramatists of America of the twentieth century who wrote dramas of high emotional conflicts where the characters are trapped in their extreme moment of emotional crises. The pressure of repression that Williams experiences himself throughout his life due to his unfavourable family environment and his being a homosexual one is transmitted to his characters. He has exploited the theme of sexual repression to its extreme in his plays with the basic intention to show its inherent ambiguity and confusion. For him it is the 'deeper necessities' in order to communicate his own confused sexual identity. Tennessee Williams' second Broadway success *A Streetcar Named Desire* received variety of responses mainly for the creation of enigmatic Blanche Dubois. The actions of the play move round Blanche either to present her in the height of an angel or a condemned one. But Williams has created her to reveal the predicament of an otherwise exceptional but helpless woman in a patriarchal society. The different character traits infused in Blanche has made her an easy prey to psychoanalysis. In this paper she has been undertaken to be analyzed in the light of Lacan's concept of sexuality and Reviere's doctrine of 'womanliness as masquerade'. Philip C. Kolin in his article "Reflections on/of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" very emphatically writes:

"*Streetcar* tells tale about us and is one of the most haunting tales we tell about ourselves, often revealing what we want concealed and concealing what we want revealed." (Kolin 1)

This reading of *Streetcar* shares some vital points of both sexuality and masquerade.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, a Freudian theorist, has rewritten Freud concentrating his discourses on question of human subject, its place in society as sexed one and above all its relationship to language. The conceptualization of feminine sexuality is the most controversial area of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan makes the famous statement: "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship" (Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore* 12). His theory of sexuality mainly revolves round sexual differences on the basis of his unique treatment of the phallus and "structures of sexuation" which present woman as 'absolute outside'. Freud's castration complex has been transformed in Lacan, and he considers castration as a symbolic process intended to recognize the lack caused for the deprivation of one's jouissance (drive). Lacan has not considered sexual differences from the anatomical perspective, and for him the 'phallus' is a signifier, not directly equivalent to the male genital organ. It is the signifier of the lack. Masculinity and femininity are defined in each one's relationship to the phallus, the signifier. In the mirror stage the child remains under the imaginary unity with his mother. But the braking up of this imaginary unity in the symbolic stage has given rise to the shocking realization that desire cannot be satisfied. Initially the phallus functions as the imaginary object assumed to satisfy the mother's desire. But the shattering of the imaginary unity between the mother and the child leaves the phallus as an object beyond reach. The phallus thus symbolically represents the moment of split between the subject and its objects of desire and also the lack caused by the split. Both boys and girls experience symbolic castration by compromising with the partial fulfillment of their jouissance. Jouissance is identified with the drive and the real. Through Oedipus complex the boys recognize mother as a lacking other and the father as possessor of the phallus, object of mother's desire. So it is the pretence of having the phallus, the object of desire for the Other (women), which is identified with the masculinity. But the girl's case is much more complex where she ultimately chooses to become the object of desire for the Other (men).

Here unlike masculinity, femininity involves the masquerade of being the phallus. In both the cases the phallus is represented as a signifier of the desire of the Other. The following comment of Lacan regarding woman's position has made him come closer to the concept of masquerade:

“. . . it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved.” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 289-90)

Lacan was against any notion of a stable fixed identity including a stable sexual identity, and it is the unconscious which never allows the subject to realize completeness. The frustration of the original desire experienced in the oedipal period invokes the chain of significations. As complete satisfaction can never be achieved, so the subject moves on from one signifier to another.

Blanche has lost her first love in the form of her young husband, the homosexual, at an early stage when her vision of love and sex just started flowering. This frustrating experience at the initiation of her sexual life has left in her what we can identify as Lacanian 'lack'. Her subsequent sexual interactions are partly motivated by her search for that original one which was not simply on physical level but was infused with a spiritual flavour. All her sexual encounters can be arranged in the chain of signification where the central signifier is always missing, and so the end result of each experience is despair. To make the study convincing we can trace back to Blanche's first love experience with her husband as her 'mirror stage'. The breaking up of this relationship at the shocking exposure of his being homosexual dropped her at the symbolic stage as a split personality.

Lacan thinks that the human subject is always split between a conscious and an unconscious. By the former he intends to mean the conscious side of the kind that is accessible and the latter indicates a series of drives which remain inaccessible. The

subject experiences something to be missing from them and this 'something missing' is the other side of the split out of which unconscious emerges. Throughout life the subject desperately tries to replace that 'something missing' which is experienced as a lack. Lacan calls this lack desire which is always beyond reach. Even when our demands are met, desire remains unsatisfied. In this respect sexuality is not the result of a simple need. It is the human predicament to be driven by an inherent dissatisfaction and sense of insufficiency. There is always an imagination of something more which we do not have any idea about, but which we believe is there. Tennessee Williams in the Foreword page of the play *Sweet Bird of Youth* has made a very striking comment which is very relevant in this context. He is of the view that "there is something much bigger in life and death than we have become aware of (or adequately recorded) in our living and dying." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 154).

In his symbolic 'structures of sexuation' Lacan develops masculinity and femininity which is available to both men and women irrespective of biological determinants. Lacan has developed the concept of two types of jouissance namely Phallic jouissance and Other jouissance. Masculine and feminine structures depend on the type of jouissance one is able to attain though the jouissance is never enough. Phallic jouissance is accompanied with a sense of dissatisfaction even after we possess our object of desire and it is related to masculinity. Masculine structure transferred desiring Other into an object a. It is called masculine not because only man can experience it. It is phallic because it is endowed with a sense of dissatisfaction or of failure. Lacan relates Other jouissance to feminine structure. It is Other because it cannot be defined within the symbolic order, and so not phallic. For Lacan the experience of unspeakable ecstasy is feminine or Other jouissance. Both men and women can experience phallic or Other jouissance. Lacan has not stopped his analysis of the 'structures of sexuation' here, but has gone further in finding out a crucial difference between men and women. He is of the view that women can experience both forms of jouissances whereas men can experience either phallic or the other. So

women experience a surplus jouissance. Sexual difference is so determined by one's position in relation to jouissance. Masculinity and femininity are non complementary and defined by different relationships to the Other. Lacan's striking comment that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship is also enhanced by his concept of masculine and feminine structures.

Following Lacan, sexuality is not the result of a need because even when the need is fulfilled, feeling of dissatisfaction still remains. Blanche's life is an enactment of catching hold of 'desire' or Lacan's central signifier 'phallus' which is beyond reach. This search to fulfill her 'desire', evoked by the loss of her husband, the Other, has led her towards her catastrophe. Ultimately she could not find out her place in the patriarchal society symbolizing the phallogocentric 'structure of sexuation' of Lacan. The drama which is enacted between Blanche and Stanley in his home can be aptly applicable to Lacan's symbolic 'structures of sexuation'. Masculinity in Stanley searches his desiring Other in his wife's body, dreams, poker game, which can be considered as phallic jouissance. Stanley's experience with each one fails to give him complete satisfaction. Blanche's, on the other hand, lies in getting financial support and home which Stella partially fulfills. Her flirtation with Mitch, Stanley, and the boy who came for collecting subscription for *The Evening Star*, only intensify her despair. Lacan elaborates in his discussion on Courtly Love that no one can seduce one's despair and real love can never be found through any form of sexual activity. It is always out of reach like Blanche's young husband. In her case there is something more the glimpse of which she imagines and which is quite often reflected in her inclination to poetry and in her aspiration as well: "How pretty the sky is! I ought to go there on a rocket that never comes down." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 492).

Blanche displays a life full of contradictions and ambiguities that actually gives her character a larger than life stature. On one hand she is found telling Stanley of her preference to bold, primary colors and on the other, her words to Mitch: "I can't stand a naked light bulb..." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955*

499) bears quite opposite aspect of her personality. Freudian notion of constant clash between Eros and Thanatos, the pleasure and death instincts, is aptly applicable in Blanche. She imagines achieving salvation through death and at the same time demands desperately someone to come to rescue her from her predicament. She is in the midst of earthly desires and ethereal longings inheriting the dichotomy of flesh and spirit of Williams' world.

One very controversial concept developed in Lacanian psychoanalysis is 'woman does not exist' (Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore* 7). Lacan's formulations about feminine sexuality present woman as the 'absolute outside'. But for Lacan 'woman' like 'phallus' has no positive signified. 'Woman' does not refer to any universal category of women. So the notion of women as a homogeneous group is only an appeal to an illusory identity. Lacan's concept of feminine jouissance, experience of something unspeakable, is beyond symbolic order. The existence of 'woman' is also determined at the level of symbolic structure. Lacan defined the position of 'woman' in a rather convoluted double negative: "It's not because she is not – wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is not not at all there. She is there in full. But there is something more." (Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore* 74)

Ernest Jones in his paper "The Early Development of Female Sexuality" concentrates on the types of female development. Other than heterosexual and homosexual groups, he talks about a number of intermediate groups. This paper of Ernest Jones has motivated Joan Reviere to develop his concept of masquerade in his paper "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929). Every individual has more or less an inherent biosexual tendency, and there is not necessarily only fundamental heterosexual or homosexual attributes being displayed in an individual. Sexual manifestations are the outcome of the playing out of this conflict and the differences in the degree of anxiety.

Joan Reviere has pointed out the case of a new type of woman, that is, 'intellectual woman', who aspires to intellectual pursuits or masculinity sharing the traditionally consigned field of man. This

'intellectual woman' quite naturally raises fear and anxiety in men who tends to believe intellectual pursuit as their enclosed field. Reviere thinks, "Women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (Reviere 35). She further writes that womanliness "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (Reviere 38).

Reviere traced the idea of masquerade at work in female oedipal complex and hence it contributed in the development of female sexuality. The girl experiences the rivalry with both the mother and the father. Reviere has analyzed the case of an 'intellectual woman' and revealed that after her successful intellectual exhibition she preferred to enjoy the favour of male partners especially the 'father figures'. She has the conscious feeling of rivalry and superiority over the male partners, and does not like to be judged by men. Moreover she inwardly wished men to recognize masculinity in her. But publicly she exhibits her condition of womanhood. According to Reviere this compulsion is due to evoke friendly feelings for her in man and to protect her by masquerading as innocence.

For Reviere there is no essential distinction between genuine womanliness and womanliness as masquerade. In this respect womanliness put on as mask is applicable to women in general other than only to 'intellectual women'. Reviere has raised a dilemma by considering the appearance and essence of womanliness as the same. But the term 'mask' implies something hidden, and this something hidden is always assumed to be the genuine and authentic one. It is the dilemma of appearance and essence of womanliness that Lacan takes into his consideration. Lacan thinks that masquerade reveals "the feminine sexual attitude' par excellence, that is to say, it is the mask or veil that is constitutive of the feminine libidinal structure" (Heath 52). It is the constructed nature of woman's identity that masquerade put forwards and not the essential one. "The masquerade says that the woman exists at the same time that, as masquerade, it says she does not" (Heath 54).

Blanche resembles the type of 'intellectual woman' of Reviere. Stanley, quite often described as an "ape", a "pig", a "goat", is also "the gaudy seed-bearer", father of Stella's "son". Blanche always intends to present her superiority over this father figure by displaying her superior taste and culture. The presence of Blanche in his family has become a threat for Stanley. He enjoys absolute power over his wife Stella who has surrendered herself to the Man in her husband. In the play the first address of Stanley to Stella is "Hey, there! Stella, Baby!" (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 470) and he throws the package that carries meat at her. The term baby indicates Stella's inferiority to Stanley and 'meat' indicates his beastly nature and their relationship that is settled upon sex or flash. In this family structure Blanche with her spirit is a misfit. The man in Stanley cannot bear Blanche's superiority over him as 'a cultivated woman', 'a woman of intelligence and breeding' possessing 'beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart' (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 551). Again inherent hatred for Stanley, the father figure, is always there in Blanche, but apparently she prefers to present herself as a very delicate and vulnerable woman. Blanche's compulsion is also for securing protection for her. She confesses a helpless woman's predicament to Stella:

"I've run for protection, Stella, from under one leaky roof to another...because it was storm...and I was-caught in the centre....People don't see you-men don't-don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 515).

She demands appreciation for her beauty from the men, and for this purpose she lies about her age. Stella is her younger sister but even after that she tells Mitch, a friend of Stanley:

"Stella is my precious little sister. I call her little in spite of the fact she's somewhat older than I. Just slightly. Less than a year." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 499).

And then, in order to hide her actual age, which may reflect in her face, she immediately requests Mitch to put over the light bulb the little colored paper lantern which she bought at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. In the play, we see, for the time being, Blanche is successful in convincing Mitch to fall in love with her constructed identity. She confesses Stella "I want to deceive him (Mitch) enough to make him – want me. . ." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 517) and for this she is so much sensitive about her age and looks.

Freud in his psychoanalytic explanation of mourning and melancholia reveals that loss prompts the ego to incorporate attributes of the lost loved one. Blanche is defined from this perspective as homosexual inheriting the attributes of her young husband. So the young boys always remain her center of attractions. The incident with the student of her school and later with the news paper boy in Stella's house substantiates the masculinity in Blanche. In her responses towards the matured one like Stanley or Mitch, she always puts on the masque of womanliness if we can call it following Reviere. She wants to project herself as object of desire for the Other (men) and so turning herself into being the phallus (Lacan). Reviere considers both the appearance and essence of womanliness as the same, but Blanche does not fit here completely. Blanche's words to Mitch: "I can't stand a naked light bulb any more..." clearly defines what Blanche is. She doesn't want to face the truth, her true identity, any more. She is so more suited to Lacan's notion of masquerade that reveals only the constructed nature of the essential identity of women. "I've got to keep hold of myself!" (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 473). This 'myself' is different from what she appears to be. The "colored paper lantern" symbolizes Blanche in the true sense. She says to Stella, "Have got to be seductive – put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and glow –" (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 515).

In comparison to Blanche, Stella is satisfied in her world and her demand is limited as she thinks "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark - that sort of make everything

else seem – unimportant." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 509). Whereas for Blanche it is "Such things as art – as poetry and music – such kinds of new light... some tenderer feelings ...." (Williams, *Plays 1937-1955* 510) that matters much. Stella is fitted in preordained social roles of woman, which are daughter, wife, mother, where woman comes to be positioned within the restrictions of an inherited patriarchal circuit. She is a wife to Stanley and is going to be a mother of his child. She has surrendered herself to her male counterpart and is secured. But unfortunately Blanche doesn't belong to any one of the roles and, may be for this, her life has become a suspect for the society which has ultimately removed her to a place where a complete- normal- human being is not expected. So Stanley by exercising his physical power over the delicate Blanche has created wound in her body and spirit and has left her incomplete- abnormal, not deserving to be in his social structure defined by patriarchal hegemony.

In Lacanian perspective of sexuality the different character traits of Blanche, generally deserve condemnation only, at least demands some more positive readings. She possesses both masculine and feminine attributes in herself which intensifies her being more as an outsider in Stanley's family environment which is mostly filled up by 'heterogeneous types'. In the play Blanche herself has used the term 'heterogeneous' to get confirmation from Stella about the identity of the players of poker game. However, Blanche is come out as a woman whose femininity may not ultimately secure a place for her in the patriarchal society resembling 'phallogocentric structure', but she has left trace of character, larger than life. Here again we can aptly put Lacan: "She is no not at all there. She is there, but there is something more." (Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore* 74)

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