

Marginalized Voices in The Glass Menagerie

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ABSTRACT

The Glass Menagerie is a play of memory, frustration and disillusionment. Here we can find different kind of human experiences which are subjective in nature. It is one of the best theatrical successes of Tennessee Williams. Here we can find the characters are not able to face reality with a full courage. These characters are a glimpse of modern characters in which we can easily find the attitude of escapism. The result lies in the fact that the world of illusion dominates over the world of reality. The result is catastrophic but it cannot be perceived initially by the human consciousness. The writer has presented a very fine balance between illusion and reality, consciousness and sub consciousness which is very praiseworthy. The narrator recollects the disintegrating story of his family and the world of illusion seems very comfortable to him. He can imagine that he is happy but this imagination has nothing to do with the reality. The central character Laura has been portrayed as sensitive and gentle but unfortunately she has limited herself and it seems that she wants to get rid of her own shadow. She is beautiful but mute and passive.

Keywords:- *Courage, Experience, Nature, Illusion, Passive.*

The Glass Menagerie is a play which is often known as a memory play. There are different kinds of character who seems very real. Throughout the play we can find frustration and disillusionment which has been narrated through a boy who recollects the story of his own family. Characters like Amanda Winfield, the mother and the daughter Laura are marginalized and their voices are often unheard in the society. Laura is a girl who is physically unfit and she is totally withdrawn from the outer world as she finds herself unfit for the society. Tom plays the role of a son who aspires to be a poet but is also hates his life. His routine is the chief concern of his disillusionment. He works in a shoe factory and he finds himself entrapped into the conventional rule of the society. Jim is the other character who is a gentleman and he has a vision to succeed in life. The narrator is also a poet and he says-

“Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.”¹

In the background we can see the effects of The Great Depression which hints at the social status of the characters. Thus the characters are embedded into an objective situation. The writer has not tried to portray the social atmosphere of the time but he has selected some characters who have their own experiences of the time. Laura is the central character of the play who is very sensitive in nature. She is unable to cope with the external world and this is one of the reasons that she lacks self confidence. She keeps herself busy in her own cave that is to say into the world of the glass menagerie. Benjamin Nelson says that the girl is-

“the least successful portrait in this play because the girl in glass is a shadow girl.”²

She is a kind of character who never asserts her individuality. Tennessee Williams is a kind of writer who wants that the audience should find out the real subjective world of Laura. Her spiritual delicacy is in extreme form. She is beautiful and her beauty needs no demonstration that is why she is mute and passive. Only a poetic heart or an artistic mind can perceive her beauty because her beauty is serene. Her perfection is unnoticed in the outer world because she has limited herself to an inner beauty of the glass menagerie. She is no doubt suffering from an inferiority complex but it flames from her physical disability caused by an age old illness. It is very noteworthy to find that the author objectifies the subjective and the vice versa. The mother is concerned about her daughter and her concern is genuine. The play becomes very interesting when we find that Tom is persuaded by Amanda to bring home some fine fellow from the factory. The mother is in search of a fine suitor for her daughter who is helpless. It is also a coincidence that the gentleman who visits the home of Laura is the same fellow who once studied in her class and she had been longing about this boy without making him know about this. The first reaction of the girl is very unusual as she is not willing to attend the dinner. She is scared as the meeting with Jim gives her a deeper

psychological impact. The behavior of the man is very soothing as he tries to win her and says that limp is not a major disability. He says her that she should not fear from her disability. Thus it becomes clear that he wants to gain her self confidence so that she can feel better in his presence. She starts talking to him but her talk is limited to her glass collection which is fragile like herself. We can find that she gains some confidence while talking to him. As the story moves forward we find that the boy asks her to dance with him and the dance ends breaking the glass unicorn. The girl understands that the world of glass has no strength to bear the reality and it can be broken easily. She also understands that it her free will to live by her choices. According to Wikipedia-

“Freewill is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action. It is closely linked to the concepts of responsibility, praise, guilt, sin, and other judgments which apply only to actions that are freely chosen. It is also connected with the concepts of advice, persuasion, deliberation, and prohibition. Traditionally, only actions that are freely willed are seen as deserving credit or blame. There are numerous different concerns about threats to the possibility of free will, varying by how exactly it is conceived, which is a matter of some debate.

Some conceive freewill to be the capacity for an agent to make choices in which the outcome has not been determined by past events. Determinism suggests that only one course of events is possible, which is inconsistent with the existence of such free will. This problem has been identified in ancient Greek philosophy, and remains a major focus of philosophical debate. This view that conceives free will to be incompatible with determinism is called incompatibles and encompasses both metaphysical libertarianism and the claim that determinism is false and thus free will is at least possible and hard determinism, the claim that determinism is true and thus free will is not possible. It also encompasses hard incompatibles, which holds not only determinism but also its negation to be incompatible with free will, and thus free will to be impossible whatever the case may be regarding determinism”³

This is a sign of happiness which the girl is ready to accept now but it is also a fact that this happiness is not permanent but short lived. Breaking of the glass unicorn signifies that she is going to live a life of despair. In Mrs Dalloway the author Virginia Woolf has said that:

“ Through all ages—when the pavement was grass , when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman—for she wore a skirt—with her right hand exposed, her left clutching at her side, stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails, and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been dead these centuries, had walked, she crooned , with her in May; but in the course of ages, long as summer days, and flaming, she remembered, with nothing but red asters, he had gone; death’s enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills, and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice, she implored the Gods to lay by her side a bunch of purple-heather, there on her high burial place which the last rays of the last sun caressed; for then the pageant of the universe would be over.”⁴

In a very similar way we find that Jim kisses her and she is surprised to feel the warmth of that kiss. She is unable to withstand the heat of the love and it acts as a momentary radiance to her. Jim understands his mistake that he should not play with the sentiments of the girl. He admits that he is already engaged to another girl. Laura again retreats into her glass world as she has alternative now. It is very interesting to note that John Winthrop a very famous Puritan leader of New England has compared the wedding between man and woman to the relationship between the holy institution like church and the community. To him the wedlock between the husband and the wife seems like a single corporate body. In this kind of relationship the husband leads his wife and the wife has a passive role to play here. It becomes clearer through these lines mentioned below:

“The Woman’s own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honour and her freedom.... Even so brethren, it will be between you and your magistrates”⁵.

Winthrop has compared the willing subjection of a woman in her marriage to the willing subjection of an individual to the magistrates or the governing authority. Amanda is the mother whose marriage is a failure. She has been abandoned by her husband and she is willing to get her daughter married. Her life is pathetic yet she is strong because she has not given up. It is her endurance and valor which makes her the most crucial character in the play. She is aware of the modern world that life is other name of struggle. Her own life is a waste yet she is full of hope

that her children will live a better life. The main reason of her trouble is that she cannot forget her past. It seems that her soul is entrapped between past and present. She is unable to accept the reality that the romantic past is no more. The days of struggle have arrived yet she swings back to the past life. It is very symbolic in nature. Coming back to the art of symbolism we will find that in literature it is the psychological idealism. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who is a German poet remarks about symbolism that the art of symbolism-

“transforms the experience into an idea and an idea into an image, so that the idea expressed through the image remains always active and unattainable and, even though expressed in all languages, remains inexpressible”⁶.

The concept of symbolism as expressed by Goethe focuses on the possibilities of numerous implications of the deciphered image. These implications are like a lost identity for Sigmund Freud. He correlates this lost identity with symbolism as something ‘underneath the sea of life in which we live enisled’ reflecting our ‘oceanic consciousness.’¹¹ According to Freud symbolism is a physical entity which is further divided into abstract concepts. These concepts are deciphered and understood differently by different people. It also depends on the circumstances, place, surrounding and atmosphere and that is the reason that a single image can have numerous meaning. Tom symbolically represents a frustrated youth who is unable to move in the storm. When the plan of Amanda for Laura is crushed she realizes that now there was hardly any scope for her daughter. She has not accepted the defeat yet and she delivers a very beautiful speech to her daughter who in turn smiles at her mother. In such smiles one can witness the voices of the marginalized.

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