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THE OTHERNESS OF LAURA IN THE GLASS MENAGERIE

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Abstract

Women have always been associated with the idea of otherness in an inseparable way. Their identity is formed out of various levels of othering or alterity. Such an identity leaves less scope for admiration of their self. In fact, their self is formed as an association with the other in such a way that there is hardly any chance for self-love. Tennessee Williams in his play “The Glass Menagerie” has sketched out the character of Laura Wingfield as a crippled woman. Laura is shown to be constantly taught by her mother Amanda about the ways to charm men and the need for becoming a career woman. Laura tries to cope up with her mother’s aspirations but fails. This research paper aims to highlight the levels of othering that Laura has to go through and its effect on her identity formation.

Keywords: Otherness, Disabled, Self, The Glass Menagerie

Other is constituted through its differences with the Self. The Self propagates a constant feeling of negation towards the Other. This negation, based on social, physical and economical levels, creates a sense of Otherness. The Cambridge Dictionary defines otherness as “being or feeling different in appearance or character from what is familiar, expected, or generally accepted.” The differences are such that it leaves the other with an identity that has been imposed on it. It has no other option than to accept this identity. Such is the identity formation of women. The patriarchal society makes men to be the self and women as the other. The self of the women are formed of the continuous teachings of their differences with men.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her prime work, “The Second Sex” has connected the condition of otherness to Woman. For Beauvoir, women are considered as eternal ‘alterity’. She has traced this otherness from the times of creation of human beings. Since Eve was created after Adam, women have acquired this second position and are eternally bound to it. The fact that they are born from the part of Adam, it is implemented that they are born in the world of men and should thus adhere to the rules set by him. Beauvoir states that a woman is defined and differentiated to man and not he with references to her; “she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other”(Beauvoir 6).

The Glass Menagerie, though being narrated by Tom Wingfield, is not only his story but is also a story of his sister, Laura Wingfield, who becomes crippled due to a childhood disease, pleurosis. This physical deformity makes her to be at the receiving end of people's sympathy and sets to mark the beginning of change in her demeanor. She is seen avoiding her classes and has a set of personalized glass animals which is referred as The Glass Menagerie. The prime requirement of getting married or a visit from her gentlemen callers is the major source of concern of her mother, Amanda Wingfield. This concern forces her to order Tom to bring in any of his colleagues as Gentleman Caller. The planned visit occurs and leaves everyone with the knowledge of their realities.

The play seems to work at various levels to form an 'othered' image of Laura. If the structure of the play is taken into consideration, it is seen that the play is the memory of Tom. The women of the play- Amanda and Laura have been denied to tell the tale of their lives. The 'Glass Menagerie' belongs to Laura but still her voice is kept as just a part of the memory. Tom considers the Gentleman caller to be the most realistic character as he becomes the "emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart". (Williams 11)

The play is the quest of a mother who wants a better future for her children especially her daughter. But the process has an adverse effect on her daughter, Laura. She gets to accept the image that her mother paints before her. Being a woman, she has to accept the fact that marriage is the best option for her. For marriage, she needs to use her charms and have several gentlemen callers. Amanda often recites her stories of her gentlemen callers. She was a popular woman in Blue Mountains and had seventeen gentlemen callers. Most of them were planters of Mississippi. She is amazed and shocked that Laura has no gentleman caller to visit her.

AMANDA: What? No one – not one? You must be joking!

Not one gentleman caller? It can't be true! There must be a flood, there must be have been a tornado!

LAURA: It isn't a flood, it's not a tornado, Mother. I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain...

Mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid. (Williams 15)

This remembrance of the past indicates towards one of the most important aspects of the society, that is, marriage. Amanda knows the intricacies of such a society and is worried for her daughter. The prospects that she lays before Laura is to either become a business woman or charm gentlemen callers. Laura finds herself incapable of both the options. She discontinues her shorthand and typewriting classes at Rubicam's Business School because of her nervous streak. When Amanda gets to know this, she is shocked. She is afraid that Laura will not be able to cope up with the situation in future. Her notion about spinsters is that which has been reflected by the society.

AMANDA: What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried woman who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful conditions in the South- barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! – stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room – encouraged by one in-law to visit another – little birdlike women without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life! (Williams 20)

The pressure of having gentlemen callers or a career in life is such that Laura succumbs to it. Her nervousness is not only because of being disabled but it is also against the restricted commoditized life. She could not comply with something as mechanical as short-hand or typing. She loves walking and being with

herself. She has special fascination for animals. The ‘menagerie’ of glass animals that she makes is the symbol of her creativity and her brittleness. Her vulnerabilities have made her to resort to the glass animals and towards loneliness. Her shy disposition is the result of her inability to keep a control on her emotions. Her mother paints for her a picture of a woman who has full of charm. Though Laura successfully rejects her typing classes but she gives in towards the prospect of marriage. On her mother’s persuasion, she dresses up to impress the gentleman caller but her anxiety and nervousness leaves her broken and shattered. As a woman, her mother has imposed on her the ‘girlie-frock’ image of her on Laura. She neglects the anxieties of her daughter and advises her to use her charm.

Laura suffers on the grounds of being disabled as well. Her brittleness in her physical form reflects in her nervousness and her glass animals especially that of unicorn. She has special attachment towards the figure of unicorn. Its uniqueness is in its single horn that makes it different from other horses. She associates this difference with herself. She is happy that other horses have accepted the unicorn and there is presumed calmness in them. But her real desire is revealed when Jim O’ Connor, the gentleman caller, accidentally breaks the unicorn.

JIM: Still I’m awfully sorry that I was the cause.

LAURA [smiling]: I’ll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less – freakish! (Williams 80)

Her real disposition is her inferiority complex generated by her disability. She has internalized her disability and wants an acceptance from her mother. Her mother’s negation towards her being crippled and her strive to equate her with normal women, has an adverse effect on her.

LAURA [in a tone of frightened apology]: Nonsense! Laura, I’ve told you never, never to use that word. Why, you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect – hardly noticeable, even! (Williams 22)

Laura realizes that she has to live with her disability and her only recluse is her glass animals. She frames her identity on the lack of being able to walk properly. She has accepted this lack. For her the image of her ‘Self’ is that of an undesired crippled woman. There is no hint of self-love in her disposition and she does not even think of it. She has an ‘Othered’ image of one who cannot have a business career or is suitable for dressing up and have numerous gentlemen callers for her. Laura is the Other and is forced to remain associated with it.

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