



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE HOMOSEXUAL SELF IN THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

APURBA PAUL

Research Scholar, Patna University

DR ARCHANA JAISWAL

Associate Professor, Magadh Mahila College, Patna University

(Supervisor)

Abstract:

Homosexuality continues to be looked down in this heteronormative society. Our society considers heterosexuality to be the normative and considers homosexuality as a disease. Homosexuals are either ill-treated or are wrongly judged. They are made to believe in the idea of heterosexuality and are forced into heterosexual relations at times. This leads to denial of one's true self and the condition of homophobia where a person is afraid to accept oneself and come out of the closet. It is high time that there should be a justified representation of the homosexuals both by the society and by the person himself/herself. Homosexuals, too have a self which should not be othered and heterosexuality should not be forced upon them.

This paper aims to find out the representation of homosexuality in the plays of Tennessee Williams and to find out whether they accept themselves or not.

Keywords: *Homosexuality, heteronormativity, self, self-love*

Homosexuality, as Sigmund Freud, states in his essay *The Sexual Aberrations*, is the deviation from the normal sexual object. This deviation is termed as inversion. Freud has conceptualized this phenomenon of inversion for people who show deviation in their sexual object and are also known as inverts. Sexual object is the person from whom the attraction or the sexual drive emanates from. Normal sexual object is always a person of other sex. So, inverts show sexual inclination towards people of same sex. Invert or better known as Homosexual is "a person who is emotionally, physically and sexually attracted to members of the same sex." (Shahani 77). The attraction or sexual drive is connected with emotions and feelings and has nothing to do with the sex of the person. But the society has set a normative that this sexual drive can only emanated

from a person of other sex. This is termed as heterosexuality and because it is the normative, the society is concerned with the heteronormativity.

Literature has often presented the privileged view even in the context of sexuality. The narrative that is popularized is that of a heterosexual person and it considers homosexuality as something that has to be avoided at its best. The problem related to the homosexual reference is that of the fear of its acceptance by the person. Our society works on the preferred binaries in terms of sexuality as well. The accepted and the normative is that of a heterosexual person who is privileged. The unaccepted and the discriminated is that of a homosexual person who is marginalized.

A homosexual goes through the fear of accepting his/her sexuality and this fear is known as homophobia. Homophobia also refers to the lack of dignity and respect for homosexuals both by heterosexuals and themselves.

According to this belief, only those who are heterosexuals can be classified as normal and any other orientation or sexual preference is considered to be a deviation or a disease. This concept leads to homophobia which means fear for homosexuality that usually translates to a disgust or non-acceptance of the homosexuals. It is a common trait that can be reflected in a variety of behavior pattern ranging from jokes to revulsion, from course correction to even killing. Homophobia does not only affect the heterosexuals but also the homosexual people that may lead to self- doubt, self- denial, self- pity and non-acceptance of the self. (Richa 116)

Thus, the 'self' that is formed is othered to an extent that there is rejection of their true identity. This continuous rejection often leads to agitation and an inferiority complex in them. There is a lack of understanding the truth about their sexuality. This leads to either hiding away of their emotions or projecting it in a different way. They present a non-acceptance of reality and at times forcibly address their heterosexuality when pressurized.

The society never accepts a homosexual person. It is seen as a disease or as a disability which needs cure. When they cannot cure it, they start with punishing people. There are incidents of castrations or forced marriage or other levels of torture that they have to go through. They cannot bear with the shame or disgust that they start associating their sexuality with. Their 'self' is completely diminished and they can hardly have a positive approach towards it.

At times, they resort to alcohol or drugs which work as their defense mechanism. This defense mechanism is their way of showing their resistance towards the society. They put forward a strong resistance to portray their feelings and emotions. Their identity is all about resistance at that time. They either overtly present themselves as heterosexuals, they break away all their inhibitions and accept themselves or in worst case succumb to the pressure. Their resistance and fight is all about gaining their affirmation towards their 'self' and rise above the aspect of self-pity and self- denial.

Heteronormativity is the aspect of accepting the heterosexual to be the norm. The term was coined by Michael Warner in his essay *Fear of Queer Planet* published in 1991. Heteronormativity "stigmatizes and makes out any sign of deviation from the alignment of a sin or pathological abnormality, thereby generating a deep – seated phobia for those who challenge the hypothesis." (Bakshi, Dasgupta 181).

The society has made heterosexuality as compulsory. It is not the individual but the cultural and social constructs which decide the heterosexuality for everyone. It is also a symbol to exercise their power on women in this patriarchal society.

Tennessee Williams has been an iconoclast in breaking the image of the Cinderella myth in the American society. He has addressed that real world is different from the fairy tale. He has tried to break the images and the gender roles of the society through his plays. But his expertise in dealing with homosexuality is appreciable. Being in an homosexual himself, he has tried to sketch the problems faced by such an individual. It is the society which instills the homophobic intentions in people's minds and it gets authenticated by literature. The 'self' of such a person is always othered. In his plays, he has created characters who are fight to identify their real selves. This paper will try to consider the aspect of homosexuality in the plays *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The heterosexual perspective is extremely inherent in the society. It has instilled the importance of a person being heterosexual. This leads a homosexual person to unaccept his/her sexuality at any cost. The character of Brick Politt in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* faces this inhibition to accept his sexuality. Though it is not outwardly

proved, but Brick shows his indecisiveness and his unacceptance of his reality. His crippledness and his alcoholism are interconnected with his homosexual tendencies. The pretence of being a heterosexual is connected to his homophobia. He internally suffers a lot but pretends to be absolutely cool about it.

The play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* reflects on the theme of homosexuality through its very setting. The play is set in a plantation which had belonged to two friends Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. Big Daddy had inherited the estate from them.

What is unusual about Big Daddy's plantation, however, is the open and unabashed centrality of the homosexual couple who originally built the plantation. As the stage directions introducing the play make clear, homosexuality is preeminent because the entire play is set in the bedroom of the homosexual couple from whom Big Daddy inherited the plantation, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. (Bibler384).

The initiation of homosexuality in the text *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is included in the beginning of the play through the story of the original owners of the house. The plantation was a product of the hard work of two friends who shared homosexual love between them. The bedroom given to Brick and Margaret is the one that was owned by Jack Straw and Peter Ochello.

Perhaps the style of the room is not what you would expect in the home of the Delta's biggest cotton-planter. It is Victorian with a touch of the Far East. It hasn't changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon. (Williams xv)

The bedroom of Brick and Maggie had earlier been inherited by the owners who had happily accepted their relation. Brick is not comfortable in accepting the truth of his sexuality. The connection with the actual homosexual owners of the estate and the couple Brick and Margaret is uncanny. The question of being the true heir of the plantation lies in this sexual inclination. But the father does not acknowledge this inclination that he refers to Jack and Peter and their relation in derogatory terms. While asking Brick about his relation with Skipper, he uses the similar reference and ridicules it.

BRICK: You think Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men?

BIG DADDY: Now that's—

BRICK: Straw? Ochello? A couple of—

BIG DADDY: Now just—

BRICK: —fucking sissies? Queers? Is that what you—

BIG DADDY: Shhh.

BRICK: —think?

[*He loses his balance and pitches to his knees without noticing the pain. He grabs the bed and drags himself up.*] (Williams 63)

Brick is reluctant to accept this reality. He complains about “mendacity” but he himself likes to incline on the lie that his friendship with Skipper was pure.

The context of homosexuality is described through the debate that goes on between the characters. The accusations levied on Brick amplify and prove the existence of the matter of homosexuality in the text. Brick is usually seen to defend himself from the accusation from the very beginning. Brick can never adjust with the reality that it was on Maggie's insistence that Skipper died. Maggie confesses that she was always suspicious of the truth of their relation. The relation that Brick and Skipper shared was not simply friendship. She recollects the time when Gladys and she went with them on double date. It always seemed to her that both of them were simply tagging along with Brick and Skipper. Their existence was simply to hide away the real feelings that Brick and Skipper shared. They needed a disguise of heterosexual love to pursue their desires. She asserts that they should have accepted their relation out in the open and not name it as plain friendship.

BRICK: One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true! – I had friendship with Skipper. – You are naming it dirty!

MARGARET: I'm not naming it dirty! I am naming it clean.

BRICK: Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!

MARGARET: Then you haven't been listenin', not understood what I'm saying! I'm naming it so damn clean that it killed poor Skipper! – You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes! – and death was the only icebox where you could keep it ... (Williams 27)

So the inability to accept the truth justifies the homophobic aspect of their reality. Both Skipper and Brick go through this homophobia. Brick even avoids the usage of the term and terms it as a 'deep friendship'.

The conflating and substituting of these negative social identifiers shows how "alcoholic" could be a code word for "homosexual." Displacing homosexuality with a label of alcoholism enabled 1950s society to covertly talk about and judge same-sex desire by associating it with other undesirable social identifiers, whether alcoholic, disabled, or loquacious. 1950s American society and politicians considered homosexuals to be both "security threats" and "perverts." By historically associating the homosexual or "pervert" with the alcoholic, Johnson shows how society in the 1950s denigrated same-sex desire, thus, also commenting on heterosexual masculinity. The crutch comes to signify impotent masculinity in Brick in that when he loses his crutch, Brick is made vulnerable to these other negative social identifiers of that time period: cripple, alcoholic, and the unmentionable, homosexual. (Pope 20)

There is an inter-relation of Brick's disability and his homosexuality which are metaphorically signified through the use of the crutch. The crutch works as the help that he requires to stabilize his physical body and his sexuality. He uses the crutch to showcase his masculinity and to hide his sexuality.

The option that the society leaves for homosexual people is that of succumbing to the shame generated by its realization. The realization of not belonging to the privileged identity of heterosexuality makes people try different options. They cannot come out of the closet so easily. They either forcibly accept heterosexuality or try drugs and alcohol or in worst case attempt suicide. Williams has openly addressed to this problem prevalent in the society at that time. Like Skipper, Blanche DuBois's husband in *A Streetcar Named Desire* commits suicide to evade the reality. Blanche's husband Allan Grey could not tolerate the truth being revealed to Blanche about his sexuality. Blanche had noticed his nervousness and his uncommon behavior but had never expected that he would be a homosexual.

BLANCHE: He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking – still – that thing was there ... He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! [...] Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn't empty, but had two people in it ... (Williams 87- 88)

Blanche describes the whole incident to Mitch. She narrates that after the revelation, Allan could not face Blanche. The feeling of disgust and shame overpowered him and he ran away from her and shot himself. Blanche runs to see the terrible sight of her dead husband who had fired himself with a revolver. This brings an end to the 'self' of the homosexual which succumbs to the pressure of the society to fit into heteronormative structures.

To conclude, it can be said that the society works on supporting the privileged from the very beginning. Tennessee Williams has tried to address the problems that middle class and working class people have been facing. He has based his plays to assert his own homosexuality and the fear of unacceptance that he had faced himself. The society strives to present a masculine perspective where people desire to be homosocial but are afraid to be homosexual. Be it Brick, Skipper or Allan, the problem lies to affirm their desires. The American society supports the patriarchal notion of masculinity and

much of the most useful recent writing about patriarchal structures suggests that 'obligatory heterosexuality' is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or that homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage (Sedgwick 3).

There hardly remains any scope for self affirmation for a homosexual person. They are othered and are burdened with the fulfillment of the sexual duties. They cannot come out of the closet and face heir relationship.

The idea is that of resistance. The self has to emerge in a certain way that the person is never demeaned and is not in self-doubt. The person should feel through the acceptance of his or her sexuality in a broader way. The term 'queer' is popularized and it represents the male and female sexuality completely. It champions the cause for everyone under the community. The fight and the resistance is to have a positive approach towards their self and have no other inferiority complex in them. This inferiority complex only leads to the hiding away of real feelings.

The acceptance of homosexuality is out in open in the United States of America since 2000s. U.S. Supreme Court has given the verdict in 2015 where it has legalized the same-sex marriage. This kind of decision gives full acceptance in the political context but to inherent it in cultural and social contexts is difficult. The acceptance should come from within. The way the homosexuals have resisted the social and sexual norms, they deserve to have an extremely positive attitude towards themselves and being narcissists can always be positive for them.

Works Cited:

- Bakshi, Kaustav, and Rohit K. Dasgupta. *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis*. 2019.
- Bibler, Michael P. "'A Tenderness which was Uncommon": Homosexuality, Narrative, and the Southern Plantation in Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Summer 2002, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 381- 400. The Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26476630> Accessed on 1 December 2021
- Cañadas, Ivan. "The Naming of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello in Tennessee. Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." *English Language Notes*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2005, pp. 57-62.
- Crandell, George. "'Echo Spring": Reflecting the Gaze of Narcissus in Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." *Modern Drama*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1999, pp. 427-441.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. 1991.
- Holder, Rebecca. "Making the Lie True: Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Truth as Performance." *The Southern Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2016, pp. 77-93.
- Nayar. *Contemporary Literary And Cultural Theory: From Structuralism To Ecocriticism*. Pearson Education India, 2010.
- Rich, Adrienne C. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 11-48.
- Richa . *Claustrophobia in Mahesh Dattani's Night Queen*. The Criterion. Vol.12. Issue-II. April 2021
- Shahani, Parmesh. *Queeristan: LGBT Inclusion at the Indian Workplace*. 2020.
- Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New Delhi. Fingerprint! Classics. 2018.
- . *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. London. Penguin Books. 2009.