

**PATRIARCHY AND RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE DEEP SOUTH: RE-READING
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF***

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was written during a period of immense prosperity as well as socio-political upheaval in 1950s North America. The feminist as well as the Civil Rights movements were gaining rapid ground in many states in the USA. However, the Southern states of America seem to have been left in a time warp. This paper will attempt a racially sensitive and feminist re-reading of Tennessee Williams' popular play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in order to gauge the extent to which the Southern women in the play are victims of patriarchy and also to reveal the racial prejudice casually and comfortably implicit in the narrative.

Keywords: patriarchy, feminist, racial prejudice, Southern America,

Post- World War II America

Tennessee Williams' '*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*' was written in the 1950s America of economic boom, eager materialism and social conservatism. The post Depression era's unprecedented economic growth and easy availability of goods led to the beginnings of a thoughtless consumerist bourgeois mentality. The McCarthy era was also a period of middle class morality and anti-communist fervour. Every 'American' was busy in the pursuit of his unashamedly capitalist 'American Dream'. In the arena of international politics, the fall of Empire was reiterated by several humiliations meted out to erstwhile powerful colonizers – the Suez Canal imbroglio where England and France were seen to have lost face, America's involvement in the Korean war, the Western axis against the Communist nations led by the USA – the result of which was the positioning of the US in the forefront of international economic and socio-political affairs, in which position it continues to this day. So the mid 20th century saw the beginnings of the rise of an 'Empire' of another kind, a benign though insidious one that ruled through coercion and international finance.

All this was true of 1950s 'white northern America'. What, then, was happening in southern America?

The Deep South

The Deep South occupied its own isolated space within the American nation and imagination. Whether it still occupies this position even in present day United States or is fully integrated is a matter open to debate. In a study conducted by Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen from the University of Rochester, it was revealed that although slavery was abolished 150 years ago, its political legacy is alive and well. These researchers who performed a new county-by-county analysis of census data and opinion polls of more than 39,000 southern whites found that without slavery, the South today might look fairly similar politically to the North. ‘Although slavery was banned, the economic incentives to exploit former slaves persisted well into the 20th century. “Before mechanization, cotton was not really economically viable without massive amounts of cheap labor,” explains Sen. After the Civil War, southern landowners resorted to racial violence and Jim Crow laws to coerce black field hands, depress wages, and tie the tenant farmer to plantations.’ (Aiken 1998) In the 1950s, blacks, who made up a sizable population of the Southern states, lived and worked in deplorable conditions. Most black families lived and worked on cotton, sugarcane and tobacco plantations. All the plantations were owned by white Americans. And they used their power ruthlessly to keep the blacks from participating in politics or wielding voting rights. The Great Migration from the poor and racist rural South to the northern industrial belt, which began in the 1940s continued into the 50s and 60s (though a reverse migration began in the 1970s). In the early 1960s, Mississippi was the poorest state in the nation. An astounding majority of all non-white families lived below the national poverty line. This was the socio-political background in which the troubled characters in Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* try to work out their issues of inheritance, homosexuality, infidelity, alcoholism, marital disharmony, ‘mendacity’ and attitudes to illness and death.

A recollection of colonial history will serve to remind us that the slave trade to the colonies of the Americas and the Caribbean through the ‘middle passage’ was originally accomplished due to the necessity for cheap labour to work in large plantations owned by white English colonizers. Another important factor to keep in mind is that since early in the 19th century the South’s proportion of foreign born has been lower than any other region of the country. And because significant immigration to the United States from countries outside Britain did not occur until the 1840s, the overwhelming majority of southern whites are of British descent. So the two long-term resident populations are British and African in ancestry (beside the Cajuns of southern Louisiana and several American Indian groups). In contrast, the Northern states of America were home to diverse migrant groups and so celebrated a more multi-ethnic populace.

According to his own story Big Daddy, the patriarch of the Pollitt family, left home in 1910 when he was 10 years old. He lived a hobo life till... “I hopped off a yellow dog freight car half a mile down the road, slept in a wagon of cotton outside the gin... Jack Straw and Peter Ochello took me in, hired me to manage this place, which grew into this one.”(62) Assuming he took over as overseer in 1920, Big Daddy must have had to work extremely hard in the period between 1920 to 1950 not only to maintain the plantation but to turn it into the wealthiest property in the Delta region. This era in the history of the South, as we know, was not a peaceful one. Slavery was officially abolished, but segregation was widely practiced. Any attempt by blacks to rise in protest was subdued, often violently. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror – a report by the Equal Justice Initiative* speaks about how EJI researchers documented 3,959 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina,

Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia between 1877 and 1950 – at least 700 more lynchings of black people in these states than previously reported in the most comprehensive work done on lynching to date. Seen in this context the presence of the bow and arrow that Mae’s daughter ‘the no-neck monster’ waves around is ominous. Why did Brick and Maggie feel the need to learn archery? This leads to the question - how was order maintained on ‘the biggest plantation this side of the Nile’? Maggie refers to Big Daddy as a ‘Mississippi redneck’. What image does the word ‘redneck’ actually call forth from the periphery? Although in the beginning the term was meant to refer to a poor white southern farm worker, it later came to mean ‘a bigoted, ultra-conservative lout’.

Silence and resistance-

The blacks, who worked and lived on the plantation, probably for generations, are not given any visual space in the play, although audiences can hear their singing voices. What did their music convey? Historically, the beginning of blues music is attributed to the American Deep South. This genre is a fusion of traditional African music and European folk music, spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads. It is melancholic and the narrative contains tales of suffering at the hands of whites or the police or some deep personal woe. It is also believed to have its origins among the African Igbo tribe when they were enslaved in the American plantations as they had a melancholy outlook and this was reflected in their music. So the pain and repression of a class of people is given voice through music.

In the New York production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Act 3 contains direct conversation between Big Daddy and the domestics, Lacey, Brightie, Sookee and Small. So was it the imperatives of place and time as well as the audience that decides on action and dialogue? In Act 3 of the New York production there is more engagement by the black servants in the domestic life of the main characters, for e.g. “Daisy and Sookee sing to comfort the children” (110) when the storm rages outside. They are also heard referring to Big Daddy as ‘Cap’n’.

Another set of black men and women work inside the main house and take care of the needs of the Pollitt family. They are seen performing peripheral acts - they answer phones, wait in the sidelines to bring in the birthday cake and cover the garden furniture when it begins to storm. Their voices are unmistakably heard talking, cackling, affectionately interrogating and singing. In contrast, the white land-owning family’s voice is strident and unhappy. It is a fact that Williams has portrayed the voices of the blacks as untroubled ones. They go about their tasks like cogs in a well-oiled machine, not questioning or commenting on the pain and turbulence they witness among the family they serve. There is no meaningful exchange between the two sets of people – the masters and the slaves.

The Grand Tour: Culture and consumerism

The Grand Tour was usually undertaken by wealthy young Englishmen between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries to study the culture of Europe. The Grand Tour had more than superficial cultural importance. In a parody of the Grand Tour, the Southern redneck, Big Daddy and his wife, Big Mama visited post-war Europe to indulge in a shopping spree, “Everywhere she went on this whirlwind tour, she bought, bought, bought.”(45) It is ironic that the European artefacts they purchased were not even unpacked, stored in the basement they went “under water last spring”. Big Daddy is thankful that he is a rich man and therefore able to bear the cost of this mindless extravagance. But the economic power to buy up hitherto valued artefacts in the post-war European “fire sale” is granted by black labour. So seen in this context, Big Daddy is a

symbolic replacement of the avaricious empire-building European of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In a funny reversal of the colonizer's bigotry towards the 'civilization' of the Orient, Big Daddy's attitude towards Europe's history, culture and architecture mirrors the colonizing Westerner's denigration of the places and people he encountered in his 'civilizing' mission. He tells his son '...those gooks over there, they gouge your eyeballs out in their grand hotels'.(45) The islands of Hawaii that Captain Cook inadvertently 'discovered' in his attempt to locate a Northwest Passage around the American continent to the Orient, held indigenous people who practiced their own esoteric religious rites. To a reader who is unfamiliar with the Americanism "gouge your eyeballs out", taken literally, would sound like a barbaric practice. The Urban Dictionary defines "gouge your eyes out" as "conveying extreme hatred". So the Pollitt's, with their buying power, were perambulating in enemy territory.

Another interesting item in their itinerary is their foray into northern Africa, Morocco, to be precise. The half-naked children begging in the streets of Spain and his encounter with an Arab woman and her daughter seems to have evoked disgust in Big Daddy. Like the 'enlightened' European colonizer, Big Daddy imposes his own prejudices on whatever he views and experiences in the 'new land'. There is an explicit criticism of the prostituting mother in Morocco and an implicit one in references to the fat clergy in Spain. So through the eyes of Big Daddy the Western audiences share a vision of Europe and North Africa at best as different and mysterious, and at worst as poor, degraded, immoral, and decaying. As Michael K. Walonen writes in his work *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in Expatriate and North African Literature*, for expatriate Western writers like Paul Bowles, Gysin and Burroughs the Maghreb was a 'frontier' space where there is a potentiality for change and an escape from the mid-century, convention-ridden America which considered these group of men 'sexually aberrant and mentally ill'. Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal were frequent travellers to the Maghreb, during this period. For these men Morocco and Tangiers was a 'wild west of the spirit' (28)

The Female Slave

'There is no actress on earth who will not testify that Williams created the best women characters in the modern theatre,' wrote Gore Vidal after Tennessee Williams' death in 1983.'(Benedict 1) The imminent death of Big Daddy foregrounds the struggle for 'inheritance'. The women in the play-Big Mama, Mae, and Maggie, are disregarded as possible heirs. During Big Daddy's illness it is Big Mama who runs the plantation, thereby proving her administrative capabilities, which Big Daddy denigrates publicly and vociferously. Big Mama laughs uproariously through every insult although she is terribly hurt. Mae, paranoid about losing to Brick and Maggie, is malicious throughout the play. Maggie bears the brunt of criticism for her husband's alcoholism, impotence and her aridity. Williams has portrayed these women as strong characters who make the best of the situations in which they find themselves.

As a writer Williams is the most accepting of his Southern upbringing and heritage. Not only does he not deny his Southern origins he practically revels in portraying the genteel, refined and anachronistic South. In that self contained world patriarchy was ingrained and female delicacy, grace and obedience were basic survival tools in every woman's arsenal. As a homosexual Williams would have empathised with the 'outsider' position of women in the rural South, their struggle to break free of their circumscribed world; and as a result of his troubled family background would have felt a deep sympathy for the abused women in his plays. Blanche

in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Serafina Della Rose in *The Rose Tattoo* and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* are three of the most memorable of Williams' female characters: all Southern belles, romantic idealists who find it difficult to come to terms with crass, modern reality. Each of these women is a fighter, Blanche, Serafina and Amanda struggle to overcome their tragic situations and emerge victorious.

In spite of being part of a traditional society with clear cut gender roles, each of Williams' female characters is strongly aware of their own sexuality. Maggie, the cat, differs in various ways from the other women in Williams' plays because of her aggressiveness, her determination to dominate her husband, her ability to face the truth unflinchingly and her unhidden greed. She also adheres to the typical Williams female mould in her beauty, her wit and her stubbornness. She is the most self aware of Williams' heroines- she is catty and mean to Gooper and Mae because she knows that they are plotting to disinherit Brick, she is aware of Big Daddy's 'lech' for her and even appreciates Big Mama's loud and crass jests. Brick's repeated rejection causes her to repress her strong sexuality and goads her into telling the lie about her pregnancy. According to Robert Jones, 'In *The Rose Tattoo*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams portrays women with little sexual ambivalence...Serafina, Myra, and Maggie are strong, loving earth mothers, who know and appreciate, and they are strong "modern" women who find salvation, even when it is only temporary, in their sexuality. Yet, like the latter heroines, they are basically stronger than the men with whom they come into contact, and they essentially direct the action of the plays.' (Jones 522)

In spite of the fact that she emerges as the true 'hero' of the play, there is a terrible fragility about Maggie. This fragility is the result of her strength, her determination to dominate Brick at tremendous cost to herself. This struggle, or war, between husband and wife reveals a master-slave relationship, which problematizes patriarchal attitudes to issues of inheritance. Hegel's elaborations on the master-slave relationship are seen working itself out in the Brick – Maggie relationship. Although Brick is the ostensible hero – young, white, wealthy and virile, Maggie his binary opposite (female, beautiful and heterosexual,) emerges as Big Daddy's natural heir at the end of the play. According to Hegel the master and slave are locked in a compulsive struggle- unto- death. This goes on till the slave, who has a weaker will, and preferring life to liberty, accepts his subjection to the master. When these two antagonists finally face each other after battle, only the master is recognizable as the victorious one. The slave is now a dependent 'thing' whose existence is shaped by, and as the conquering other. Brick, struggling to come to terms with his sexuality and betrayal of Skipper, uses alcohol to detach from reality and keeps deferring all opportunities and attempts for a resolution. Maggie, the realist, has tried every trick in the book to 'fix' an identity for Brick. It is Maggie who performs the act of ravishment, overcoming, Brick's reluctance, thus, proving she is the master. In the absence of a reciprocal sensitivity she simply puts the male to a utilitarian function. In the end, 'She combines the motherly attention of Big Mama and the sexuality and aggressiveness of Big Daddy.' (Tischler 504)

Williams has exposed the patriarchal assumptions casually embedded in Southern attitudes in all his plays, however it is in '*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*' that his revelation of women's ill-use at the hands of their male family members is made so visible. Loud, loyal and loving Big Mama certainly does not deserve the treatment she receives at the hands of her loutish and boorish husband. His illness does not excuse his insensitivity or his desire for a young mistress at the age of sixty-five. Big Mama is crass but funny, she doesn't have any time for social niceties but is a naturally kind hearted woman. She runs the estate single-handedly during her husband's

illness and all the gratitude she receives for it is an unfairly virulent verbal attack. This becomes obvious in his diatribe against Big Mamma's perceived assumption of control in Act 1:" ...and you been gradually taking over. Bossing. Talking....you are just not about to take over."(40) The fear of his wife being a better manager than himself could be the motive behind the hurtful diatribe.

Mae is a victim of her husband's social ambitions; he marries her because she belongs to old money. Though the family has fallen on bad times, they were wealthy at one time. She is the mother of five 'no-neck monsters' with a sixth on the way. Both husband and wife hope that they inherit, rather than the childless Maggie and Brick, due to their 'charming' and 'talented' children. Maggie, since she was childless, had to bear the brunt of Mae's snide remarks. Hers is the unhappiness resulting from envy and boredom. She does not exhibit any motherly instincts, only her capacity as a brood mare.

Seen from the general feminist perspective, none of these women have any degree of equality or emancipation. They are objectified and exploited by their husbands who do not value them at all. Big Daddy tells his son, Brick, to get rid of Maggie if she doesn't please him; he loathes the sight of his wife and is disgusted by Mae's fertility. All this reveals Big Daddy's misogyny and is a reflection of the attitude of the male-dominated Southern society as a whole.

Conclusion

Plantation owners in the Deep South had exploited slave labour for centuries and the attitude of ownership and racial superiority was ingrained in them. The Civil War did not alter mindsets overnight. Patriarchy was also a condition of life in the Southern states. The parallels between slavery and patriarchy can be drawn on the basis of male attitude to both women and slaves – both are treated as possessions without any individual will. 'The abolitionist movement in the 1830s in which women were heavily involved drew their attention to the similarity of their plight. Historian Aileen S. Kraditor wrote in her book *Up from the Pedestal*: "A few women in the abolitionist movement in the 1830s . . . found their religiously inspired work for the slave impeded by prejudices against public activity by women. They and many others began to ponder the parallels between women's status and the Negro's status, and to notice that white men usually applied the principles of natural rights and the ideology of individualism only to themselves.'"(Mc Elroy 2008) So the socially superior, wealthy, Southern belles as well as their black slaves were victims of the same patriarchal, feudal mindset. Williams' attempt to hold up a mirror to this deeply flawed world can be seen as his commitment to exposing the double standards prevalent in contemporary society that women had to negotiate in order to survive.

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