

The Society in Transition: A Comparative Study of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Cherry Orchard*

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Abstract: Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* focus on the suffering of certain sensitive individuals in a society in transition. Both these plays have strong resemblance as both of them portray the fading aristocracy's last struggle for existence against a dominating materialistic civilization. The protagonists are lost in a particular point of time where they are unable to give up their traditional way of life in order to adjust with prevalent social forces. This leads to some psychological and emotional problems in the life of these characters.

Keywords: Transition, Aristocracy, Decay, Mercantile, Existential loneliness, Aesthetic Sensibility.

The aim of the present paper is to study the crisis of a society in transition with particular references to Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Both these plays have strong resemblances as both of them portray almost identical problems. The problem is that of the people who live in an intermediate period of transition between the outgoing conservative, aristocratic civilization and an upcoming commercial, bohemian culture. As it is, transition is a state of tensions. A sense of insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety clouds the people's minds. People of the outgoing generation are in a difficult situation. Their necessity to part with the past and their inability to make adjustments with the present form the core of this situation. The tension is in the psychological and emotional nature of these characters. Both these plays present this tension in the life of the people of the outgoing generation who are confronted with a challenge to choose between two contradicting worlds: their beautiful but useless aristocracy and the upcoming commercial civilization. So, it is the last desperate struggle of the dying aristocracy to resist the drift. The struggle continues and the tension deepens until the emissaries of the past get alienated from the mainstream of the society. Conflicting ideologies, multi-focal ethical values and metaphysical questions of an uncertain kind crowd in both the plays, making them socio-ontological studies of a society in transition. The crisis of a transitional period registers a conflict between an order that has exhausted its freshness and an order that is yet to gain acceptance. The resulting situation is a psychological no-man's land. The period is characterized by conflicting loyalties. People are thrown into a quagmire of doubts and uncertainties, fear and anxiety. People, with their inherited values and the new experiences are constantly bewildered and perplexed. They live in a troubled world, a world torn between two

extremes. This period is characterized by chaos and disorder. There is confusion and bewilderment. Commenting on this social situation J.B. Priestley observes:

It is a kind of short interlude between two long acts. Just as the Regency is : a col between two plateaux...a bridge passage, brief but complicated in the great symphony of two centuries; a time when a lot of people are trying to cling to the past while many others are trying to hurry themselves and everybody else into a future of their own devising.... It was an era of tensions between two extremes. (84)

The tension of a transitional period presupposes a radical change in the social system. This change takes place when new ideas and thoughts enter into the mind of younger generation. Both Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* focus on the pathetic story of fading aristocratic cultures. The existence of the aristocratic culture is being threatened by the up-coming middle-class society. People refuse to see the aristocrats with their usual sense of awe and respect. As a result, the aristocrats lose much of their charm and influence. In the case of *A Streetcar Named Desire* it is the old southern aristocracy which is suffering a set-back after the American civil war. After the war the southerners lost much of their charm and glory and had to confront a society which was completely different. On the other hand, *The Cherry Orchard* presents the decay of the Russian land-lords. After the liberation of the serfs and the subsequent rise of the *nouveau-riche*, the Russian aristocrats lost much of their power and glamour and felt alienated.

A Streetcar presents the precarious condition of the Southern aristocrat because of some fundamental changes in the society. The aristocrat's life on the plantation was easy and gay. The principal characteristic of American Southern aristocracy is the romantic conservatism of Southern attitudes, and behaviour. It is distinct from others because of its belief in its custom, its institutions, its traditional easy-going life. It is distinct with its own sense of individuality. Life on the plantation was unaffected by the drab routine and skimpy meanness of the middle-class life. It has none of the sordidness of the middle-class life. But when the civil war came, it deprived the South of its charm. The civil war had been as destructive to the Southern landlords as the French Revolution was to the French nobility. It brought to the South a new set of values. As a result, the fading aristocracy became excessively rigid in its adherence to their old norms and values in a bid to save itself from the new values and ideas. Although their plantation had disowned them, the possessiveness that the Southerner felt about the plantation still lingered. Their memory of the past was too strong to allow them to follow the new generation which lived in a completely different way. So, being caught in this inner contradiction the sensitive Southerners felt torn between two worlds. At last there were three alternatives available for them as Robert Emmet Jones puts its :

He could accept the changes that war had made and conform to the new society. He could migrate west and start again, or he could retire

from active life in the New South, live in a world of false values, and become increasingly alienated from the society which he had sired unknowingly and which had rejected him. The proudest (and the weakest perhaps) chose the last way. (211-2)

So the people of the South who are sensitive of their culture and heritage preferred to remain in their own worlds, though that has the risk of being alienated from the main-stream of society. Williams' *Streetcar* has shown the final dissolution of a person of the South, who once had great charm. Blanche, the protagonist of the book is a social type, an emblem of a dying civilization, making its last romantic exit. She represents the outgoing sensitive, self-conscious civilization of the South. Stanley stands for the industrial culture of today. He is an embodiment of animal force, of brute life unconcerned and consciously scornful of every value that does not come within the scope of such a life. He is all muscle, lumpish sensuality and crude energy. Blanche's problem is related to her tradition : the tradition that makes a woman feel important. In Stanley's world Blanche cannot live and be herself. It makes Blanche feel alone. Left alone she is Insecure and shaky. She cannot maintain her traditional way of living and at the same time become an active member of the present generation. Blanche belongs to a different world and time. She is bound to feel uncomfortable in a society that is ruled by Stanleys. She makes every effort to adjust with the present but her memory of the past makes her rigid and nonconformist.

On the other hand *The Cherry Orchard* pictures an essentially delicate situation. A change has taken place in the social system. As a result some Individuals are forced to be separated from a stable point in their life, which was giving to their life coherence until now. In the final analysis, their desperate attachment to an imagined or remembered world which the characters obsessively attempt to rejoin separates them from one another and from the emotional communion with others. With the portraits of Liubov and Lopakhin, Chekhov tries to give a clear picture of the fading aristocracy of the Russian land-lords and the up-coming civilization of a mercantile, middle-class society after the liberation of the serfs.

The 'Cherry Orchard', the last possession of Liubov, an aristocrat, remains the centre of attraction throughout the play. She is passionately attached to her orchard while her present financial condition forces her to dispossess it to pay back her loans. However, she is not ready to part with the orchard, since she associates the orchard with her power and position. In contrast to Liubov's attitude Lopakhin, who represents the modern, industrial ethics sees the orchard as a vast wasteland which should be cunningly used to make money. As typical of him, he is unable to understand Liubov's emotional rapport with the orchard. At last, it so happens that Liubov fails to keep the orchard necessitated by the pressure of circumstances. The orchard is gone and with it the ideas she had embodied.

From the above discussion it is apparent that both the dramatists have dealt with the tragic individuals who suffer from a crisis of

belongingness. The world to which they very much belong has faded and they have to live in a world to which they emotionally do not belong. These individuals suffer because instead of all their efforts they are unable to connect themselves with an outside world which is so different from theirs. As a consequence, these people alienate themselves from their surrounding and live in an essentially private universe of thought and feeling. They lead a life of isolation. Both Chekhov and Williams have dealt with this existential loneliness of human beings. Commenting on this aspect in general, Richard F. Leavitt observes:

Like Chekhov, Williams invests ordinary events with spiritual significance. Both writers share the same sense of the isolation of human beings and their tragic inability to communicate with each other. As Chekhov's milieu was the dying aristocracy of feudal Russia, so Williams celebrates the antebellum South. (50)

In both plays one finds certain sensitive people who confront a society which does not believe in the dignity of an individual or in the importance of faith in something higher. No respect is being paid to their aesthetic and emotional sensibility. Both Williams and Chekhov feel for the emotional condition of these characters. They sympathise with these people because they think what these individuals are undergoing is essentially a human tragedy which may happen to anybody who is sensitive and proud. Chekhov, who writes in later part of nineteenth century and early twentieth century, chooses this precarious condition of sensitive people pitted against an indifferent universe as the subject for his plays. The protagonists in his plays are lonely and unhappy. They never like to compromise with anybody who differs from them. It seems, this particular aspect of Chekhov had much influence on Williams' mind. From him Williams has learned that human beings who are unusually sensitive and delicate are fated to be lonely and unhappy. Both Williams and Chekhov deal with individuals who are desperately trying to project the old ways of life in a rapidly changing social stratum. The transition is the last desperate struggle of the dying aristocracy, unable to give-up the old way of life and to accept the vulgarity of the middle-class. In *A Streetcar* and *The Cherry Orchard*, the last emissaries from the past are vanquished and routed. Blanche goes to an asylum and Liubov goes back to Paris to stay with her sick, unfaithful lover. They feel alienated, being unable to face the present and reluctant to part with the past.

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