

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* AND VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SAKHARAM BINDER*:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

Dr. Harish. G. Tapadia

Asst. Professor of English

Vasantrao Naik Govt Institute of
Arts and Social Sciences Nagpur

Abstract

*The prevalence of violence in society has been one of the eternal human evils. Prominent American playwright Tennessee Williams and Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar have been in the forefront of the attempts of their respective theatres to grapple with this issue as sensitisation and awareness can go a long way in dealing with it. If one looks at domestic violence then it is observed that in most cases man is the perpetrator and woman is the victim. Domestic violence usually refers to the cruelty inflicted by one of the marital partners on the other. It also includes such cases occurring in a live-in relationship as well as the violence inflicted by one of the family members or a close relative on another. With the emergence of feminist movement in the early 20th century this issue began getting prominence. Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* depicts a man's brutal ill-treatment of his sister-in-law whereas Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* portrays a man's savage cruelty to his two concubines. The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of domestic violence and its tragic consequences for the female protagonists as a result of their conflicts with the male protagonists in these two plays.*

Keywords: *American, occurring, Tennessee Williams's, Vijay Tendulkar's..*

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* AND VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SAKHARAM BINDER*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

- Dr. Harish. G. Tapadia

The prevalence of violence in society has been one of the eternal human evils. Prominent American playwright Tennessee Williams and Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar have been in the forefront of the attempts of their respective theatres to grapple with this issue as sensitisation and awareness can go a long way in dealing with it. If one looks at domestic violence then it is observed that in most cases man is the perpetrator and woman is the victim. Domestic violence usually refers to the cruelty inflicted by one of the marital partners on the other. It also includes such cases occurring in a live-in relationship as well as the violence inflicted by one of the family members or a close relative on another. With the emergence of feminist movement in the early 20th century this issue began getting prominence. Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* depicts a man's brutal ill-treatment of his sister-in-law whereas Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* portrays a man's savage cruelty to his two concubines. The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of domestic violence and its tragic consequences for the female protagonists as a result of their conflicts with the male protagonists in these two plays.

Tennessee Williams is one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century. A ruthless analyst of the American psyche, his concern with contemporary issues such as the place of women in society, decline of Southern aristocracy, parental conflict, alienation and violence is expressed through his plays. Some of his famous plays are *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *A Streetcar Named Desire* deals with the conflict between Blanche Dubois, a Southern widow and Stanley

Kowalski, her aggressive brother-in-law which results in Stanley's rape of Blanche and her becoming insane. The play's title suggests unpredictability of human desires as against a streetcar which runs on a pre-charted course.

Stanley lives in a two-room flat in a slum in New Orleans with his wife Stella. He had been in the army during the World War II and is a factory worker now. Stella comes from the noble Dubois family from the Plantation district of the South. Her genteel upbringing and refined manners are in stark contrast with her husband's rough and unrefined working-class manners. Stanley's introductory scene throws light on his vulgar animality and crude sexuality as he throws a parcel of meat to Stella while cracking a lewd joke. He loves Stella in spite of his frequent violent quarrels with her. She also loves Stanley and does not allow his uncultured behaviour to come between them. The Stanley-Stella relationship is a typical example of the bread-winner husband's dominance over the submissive housewife who lives her life on his terms. The arrival of Blanche, Stella's elder sister, in the Stanley household threatens to change the dynamic between Stanley and Stella. They are happy together and Stanley fears that Blanche may take Stella away from him by sowing seeds of discord between them. He becomes hell-bent on driving Blanche out of his life and safeguard his earlier equation with Stella. He inflicts verbal, mental as well as physical violence on Blanche to achieve his end.

Blanche arrives at Stella's house on the pretext of spending a few days with her as she has been given a long leave of absence by her employers. She is suffering from a case of bad nerves. But the reality is quite different as discovered by Stanley afterwards. Blanche and Stella had been born and brought up at Belle Reeve, an ancestral mansion and the centre of a great plantation near the Two River Country. The family's fortune was declining as the men were squandering its wealth. Blanche got married at a very young age and was reduced to widowhood by her husband's suicide. Stella got married to Stanley and left for New Orleans. Blanche began working as an English teacher at a high

school. One by one all their relatives died and Blanche was left alone. Then she lost the family estate due to financial troubles. Stella receives the news of the loss of Belle Reeve calmly but it does not go down well with Stanley.

Stanley and Blanche had become acutely conscious of the glaring difference between their backgrounds and manners right from the beginning. He realises her disdain for his working class manners and resents her uninvited stay in his house. Considering the limited space in his small flat it is obvious that the prolonged stay of a guest starts getting on his nerves. Blanche lives in an illusory world in which she thinks of herself as an aristocratic lady and expects compliments from Stanley which she never gets. Stanley believes in male superiority whereas Blanche tries to defy him considering him to be inferior in class. As Calvin Bedient puts it, the conflict between Stanley and Blanche and its tragic consequences arise from the collision between a masculine and a feminine assertion of strength. (Bedient 45)

Stanley suspects foul play in the loss of Belle Reeve. He claims that a part of the ancestral property belonged to Stella and demands to know how it was lost. He tells Stella:

It looks to me like you have been swindled, baby, and when you're swindled under the Napoleonic code I'm swindled too. And I don't like to be swindled. (Williams 35)

Stanley suspects that Blanche has sold the property. When Stella refuses to believe, he searches Blanche's belongings to make sure. He has no qualms in invading Blanche's privacy by ransacking her trunk in her absence. When he finds expensive dresses and jewellery in it, he feels vindicated. Though Stella asks him not to hurt Blanche's feelings, he rudely questions her about the property documents. When Blanche tries to withdraw

her love-letters while handing over the documents to him, he snatches them showing no regard for her sense of dignity and decorum.

The violence in the play turns physical in Scene Three during the Poker game which Stanley and his friends play. Among Stanley's friends Blanche finds Mitch to be a husband material and talks to him. Stanley does not like her interrupting his game by engaging Mitch in conversation. He finds Blanche's turning on the radio even more annoying and orders her to shut it. When it is not done he gets up in rage and throws the radio out of the window. Stella has to bear the brunt of his rage as she tries to pacify him. He pounces on her ready to strike. The stage directions describe the situation as follows: 'She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out. Blanche screams and runs into the kitchen.' (Williams 57)

It seems that Stanley becomes a wife-beater when things do not go according to his wishes.

Blanche is very much concerned about the welfare of Stella. She cannot imagine her getting beaten in an advanced state of pregnancy. She encourages Stella to leave her vulgar and abusive husband. She says about Stanley:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something – subhuman – something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! (Williams 72)

Though Blanche has lost everything in her life she still clings to the memories of the American Old South's aristocratic culture. Her utterances bring out the sense of superiority which she feels over Stanley and his friends who belong to a modern world. Stanley overhears her comments and realises that Blanche may persuade Stella to leave

him. He perceives Blanche to be a threat to his way of life as Stella had been accustomed to Stanley's violent behaviour and even used to find it enticing.

Stanley digs into Blanche's past and finds shocking information. After the loss of her ancestral property Blanche had got into many affairs with the men of her hometown. She had even lived at Hotel Flamingo, a disreputable place. Moreover, she had been terminated from her job as a teacher due to having a relationship with one of her young students. When Stella is arranging a birthday party for Blanche, Stanley, out of spite, discloses these facts to her. He says:

She didn't resign temporarily from the high school because of her nerves! No, siree, Bob! She didn't. They kicked her out of that high school before the spring term ended - and I hate to tell you the reason that step was taken! A seventeen-year old boy - she'd gotten mixed up with! (Williams 101)

Stanley sabotages Blanche's plan of getting married to Mitch by telling him about her past. According to Gulshan Rai Kataria, Stanley discloses Blanche's disgraceful past to Mitch to take revenge on Blanche as she had tried to ruin his marriage by prompting Stella to get away and he tries to pay back by destroying the chances of her marriage with Mitch. (Kataria 30)

Mitch who had been favourably disposed towards Blanche earlier now begins to regard her as an object of lust. While refusing to marry her, Mitch says: 'Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight.' (Williams 117)

Blanche confesses everything to Mitch. She tries to make him understand the circumstances in which those things had happened. After marriage she had discovered the fact of her husband's homosexuality. When she expressed her disgust with him, he had committed suicide. To forget her grief she had indulged in various affairs. Mitch fails

to understand her and hurts her even more by trying to make physical advances towards her which she rejects.

The violence in this play reaches its culmination in Scene Ten with Stanley's rape of Blanche. She is already under a lot of stress. Now Stanley has wrecked her hope of marrying Mitch. As Stella has gone to the hospital for child-birth, she is alone with Stanley in the house. Blanche still continues to hide behind a façade of respectability. She tells Stanley about a rich admirer of hers, Shep Huntleigh, who has invited her for a cruise on the Caribbean Sea. He is unable to stand her false postures and superior airs. The combination of his anger for Blanche and his drunken state results in Stanley's desire to ravish her. His gross behaviour seems to be a result of his wish to settle his account with her and not out of any physical attraction. Blanche tries to save herself by threatening him with a broken bottle. Stanley responds: 'Oh! So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house!' (Williams 130)

Stanley's violation of Blanche's chastity completes the process of her mental breakdown and leads to her metaphorical death by being confined to an asylum. Zaid Ibrahim Ismael aptly comments:

In all previous sexual encounters, Blanche had freely given of herself. But to be taken so cruelly and so brutally by a man who represents all qualities which Blanche found vile caused her entire world to collapse. (Zaid)

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the greatest Marathi playwrights. As he is genuinely interested in Tennessee Williams's plays, many of his themes have found echoes in Tendulkar's plays. The affinity between the two playwrights is evident from the fact that Tendulkar had translated *A Streetcar Named Desire* into Marathi as *Vasanachakra* in 1966. This translation seems to have inspired Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder*. The eponymous character of Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder* is a remarkable study in the basic instinct of sexual urge and violence in a human being.

Sakharam is depicted as a self-made man who lives life according to his own beliefs. He has a habit of lashing out at the world time and again. As he does not believe in the institution of marriage, he has chosen to remain a bachelor. He offers shelter to women who have been deserted by their husbands and makes them perform all the wifely duties in his house. Tendulkar portrays him as a self-centred pleasure-seeker who exploits the deserted women to satisfy his lust. The lack of love from his parents and the constant beatings that he used to get from his cruel father had denied him a secure childhood. The bitter experiences in his family crushed his tender feelings. Even after running away from the house, there was no escape from misery for Sakharam as the world outside proved to be equally exploitative. Such experiences of life turned him into a rough and tough guy with strong leaning towards being violent. Shailaja Wadikar observes that lack of love has generated a kind of fierceness in Sakharam's temperament. As a result, he turns into a masochist who seeks pleasure in inflicting pains and miseries on others. (Wadikar 102)

As the play opens, we see that Lakshmi is the seventh woman brought to his house by Sakharam. While explaining the rules of living in his house to her, Sakharam condemns the hypocrisy of people in society. He accuses the husbands of giving an inhuman treatment to their wives. It is ironical that he himself behaves in the same manner with his mistresses. He makes them slave for him all the time. He shows no concern for Lakshmi's suffering as she spills burning coals on her feet. The room is kept in total darkness in Act I, scene V, in which Sakharam forces Lakshmi to satisfy his lust in spite of her burnt feet. The audience can hear only the voices of the characters. The same technique has been used in Act I, scene VI, when Sakharam beats Lakshmi with a belt for objecting to Dawood's participation in the prayer of Lord Ganesha. The audience can only hear the agonised moans of Lakshmi.

The few months that Lakshmi spends with Sakharam brings out certain changes in his character. He begins behaving like a sober family man to some extent. He starts making an effort to reduce his intake of opium and liquor. However, Sakharam's

relationship with Lakshmi cannot last for a long time due to the inherent differences in their personalities. Soon Sakharam is fed up with the placid ways of Lakshmi. She tells him:

It is a year now since I entered this house. I haven't had a single day's rest. Whether I'm sick or whether it's a festival day. Nothing but work, work: work all the time. You torture me the whole day, you torture me at night. I'll drop dead one of these days and that will be the end. (Tendulkar 146)

When Lakshmi objects to the presence of Dawood, his Muslim friend, during the worship of Lord Ganesha, Sakharam beats her severely and sends her away.

Sakharam brings Champa to his house as his next concubine. The goodness and sensitivity that Lakshmi had kindled in his nature completely evaporates now as Champa is an antithesis to Lakshmi. Sakharam is a complex character that undergoes profound changes with changing circumstances. The physical beauty and aggressive nature of Champa inflames Sakharam's sexual hunger. He wallows in the mire of lust in Champa's company.

Sakharam is fond of flaunting his virility in order to hide his loneliness. To his utter discomfort, he realizes the transient nature of his virility when Lakshmi returns to his house. Champa has her own vested interest in letting Lakshmi stay in the house. She watches calmly while Sakharam is beating Lakshmi to drive her out. She interferes only when she feels that Sakharam may kill Lakshmi. She is worried about her own prospects in that case. She plainly tells Sakharam that doing all the household work during the day and then satisfying his physical appetite during the night makes her terribly tired. If Lakshmi is allowed to stay in the house, she will look after the household work. Champa

forces him against his wish to allow Lakshmi to stay in the house.

The simultaneous presence of Lakshmi and Champa seems to bring out the two different strands in Sakharam's nature and results in his impotence. His ego is deeply hurt when Champa refuses to have intercourse with him citing his impotence as its reason. Lakshmi notices that Champa goes out somewhere every afternoon without telling her anything. She becomes suspicious and follows her one-day. To her shock she finds out that Champa is having an affair with Dawood. Instead of telling this to Sakharam she only harbours a secret hatred for Champa. She becomes friendly with Shinde, Champa's husband who keeps visiting Champa and gets beaten by her every time. Lakshmi finds this highly objectionable. When Sakharam orders Lakshmi to leave his house she realises that she can restart her life with Sakharam if she discloses the fact of Champa's infidelity to him. When Lakshmi discloses the fact to Sakharam, he is enraged and murders Champa by strangulating her.

The playwright has given an interesting picture of a person suffering from the masochist tendency through his portrayal of Fouzdar Shinde, Champa's husband, in *Sakharam Binder*. Shinde is responsible for making Champa a gross, violent and aggressive woman. He had spotted Champa during a police raid on the liquor-shop of Champa's mother. He prevailed on Champa's mother to marry Champa to him in spite of her tender age. He tortured Champa by branding her, sticking needles into her and making her do awful things. Shinde's inhuman treatment to her resulted in Champa's becoming frigid. After some years there is complete turnaround in Shinde's relationship with Champa. Now Champa leaves him and goes to stay with Sakharam. When Shinde requests her to come back, she abuses and beats him to her heart's content. This happens many times. It appears as if Shinde enjoys getting beaten by her. Shailaja Wadikar rightly comments that Champa's mother's total disregard for her and her husband's inhuman treatment to her have made Champa coarse and violent. (Wadikar 133)

Lakshmi wastes no time in denouncing Champa for her affair with Dawood but shows no consideration for the fact that it was Champa who had helped her in living in Sakharam's house against his wish. She ruthlessly advises Sakharam to bury Champa's corpse secretly. She wants to spend the rest of her life with Sakharam. So his crime of killing Champa is acceptable to her. She sees it as an opportunity to live securely with Sakharam, as she has no other place to go. It is interesting to note that she discloses the fact of Champa's disloyalty to Sakharam only when her own existence in his house is threatened. In spite of Champa's kindness towards her, she looks upon Champa as her rival and seizes the opportunity to defame her. Herself a victim of Sakharam's cruel treatment, she becomes a persecutor of Champa.

Thus Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* deal with violation of the sanctity of family relationships while presenting horrifying pictures of violence. Blanche and Champa have to pay a heavy price for not bowing in front of male superiority and obstructing the selfish desires of Stanley and Sakharam respectively. Both Williams and Tendulkar display an acute awareness of loss of traditional values and resultant tendency towards cruelty and violence in modern times. They have tried to give a wake-up call to society through their plays. They suggest that we cannot improve the condition of our society unless we get rid of the inborn tendencies in human nature such as lust and violence. Though belonging to different cultures and time, both playwrights have shown the chilling effects of domestic violence which is an issue of universal appeal. Tendulkar can be said to have been inspired by Tennessee Williams in his treatment of this issue.

Works Cited

Bedient, Calvin, *There Are Lives That Desire Does not sustain: A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009. Print.

Ismael, Zaid Ibrahim, *The Image of Women in Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*. Web. January 2017. < <http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=45986>.>

Kataria, Gulshan Rai, *The Hetairas (Maggie, Myrtle, Blanche) Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009. Print.

Wadikar, Shailaja B, *Vijay Tendulkar A Pioneer Playwright*, New Delhi: Atlantik Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd, 2000. Print.

Tendulkar, Vijay, *Collected Plays in Translation*, New Delhi: OUP, 2003. Print.

Williams, Tennessee, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, New York: Signet, 1951. Print.

Higher Education &
Research Society