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From Subject to Object: Traumatic Staging of the Disabled Body in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Night Mother*

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Abstract:

The paper aims to explore two flawless pieces of dramatic canvass from the classical and especially from the modern American dramas as *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams and Martha Norman's *Night Mother* focusing on the body with disability. Though the paper mainly focuses on these two literary classics, the question of body is not restricted to them. I argue that the disabled body dynamics is vehemently presented and honestly portrayed the significance of staging of the disabled body in these two plays. In the Twentieth century American literature, the norm-breaking function of body has certainly taken a new dimension molding it into various forms such as disabled body, queer body and performing body. The paper also examines how the self and the body transform into character and its fragile but intense voyage on stagecraft promises a gradual change representing disability in various social and psychological aspects.

Keywords: disability, inexorable, performance, norm breaking, exploitation, social codes.

Literature is an amalgam of sociology, anthropology, psychology and all sciences dealing with human nature. It reverberates the essentials of human soul over body. Literature is not simply inspiration but it is a reflection of its culture and tradition, manners and morals, ethos and mentality. Early research on disabled body, in literature and interdisciplinary studies focused on revisiting cultures of body of an individual as person with disability. Disability research in association with performance of body, has recently coalesced an equivocal phase that an individual with disabled body not only suffers the trauma of mental retardation alone but his/her entire family, relatives and even acquaintance suffer this strain of amplifications for long.

Stage performance is not a mute or mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of cultural facets and the voices resounding in context of totality of human experiences that consciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Broadly speaking, in the world of performance, it is not quite easy to explain what qualifies as a disabled body in performance or to what extent a body qualifies as disabled? There are no specific parameters that qualify it. Moreover, it is controversial or questionable whether authors both with or without personal disabilities can be taken in the category of those who either enact or present bodies as disabled. Disability performance comprises of the intersection of such

discipline as body studies, feminist theatre and gender and disability studies. The disabled body study is yet another recent area of study. It came into vogue during the 1980s with roots in the disability rights movement, already began in the mid-1950s.

The presentation of disabled body, no matter whether it is physically disabled or mentally disabled, has become more complicated in recent American drama. The effects of the disabled body dynamics have increased gradually but the empathy of people has not, that is why it is observed that the available research on disabled body is both compulsive and crucial. The disabled body dynamics consider not only the individual with the disability; rather it concedes the changes and strains and clashes of every member of the family. “*When a child with disability is born into a family, it is as if the entire family becomes disabled*” (Seligman and Darling 5). In fact this disability not only affects the disabled individual rather it challenges the self-identity of the entire family. This paper therefore inclines to explicitly fill the gap between disabled people and their representations by exploring how disability affected their performance. The rhetorical effect of representing disability derives from social relations between people who assume the normative position and those who are assigned the disabled position. From the early literature to modern and postmodern literature, the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice. Most disabled characters are enfolded by the otherness that their disability signals in the dramatic composition or in poetry. For example, Dickens’ pathetic and romanticized Tiny Tim of *Christmas Carol*, Victor Hugo’s Gothic Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Natre Dame*, D.H. Lawrence’s impotent Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Tennessee Williams’ suffering cripple Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*. The representation of these characters basically envisages inexorable empathy in the minds of normative readers. Though such presentations refer to actual social relations, they don’t produce those relations with counterfeited essence. Disabled bodies are thus sought to incorporate a few determining blows that create an illusion to reality for short of the complicated, identical and uninterpreted context in which real people live.

The bodies with disability precariously suffer a crisis of mental agony, breakdown of relationship and self-identity. Care for the individual with disabled body breeds continuous mental strain for the people who take care of him/her. The constant caring and upbringing of the person with disability cause behavioral prejudices to his parents as well as to his caretakers emphasizing the changes in accordance with subjective understanding. Consequently the disabled individual senses all of this and he/she does not want to be a burden on the family or the parents. By keeping disabled body dynamic in view, the paper argues that *The Glass Menagerie* and *Night, Mother* both portray that people with physical or mental impairment need genuine concern. By examining the characters and issues raised in these plays through the performance of disabled bodies, both the playwrights genuinely mark a glimpse of disabled body dynamics to present a range of directions into the interdisciplinary fields of disabilities studies and to explore them into a wider performative validity. These plays talk about the characters – Laura Wingfield and Jessie Cate who are physically and mentally challenged yet never surrender to loneliness.

Both the characters have a common feature revealing that their behavior lapses the stereotypes which is based on normative gender, class and racial approbation. Laura as well as Jessie both are the victims of complex- ridden disabled body dynamic that stuck them into an infinite catastrophic fate of social exclusion.

Tennessee Williams, hardly the first to reconfigure through dramatic experimentation on the American dramatic canvass, has carved a niche by presenting extraordinary body as disabled because he experiences it closely in his family. *Laura Wingfield is one of several of Williams' characters based on his sister, Rose who was diagnosed with dementia praecox and was known to have severe fits of hysteria, paranoia, and depression by the age of twenty seven* (Williams, "Notebooks" 40).

Williams watches his cripple sister suffering closely. He also observes and experiences the inevitable and lifelong changes that overtook his sister's body. The autobiographical masterpiece *The Glass Menagerie* reflects the disabled body dynamic well before the culture observed it. In fact Laura's cripple body has been portrayed as a source of exploration of disability that contemplate trauma in form of alienation. She is an iconic figure of disability, the essence of isolation, virginity and martyrdom. Williams emphasizes on her purity and fragility proving her role acceptable on the stagecraft. The highlight of the script falls on her vehemently that provides her character with an aura-like atmosphere. Throughout the play, Laura is deprecated in both small as well as large parameters of bodily comforts i.e. family and society as she is not able to act out her traditional feminine performance as openly as her mother Amanda does. As a result of her physical disparity, she symbolizes the solitary martyr because her marginalization in the family and in the society she lives in, curbs her ability to play the roles of a wife and a mother. Moreover she inclines to wait for a gentleman caller who might be her prince charming though her mother is not sure of it. Consequently, her disabled body paradoxically disables her from fulfilling a particular role.

Laura's disabled body has somehow been presented as an exploitation of disability for literary purposes. As Ann M. Fox states:

Laura Wingfield, the self-proclaimed 'cripple' from *The Glass Menagerie*..... is an obvious first class winner for Myth Disability as she clutches her blue roses and recesses of the stage by the play's end? Judging from the omnipresence of disability here and elsewhere in Williams's plays, one might reasonably read his drama as preoccupied with it for its more negative metaphorical uses..... The literary use of disability at best advances narrative and metaphor without addressing the lived experience of disability itself and at worst cycle disability backs into a cultural lexicon that perpetuates the rejection and repression of disability identity (234).

Laura has failed to gain the assertion of will and confidence in her. She fails to learn to trust herself. Laura declines the order of Amanda to open the door when the gentleman caller visits

her asserting: “Mother – you go to the door! ...Please, please, please, you go!” (51). It shows that her lack of confidence alienates her from the people around her. Throughout the play Laura is amenable to lapsing into illusions, she easily gets affected by her own painful self-conscious figure. Time and again, her brother Tom encourages her to move on even if she did not know a thing about it. Even the gentleman caller Jim who visits Laura expresses his contempt of not liking her saying:

“Yep – that’s what I judge to be your principal trouble. A lack of confidence in yourself as a person. You don’t have the proper amount of faith in yourself.” (73).

Though Laura’s disabled body does not address the untold difficulties she has been experiencing since her childhood; she acknowledges the multitude of difficulties through her life span. Discrimination and social difficulties are not limited to severe disability that Laura’s body suffers. Laura’s shyness is often taken as the focus of her character; it is viewed as the root of her problem. According to me, Laura is resigned to isolation as she proves to deadening withdrawal and introversion. However, her shyness and isolation stem out not only from her personality, but also from her disability. Actually Laura defines herself by her own disability. She develops a complex that she would not be able to come over her disabled body. Her minor disability becomes larger than her long life that she does not enjoy. Individuals with disabled body judge themselves as disqualified from ever achieving social acceptance, therefore they are unwilling to make efforts to achieve social acceptance. Laura isolates herself in order to avoid the pain of inevitable rejection. Her disability leads her to a low perception of self-worth, which in consequence leads to her further shyness and isolation. Her dream world keeps her protected from reality. Laura’s social and physical disabilities conflate her during the course of her development from adolescent to a young lady. She is not able to face the realities of life so she started bunking her classes to ignore social responsibilities. Even her brother Tom whom she counted on, thinks her as a burden, a parasite and terribly nuisance. His remark in one of his very famous dialogues manifests his mental outburst:

Laura is very different from other girls..... Not quite all – in the eyes of others – strangers – she’s terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house (43).

Williams successfully recreates the character of Laura when he allows her to mix with gentleman caller that makes her performance real and appealing. Laura’s actions would usually be considered as parameters because she is rejecting the social roles which are basically assigned to women. Her disabled body however, reframes her situation. The technique of code mixing goes with the moments of the play. The flashback technique highlights the past of Laura’s school days when she used to have a crush on Jim O’Connor. Being disabled, she is assigned an isolated role in society, and this forsakes the roles assigned to her as a girlfriend. Laura is clinging to the social role assigned to the disabled; her performance defines herself in terms of this prescribed social role.

Society has had a contradictory attitude towards its members with physical or mental handicaps, as the removal or forced invisibility of these people stands in sharp contrast to the popularity of the freak shows during the 19th century. These are largely based on looking at bodily defects such as abnormally large and fat or skeleton like human bodies, dwarfs or even indigenous people from exotic places. The bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions and fantasies.

Marsha Norman, one of the American living dramatists, in her *Pulitzer Prize* winning play *Night, Mother* illustrates one possible central facet about the nature of disabled body: the anticipation of the outcome of dramatic situation. The emotional world of disabled woman has been gracefully explored in this play. It deals with the issue of disability – in this case epilepsy that breeds alienation, trauma and loss. The play highlights Thelma's emotional combat to snatch her daughter from the jaws of death. She repeatedly tries to create a hope in Jessie to discourage her from committing suicide, but all in vain. The actions move around Jessie Cate and her mother Thelma. Jessie, a lady in her thirties, has suffered from epilepsy ever since her early childhood. Jessie is fat, lumpy, ugly and deranged woman. Her mother Thelma concerns that Jessie will not be able to live a life that a normal person aspires. Jessie never leaves the house. Like Laura, she is isolated from the outside world. As Laura's mother Amanda is curious to find a gentleman caller for her daughter, in the same way Jessie's marriage has disintegrated by the time the plot begins. Unlike Laura, she gets married but her marriage proves to be an unsuccessful one. Though, she is the mother of a grown up son who turns out to be a criminal, she loses all hopes in him as well. She is isolated and lonely and suicide seems to indicate the only possible way left for her to get rid of her intense sufferings. This can be interpreted as a protest play against the injustice meted out to the mentally challenged individual.

In fact in case of Jessie's troubles too, disabled body is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives that flatten the experiences of fluidity of female existence. Nothing can be more ironical and pathetic than the present conversation between Jessie and her mother throws light on Jessie's sufferings and her withdrawal from social norms:

Mama: I don't know. Because of how I felt about your father. Because I didn't want any more children. Because I smoked too much or didn't eat right when I was carrying you. It has to be something I did.

Jessie: It does not. It's just a sickness, not a curse. Epilepsy does not mean anything. It just is. (Norman 37)

It's quite fascinating that at the time of her suicide Jessie has been physically well for a whole year. She claims that it is not her disease that leads her to this decision rather feelings of depression and abandonment force her to take this fatal step. The suicide is taken as a step to run away from the bitter realities of life. Jessie asserts that she lacks an identity and attempts to commit suicide in order to gain it. She wants to be isolated from herself and social codes as well.

In this case, the readers learn early of Jessie's plans. The central question of discussion arises here: would Jessie really commit suicide, or can Mama (Thelma) find a way to save her? The pivotal argument of this paper is that the troubled mind always has been influenced by healers of diverse religious and scientific persuasions, which means that the body with disability or mental disability, from one place and time often look remarkably different from the forms of mendacity in another way. This is a heart touching play that reflects human helplessness against the attack of fatal fits of epilepsy.

By selecting these texts, my aim is to display a persuasive presence of categorization of disabled bodies into a proper societal order. The paper reflects how Laura as well as Jessie juxtaposes to their mothers deteriorating the appropriateness of feminine propriety. The protagonists in these parts are more vulnerable to physical threats and sexual dissatisfaction due to physical frailties or dependence. Thus they destabilized their norms, their traditional feminine role of becoming obedient daughter and nurturing mother resulting into an unfulfilled life. The significant sum of these characters is that it is not their physical unfits that retards them from playing their social roles but making them marginalized and segregated is more traumatic struggle they experienced.

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