



To Stay or Not to Stay: Stella, Alison and Their Subordination in Patriarchy in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

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Abstract

A Streetcar Named Desire and *Look Back in Anger* are unquestioningly the most significant works of Tennessee Williams and John Osborne. Performance wise they are also accepted globally. The heroes, polish Stanley Dubois and the English Jimmy porter are also known characters in world drama despite their abusive languages towards their wives. Although the dramatists are from two different countries, both stories deal with the same issue: the helpless existence of women in patriarchy. This study shows two prominent literary wives, Stella and Alison of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Look Back in Anger*, whose family statuses are unequal to their husbands. The wives epitomize their helplessness in a patriarchal world. They live in two-room apartments. Stella socializes with her upstairs neighbors Eunice and his wife, and is close with the surrounding people. Alison escapes herself from her abusive husband into ironing. Both the wives tolerate the mood swings of their loud, mean husbands who are numeric, but Alison, in her pregnant state, cannot keep her cool after the arrival of her actress friend Helena Charles. Later on, after having a miscarriage and her loneliness in her parental house, she comes back to Jimmy. Stella has lost her parents and the only widow elder sister Blanche has been forced to come to her house as she is jobless and the family property Belle Reeve is no more for the sisters. The practical Stella never thinks of leaving her husband for survival issue. Alison does not seek independence and self-definition as these great plays do not advocate their rights, and the wives do not challenge the patriarchy. Instead, they suffer from the injustice of a violent and unequal world and do not struggle hard to achieve a better world for themselves. The aim of the article is to show Stella and Alison's subordination, helplessness in patriarchy through comparative and contrastive analysis and feminist theory.

Keywords: Dysfunctional Marriage, Patriarchy, Similarities and Dissimilarities of Stella and Alison, The Helplessness of the Wives

A Street Car Named Desire (1947) by Tennessee Williams and *Look Back in Anger* (1956) by John Osborne are two brilliant plays. These works are also theatrical shockers because of the vulgarity of the heroes. Tennessee Williams and John Osborne portray patriarchy that is imposed on Stella and Alison by their respective husbands Stanley and Jimmy. The abused, unappreciated wives do not have the power to break social standards set for women and are unable to control their own lives. They live by the rules set by men. Through *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams reveals the changing attitudes of society towards masculinity. It also criticizes the society's attitudes towards America women. Mary Ann Corrigan states: "In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams synthesizes depth of characterization, typical of drama that strives to be an illusion of reality, with symbolic theatrics, which imply an acceptance of the stage as artifice" (1976, p.385). Philip C. Kolin contends that "Williams has challenged the "traditional codex of sexuality in the 1950s" in his plays he shattered the "orthodox modes of genderization" (2000, p.145). In the words of Bloom (2005), "*A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of family tensions" and one that includes "man fighting woman" (p.124). Brinkema finds Stella, "the beleaguered wife of brutish Stanley" (2007, p.258), married the one she liked although she knew that they came from different cultural and economic backgrounds. Stella and Stanley live in the south, which "is an epitome of patriarchal society" (Fang, 2009, pp. 102-108). Stanley, the "controlling, jealous, and violently aggressive" takes the responsibility to work outside home and make money, whereas Stella stays home and takes care of the household chores. As Susan Koprince contends, "there is no doubt that Stanley Kowalski is hyper masculine" (2009, p.50). He "believes in male superiority" and "views women as sexual objects—'hens' who have been placed on earth solely for the male bird's pleasure" (Nazemi et al, 2016, p.51). The main theme of the story revolves around the appearance of a third party Blanche, Stella's sister, whose past deeds create further conflicts between the family members, specifically between the couple, and between Stanley and Blanche. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella acts as a typical 'Angel in the House' as she yields to the cult of domesticity: she respects her husband, pleases him and manages the housework. However, we find her failure at the end of the play. The patriarchal spirit of the context does not allow her to keep her unique identity and to be independent. Stella submits to Stanley in every way and "undermines her own authority by tolerating [his] dominance" and "identifying herself as the weaker sex" (Jarekvist, 2013, p.11). In Stanley's poker parties, the women are silenced and confined to a bedroom, sent out to dinner and a show, or exiled to Eunice's apartment upstairs.

In the second scene of the *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Stanley enters the house in the second scene he dehumanizes women by asking "What's all these monkey doings?" (Williams, 2000, p.32). He also reminds Stella about his supper before she is going to take Blanche out: "How about my supper, huh? I'm not going to no Galatoire's

for supper!” (p.32). He expects his wife to prefer domestic roles to everything else. His strong demand for a ready meal suggests that, in the family, he is the boss, the self, whose demands must be fulfilled immediately. On the other hand, Stella acts as a maid-servant and takes this status for granted immediately by answering “I put you a cold plate on ice” p.32), which indicates that she has already prepared the supper. So, Stella “matches the sociological profile of the battered woman; for she is essentially a submissive, self-deprecating wife who tolerates and excuses her husband’s behavior” (Koprince, 2009, p. 49). In other words, she herself accepts to be considered as the inferior other by men and does not act again. He “falls on his knees in front of her and showing a lot of respect takes her back to the house” (p.66).

Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* focuses on the marital struggles of the young Porter couple who live in a middle-class area with Jimmy’s friend Cliff. The husband Jimmy is intelligent and educated but disaffected young man of working class origin and his impassive upper middle- class wife Alison are equally competent. Osborne took inspiration from his personal life and failed marriage with Pamela Lane for writing *Look Back in Anger*, which was his first successful work as a dramatist. Critic Prasad sees the play which “spawned the term “Angry Young Man” to describe Osborne and those of his generation who employed the harshness of realism in the theatre in contrast to the more escapist theatre that characterized the previous generation” (p.30).

The tragi-comedy *Look Back in Anger* shows the dysfunctional marriage and the sufferings of Alison successfully. Similarly, Williams’ painful play *A Street Car Named Desire* shows the helplessness of Stella. Stella Dubois and Alison Porter left their families and married young to become housewives of two working class husbands Stanley Kowalski, a Spanish-American ex-serviceman and Jimmy Porter an owner of a sweet stall. Both the wives are twenty-five years’ old. The American Stella belongs to the aristocratic Dubois hailing from the plantation district of the south. In the words of Mahela, “Stella actually managed to break free of the customs and expectations of her family and lived her life the way she wanted” (2016, p.10) with the nasty husband Stanley. The army officer daughter Alison also married beneath her class against parental opposition. Alison and Stella both live in two-roomed houses in poor areas and have different social backgrounds from their husbands. The wives had genteel upbringing, are refined and have striking contrasts to their working-class husbands and their uncouth manners.

Alison and Stella have less power than their husbands as they have inferior positions in the families of women. They also cannot take decisions regarding family issues. From the beginning of Stella’s married life she accepts her inferior position to her man. In fact, her powerlessness, discrimination and limited self-esteem and self-confidence make her subordinate to husband Stanley. Stella views her subordination situational. Contemporary feminist theory begins with Simone de Beauvoir’s argument

that “because men view women as fundamentally different from themselves, women are reduced to the status of the second sex and hence subordinate” (Beauvoir, 1956, n. p.). Hence, Stella is proud of her husband and takes his violent side positively and considers it masculine.

William’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens with a scene where the bullying hero and Stella’s husband Stanley carries a “red -stained package from butchers” (Williams, 4). He yells and his wife appears on the first floor landing. Then he throws that package of meat at her:

STANLEY: Catch!

STELLA: What?

STANLEY: Meat! (Scene ONE)

So, we see, from the beginning of the play, Stella is submissive and the husband is portrayed as a dominant one. Her only duty is to please her husband. On the other hand, Alison of *Look Back in Anger* is lost in her own activity-ironing wrinkled clothes of all the members of the Porter house. She finds ironing her defense mechanism and is not willing to satisfy her bullying husband Jimmy physically or mentally. Her detachment from Jimmy makes him furious with her and he fumes: “All this time, I have been married to this woman, this monument to non-attachment . . .” (Osborne, 1994, p.16).

Stella is not afraid to show her sexuality “While Blanche (Stella’s sister) is driven by guilt over the indulgence that gives Stella and Stanley a vital intensity” (Riddel, 1963, p.17). She also never thinks of leaving her abusive, brutal husband for survival in cruel patriarchy in her pregnant state. She tries to save her elder sister Blanche from her wild husband while she does not want to get out of it although she is physically abused by him. Jimmy, on the other hand, never attacks Alison physically but Alison is terrified of his harangues towards her and her family.

Stella asks for money to Stanley when she requires and is not ashamed of her financial needs but Alison even cannot demand love or money from Jimmy but accommodates husband Jimmy’s friend Cliff who is the peacemaker in their combative marriage. After receiving ten dollars from Stanley, Stella thinks of giving half the money to Blanche who has been compelled to stay with her sister and the nasty brother –in-law. Stella says to Blanche: “You take five of it, Blanche, and I’ll keep the rest” (p.161). The empathetic Stella comforts her sister:” You don’t have to worry about anything while you’re here. I mean expenses”(p.161). Alison lacked compassion for Jimmy’s surrogate mother Mrs. Tanner when she was dying uncared. Jimmy pleases her to accompany him to the hospital; “Aren’t you coming with me, aren’t you?” (p. 64), but she refuses to accept his request instantaneously and doesn’t try to console him.

Stella is an active listener and lends her ears to her husband, his friend and her neighbors. When Blanche says: “You’re married to a mad man,” she protests and defends her husband, “People have to tolerate each other’s habits, I guess” (p.158). She knows

when to talk and when to remain silent. She hardly gets excited by anyone. Alison never listens to Jimmy and says, "I'm sorry. I wasn't listening properly." (p.3). She converses with Jimmy's friend Cliff and her friend Helena and is insensitive to Jimmy's feelings.

Stanley has a satisfactory physical relationship with Stella. Alison however cannot make her husband happy in terms of lovemaking. In this regard Jimmy says to his friend Cliff "Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn't desire it myself. Oh, it's not that she hasn't her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python" (p.36). In fact, she can neither give nor demand anything from Jimmy.

Stella is just opposite to Alison and loves her husband and his class. On the first night of their marriage, she was thrilled by his manly violence when he smashed the light bulbs. Moreover, she is easily comforted by him and regains her "narcotized tranquility" as she has adjusted herself well to her marital life. Alison is deeply attached to her maternal family and secretly communicates to her mother through correspondence. Her angry husband remarks to friend Cliff: "She gets letters. Letters from her mother, letters in which I'm not mentioned at all because my name is a dirty word" (p.35). In reality, she fails to submit herself to working class which is his class.

Alison is called by her name but Stella is referred to as "little woman", "a doll". Being unable to tolerate the ill-treatment of husband Jimmy towards her, Alison decides to leave him in her pregnant state influenced by her feminist friend Helena Charles during her stay in Alison's house. On the other hand, Stella is not influenced by her sister Blanche despite her effort to separate Stella from husband Stanley. In the words of Riddle "She brings the spiritual, even cosmic, balance that his unformed vigor demands" (p. 19). After Alison's return to her house, Helena decides to go away from Jimmy's life as a mistress and paves the way for the reunion of Alison and Jimmy. She says to Alison "Stay where you are, don't be silly . . . I've made up my mind to go, and I've got to tell him now" (p.98).

Alison is always silent, which is enforced to save her from the tirades of her husband. She thinks she is trapped in a setting which is unknown to her and living with Jimmy is a big mistake. She easily unburdens herself by talking to her friend about the embarrassing marital life. She also gave a detailed account of her marriage to friend Helena. She marries Jimmy breaking the class barrier and the social distance that creates tension between them and are alienated them from each other. Alison puts faith in Helena and depends on her for moral support and embitters the situation.

Stella never gets angry with Stanley even when he attacks her. To avoid his violence in his drunken or angry state, she removes herself from the scene. She trusts her husband over her sister Blanche who tries to make Stella consider Stanley to be brutal, lower class and unworthy for his wife. Stella expresses her love for Stanley in Scene Four when her sister Blanche tries to persuade Stella for leaving Stanley: "But you've given in

and that isn't right, you're not old! You've got to get out" (Williams, 2000, p.158). Stella remarks "I'm not in anything I want to get out of. Similarly, in Scene One she states: "I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night . . ." (p. 125) as she is enamored with his masculinity and fiery attitude. She informs her sister Blanche "there were things to adjust myself later on" (p.125). In Alison's case, she is horrified of Jimmy's rough side and considers herself in a jungle: "It is more like a zoo every day" (p. 21). After four years of her conjugal life she decides to abandon Jimmy without telling him that she is pregnant. With the encouragement of her friend Helena, Alison decides to leave him. Helena sent telegram to Alison's father Colonel Redfern to take her with him without prior consultation with Alison.

At the beginning of the plays, the wives Stella and Alison are pregnant with their babies. Stanley knows about it and for this great news he loves his wife. Alison is afraid of sharing the news with her husband although their mutual friend Cliff requests her to do so. "You haven't told him yet?" (p. 25). She avoids the requests "Not yet . . . I've no idea". Alison's practical friend Helena also questions her "Why haven't you told him you're going to have a child . . . you've got to tell him (p. 37). Despite their suggestion, she never tells her husband about her pregnancy till she returns to her house experiencing a miscarriage in her parental house. There is no communication between Jimmy and her when they are together. Stella wants to talk as much as she wants to with Stanley. Alison never shares anything with her husband for her fear of getting attacked by Jimmy. Stella cannot tolerate Stanley's absence from her life. After his return from outside she takes shelter on his lap and cries like a baby. She accepts Stanley's messy drinking habits and considers rows between couple normal. She explains to her sister "there are many things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark-that sort of everything make everything else seem-unimportant" (p. 162) due to her clear conception of marriage. Hence, she never thinks of deserting Stanley whose absence from the house is unbearable to her. Stella is practical. She accepted the terms of Stanley when she married him. It seems she is buried alive in flesh for survival. She wants her husband's friend Mitch to marry her sister Blanche who threatens their marriage. The helpless Stella agrees to send the sexually harassed sister to an asylum for surviving her marriage. She feels guilty at the same time and says to their neighbor "Oh, my god, Eunice help me! Don't let them hurt her . . . What are they doing to her (pp. 223-24). Alison never thinks of the consequences of her behavior towards the dying woman Mrs. Tanner who is the substitute mother to Jimmy. For lack of compassion for the old woman, she did not send bouquet to her funeral but there is no guilt feeling in her for hurting Jimmy's sentiments. Stella cares about the people who matter to her husband. She did not forget to send custard to the mother of Stanley's friend Mitch. She is sensible to her sister and requests Stanley, "try to understand her and be nice to her" (p.132).

Alison is inexperienced about life and allows her friend to stay with him. After

seeing her trustworthy friend Helena as Jimmy's mistress, she decides to leave them because she does not want to fight for her legal position as his wife. Alison regrets her return to her home and states "I detest myself for doing it" (p. 94).

Stella tries to stop Stanley from humiliating her sister although she is not successful in her attempt to do so. In the eyes of Jimmy, "nothing can provoke" Alison. It seems she is in a coma and Jimmy fights to keep her alive, who demands undivided attention from her and she fails to do it.

The relationships between Stella and Alison with their husbands get changed irrevocably after the arrival of intruders. After hearing to know about Blanche's rape by Stanley, Stella believes her sister but strongly influenced by her baby and makes a choice about her marital life. She follows the advice of her neighbor friend Eunice "Don't ever believe it. Life has to go on. No matter what happens you've got to keep on going" (p. 217).

Stella is very warm, self-controlled and considerate as a woman. She takes the loss of their ancestral home, Belle Reeve without much ado. She also warns her husband not to mention this topic and wound the feelings of her sister. Alison is stuck between her upper class upbringing and the working class world of her husband. But she is quite adjusting with Jimmy's friend Cliff Lewis but hates Jimmy's friend Hugh Tanner. The kind, practical Stella, despite their financial constraints, allows her rootless elder sister to stay with her. She never blames her sister for depriving her of her legal property by selling it. Stella also apologizes to her sister profusely for the rough behavior of her husband. She tries to protect her sister from the vulgarity of Stanley's habits while the poker party is going on. She is disinterested in her sister's past and criticizes her husband when he exposes Blanches past to take revenge on her. Stella also apologizes to her sister profusely for the rough behavior of her husband.

Alison is exhausted by their constant verbal fighting and has a tendency towards neutrality. In the words of Jimmy "She is mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind" (p.17). Jimmy's violent behavior causes a lot of pain in her but she conceals her feelings and remains silent when he transfers his contempt for Alison's family. Her silence almost kills him. His effort to make her shout at him fails miserably. She has nothing to say to him.

Stella does not have the courage to leave Stanley for poverty and her new born baby. Alison leaves Jimmy but returns to him after experiencing a miscarriage. Both the wives paved the ways to be humiliated and sought male dependence. Life puts the wives to severe tests. When Stella gets to know about the molestation of her sister by her husband, she receives terrible shock. She remains in a dilemma about her decision-to believe or not to believe her husband. Alison, after her return from her parental house, sees the intimacy of Jimmy and her fiend Helena. She begins to take her decision-to stay or not to stay with her husband Jimmy. At the end, both Stella and Alison take the crucial decisions of their life and stay back with the husbands who broke their trusts.

Both Stella and Alison are certainly different types but are victims in patriarchal society which makes them helpless. Eventually, both choose to stay with their husbands. Their helplessness leads them to patriarchal subordination. They need male protection and financial security. Social context also has made them vulnerable. They become stereotypical wives who allow their male partners to devalue them. They do not seek identity of their own. They represent those women who are not only trapped but also submit to gender-based behavior of their husbands willingly. Jordan Davis states, “Stella has already demonstrated her willingness to forgive Stanley for his transgressions” (1994, n.p.).

Without any monetary resources, these women are powerless. They have accepted patriarchy without expecting anything. In fact, he gives Stella money "to smooth things over". In conclusion we can say that both Stella and Alison are stereotypical wives in their challenging marriages who cannot leave their mean husbands for survival questions in patriarchy despite having similarities and dissimilarities regarding their views on life, husbands and adjustments. Their conventional nature, simplicity, and innocence make us feel for them who have to stay on the beaten paths for survival. No measures are taken for the abusive, vulgar husbands for their “disrespectful” behavior in patriarchal order. The two wives have to endure their meanness, but we do not develop disliking for them as they are vulnerable and are subjects to abuse and harassments in the hands of their own men and society.

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