



Blanche and the Fear of Patriarchy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 2019/05/16
Received in revised: 2019/07/18
Accepted: 2019/08/01
Available online: 2019/08/26
DOI:

KEYWORDS

Patriarchy
Insanity
Maternity
Gender performance
Transgressive Sexuality

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of Blanche DuBois's sexuality and its connection to patriarchy in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In this critically acclaimed play, Blanche not only performs her assigned gender role but also flaunts her sexuality which transgresses gendered norms of her society. Critics mostly agree that because of repressive patriarchal rules she loses her sanity, while few argue that her excessive sensuality causes her downfall. Instead of perceiving patriarchy as a catalytic backdrop, or an instigating agent, this paper aims to view Blanche's descent into madness as the sheer plotting of patriarchy since her transgressive sexuality upsets the patriarchal status quo. Using the lens of Gender and Sexuality Studies, it argues how transgressive female sexuality poses a threat to the existing chauvinist power structure. It also seeks the tools patriarchy uses to control and cage transgressive female sexuality, discussing how the discourse of insanity and maternity is manipulated to bring back order on stage, and in the society in general.

Introduction

Tennessee Williams stormed the American theatre with his 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire* with his vivid depiction of Blanche DuBois, still one of her kind on stage because of her puzzling vulnerability, sexuality, and insanity. Blanche's final exit from the stage in the closing scene, submitting her to the asylum doctor saying "I have always depended on the kindness of the strangers," still creates a strong resonance in the readers and the viewers alike, evoking both questions and discussions (*SND* 178). Even in the 21st century, the discussion on Blanche does not exhaust us because of its expansive scope and merit. To add to this ongoing discussion, this paper explores the portrayal of Blanche DuBois's so-called transgressive sexuality and its subsequent repercussion on patriarchy. Referring to the patriarchal bias, scholars have contended how sturdy Stanley Kowalski's carnality is pampered, and Blanche DuBois's sensuality is curbed at the end of the play. One

of the astounding creations on stage, Blanche, evokes pathos in the readers and viewers for her tragic fall, and her subsequent descent into madness. Critics mostly agree that it is because of the repressive patriarchal rules she loses her sanity, while few argue that her excessive sensuality causes her downfall. Instead of perceiving patriarchy as the backdrop, or an instigating agent, this paper views the whole process of Blanche's collapse into madness as the sheer plotting of patriarchy since her transgressive sexuality upsets the patriarchal status quo. Using the lens of gender and sexuality studies, this paper, thus, argues that Blanche's transgressive female sexuality can pose a threat to the existing chauvinist power structure, and subsequently breed fear in patriarchy. It also aims to discuss the way patriarchy terminates the threatening fear by manipulating the concept of insanity and maternity, and exploiting the patriarchal discourse. Hence, by examining the portrayal of Blanche in relation to other major characters Stanley, Stella, and Mitch, this paper investigates the fear of patriarchy and its politics of monopolizing and maneuvering the domain of sexuality to expel the threatening fear.

In scene I, we encounter Blanche who has come from Laurel to stay with her sister Stella and her husband Stanley. A woman in her 30s, coming from a bankrupt middle-class background who has become a widow in her teenage and never married again, has always been a puzzling and perilous combination for patriarchy to handle. A fatherless and husbandless Blanche does not belong to any man anymore; therefore, her identity is already in crisis before the play starts. Married at the age of sixteen to a homosexual husband, Allan, and later widowed when he shot himself, Blanche had to join as a school teacher. She witnessed the worst days when everyone in her family died, leaving her emotionally vulnerable and economically bankrupt. Only she knew how "all that sickness and dying was paid for" when none of her relations left a fortune or even a cent of insurance (*SND* 22). When the school dismissed her because of her advance to a seventeen-year-old student, she had no place to go except her sister Stella and her husband Stanley's home in New Orleans. In scene II, after the revelation of losing Belle Reve, her family estate, it was established in the play that she was permanently displaced. Later we are informed that she has been living in cheap hotels where she "had many intimacies with strangers" (*SND* 146). She blatantly confesses to Estella: "I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers" (*SND* 91). Stanley's awkward question – "How long you here for, Blanche?" – resonates the fact that a middle-class woman without a male tag cannot but be a burden on the society (*SND* 27). Blanche neither belongs to one man nor does she have a fixed home. Thus, a displaced Blanche, displaying transgressive sexuality, challenges the stereotypical idea of

feminine sexuality. It is no wonder that as time went by “she became a town character” to the community of Laurel (*SND* 121).

To have a thorough understanding of the portrayal of Blanche’s sexuality, at this point, we must delve into the theoretical framework of sex, gender, and sexuality in order to situate her sexuality in the backdrop of patriarchy. One of the early theorists in gender studies from the 1960s Robert J. Stoller makes a distinction between sex and gender: “Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are ‘male’ and ‘female,’ the corresponding terms for gender are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex” (Stoller 9). Rejecting the previous assumption of biological determinism, in 1990 Judith Butler published her greatly influential work *Gender Trouble* which claimed that gender was ‘performative,’ imposed by normative heterosexuality. Arguing that gender does not necessarily proceed from sex, she says: “If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way” (Butler 6). While defining the concept of gender in “Theorising Gender and Sexuality,” Stevi Jackson also makes the distinction between the sex we are born with and the gender we acquire. Jackson points out that masculinity and femininity are defined not “by biology but by social, cultural and psychological attributes” which are attained through becoming a man and a woman in a particular society at a particular time (133). Thus, critics of feminist and gender studies categorically argue how, in a patriarchal society, gender is a social construct, and sexuality is a behavioral performance.

However, we must not forget one pivotal aspect of gender performance; that is, though it is performed by both men and women, its contour is exclusively outlined by men. Jeffrey Weeks, in his book *Sexuality*, thus, sensibly discusses how crucial it is to identify sexuality as a historical construction that once did not exist, and at the same time in the future may not exist again. He contends: “Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency” (Weeks 21). Naming the position as “the male epistemological stance”, the American feminist Catharine MacKinnon argues that gender divisions and women’s subordination are rooted in heterosexuality. Showcasing the construction of patriarchal power discourse, she comments that: “men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described... Power to create the world from one’s point of view is power in the male form” (MacKinnon 537). Thus, the sexuality of an individual, showcased through behavioral characteristics and performances, is shaped up and measured by the patriarchal ideology.

In short, both men and women are expected to play their disparate masculine and feminine roles in a hetero-patriarchal society. Since femininity defines a woman, her gender behavior is supposed to be naïve and submissive, which turns out to be a prototype of one kind of gendered behavior. If a woman refuses to play her assigned gender role, her deviant gender performance becomes a matter of constant scrutiny, both by men and women. Patriarchal society is ultra-sensitive especially when it comes to women's displaying any sexual behavior or practicing sexual liberation. The society feels extremely threatened to encounter a woman who transgresses the boundaries of perceived femininity by flaunting her sexuality, exhibiting her sexual desire, or initiating a sexual act. MacKinnon correctly points out that the division of gender is based on "the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalises male sexual dominance and female sexual submission" (533). Agreeing with her view, this paper maintains that the control over the domain of sexuality has been a part of patriarchal politics since ages in order to subjugate women.

According to the gender norm, Blanche, in the play, performs her gender role, and, expectedly, is portrayed feminine. Her efforts of looking beautiful to receive men's attention and her southern belle performance by submitting to men are the testimony of both expected and accepted role of gender performance. Even, her flirtation and coyness can be recognized healthy and productive which serves the patriarchy attracting men toward women. It is her performed coyness and softness that attracted Mitch to her. She seems to know the way of the world; she knows that a woman has "got to be soft and attractive" (SND 92). Yet, to society's dismay, Blanche transgresses her gender boundary by flaunting sexuality. Unabashedly she wears her sexuality on her sleeve like her male counterpart Stanley. Camille-Yvette Welsch considers Blanche as "one of the first female characters in drama to be so open about having sexual needs—she is no longer familiar with being the observer of desire rather than the enactor" (27). Her flirtation and the desire to kiss the young man, a stranger who comes to collect the bill for *The Evening Star*, manifest her assertive sexuality. Taking a large, gossamer scarf from the trunk and draping it over her shoulders, she flirts, "Young man! Young, young, young man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young Prince out of the Arabian Nights?" (SND 99). In scene III, during the poker night, Blanche uses her sexuality to gain Mitch's attention once she finds out that he is not married: "*She takes off the blouse and stands in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt in the light through the portieres*" (SND 53 [stage direction]). Later, her bold confession to Mitch of bringing in "victims" like a big spider at the Tarantula Arms seriously subverts the traditional form of female sexuality (SND 183). George Hovis in his article categorically shows Blanche's exploitation of

conventional ideas about female sexuality, arguing that she “delights in transgressing Southern decorum and mocking the chauvinistic gender dynamics of her culture that deny women sexual initiative and forgive men their excesses” (183). He goes on arguing how Blanche uses the facade of a belle to survive within a social milieu in which they are disempowered. According to Hovis, Blanche “wears the mask of the belle both to appease and to shock; it is the fluidity of the form that allows her to exploit conventional ideas about feminine sexuality” (185). In this process, Blanche’s sexuality becomes her liberating tool that she manipulates to empower her.

Both Blanche and her sister Stella are presented as sexually active and assertive. Yet, in the play, in terms of female sexuality, Stella is presented as Blanche’s antithesis. Considering the play as a modern tragedy, Dan Issac argues that Blanche’s tragic flaw is hubris – her pride of intellect and pride of sexual prowess, which unfortunately goes against the sexual mores of the world in which she lives. He maintains: “Blanche simply wants to have sex the way men do: casually, serially, and triumphantly. A sexual Joan of Arc, who listens to the voices of her body, she is a prophet and a poet, morally superior to her adversaries” (Issac 179). Like Blanche, Stella never shows off her sexuality, never breaks the secret code of feminine sexuality. It is Stanley’s initiation and bestiality she always responds to and finally, surrenders. While elaborating the concept of female captivity, critic Jacqueline O’Connor comments on Stella: “embracing Stanley’s lifestyle and values in order to escape the death and decay of Belle Reve, Stella has welcomed the sexual role of the happily married woman – she adores her husband, and seems eager to bear him children” (49). The ending of the play is suggestive of Stella’s complete surrender to Stanley. After a brief moment of hesitation and revolt, she gives in to Stanley once he is able to convince her that he did not rape Blanche, and she is mad. The stage direction asserts:

[She sobs with inhuman abandon. There is something luxurious in her complete surrender to crying now than her sister is gone.]

STANLEY [*voluptuously, soothingly*]. Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now, love.

[He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse]

Now, now, love. Now, love.... (SND 179)

Louis Blackwell, on a similar note, in his study of William’s women, defines Stella as one of Williams’s women “who have subordinated themselves to a domineering and often inferior person to attain reality and meaning through communication with another person” (102). Thus, Blanche’s inability to conform to stereotypical gender role displaying coyness and submission is contrasted with her sister Stella’s sexual role as a happily married woman.

Hence, it is no wonder that Blanche's performed transgressive sexuality will upset the patriarchal order. In the play, Stanley, Blanche's antagonist, epitomizes the patriarchal masculinity and power, and his family, as a miniature patriarchal unit, exemplifies the same power dynamics in the form of Stanley and Stella as is found in the society at large. For Stanley, a sexual act is a manifestation of power, and being the only man in the house, he must exhibit his sexuality. The stage direction in scene I before the first encounter between Stanley and Blanche is a supreme instance of the superiority of Stanley's sturdy sexuality over female submissive sexuality:

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humor, his love of good drink, and food, and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. (SND 25)

The obvious sexist discourse used in introducing Stanley on stage can be studied as a deliberate act of demonstrating the normative heterosexuality which the patriarchal society allows men to practice and exhibit. Welsch also discusses the nature of Stanley's sexuality drawing references not only from the text but also from the first production of the play:

Stanley's sexuality is not suave or understated; it is absolutely at the surface, and the costuming in the play and the film underscored that. Costume designer Lucinda Ballard found her inspiration for Stanley's wardrobe in a work crew she saw on Eighth Avenue in New York City. She bought T-shirts and jeans, then tailored them to be skintight. (36)

The names he has for Stella – baby, child, little woman, baby doll, canary bird – are suggestive of his power over her. When another form of expressive sexuality is performed at his home in the form of Blanche, not Stella's brand of submissive sexuality, but Blanche's kind of assertive and overpowering one, this makes him unnerved, creating a disorder in the status quo, challenging the harmony between Stanley and Stella before the arrival of Blanche.

In scene II, Stanley seems shocked by Blanche's coquettish flirtations with him. The stage direction says: "*She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser. She throws back her head and laughs*" (SND 41). Alice Griffin, in her book *Understanding Tennessee Williams*, pinpoints

this particular incident and discusses how Blanche uses her sexuality not only to compete with Stanley but also to survive in a chauvinist society. She comments:

It is important to realize that Blanche in this scene is relying upon the only weapon she has, her sexuality, to save her from being held responsible for the loss of Belle Reve. The provocativeness, the flattering of the male, the invitation to physical contact by way of the buttons, are all geared to having Stanley accept her explanation that the plantation was lost through debt, that she is not “cheating” them out of a share of sale money. With Stella afterward Blanche is honest: “We thrashed it out. I feel a bit shaky, but I think I handled it nicely ... called him a little boy and laughed – and flirted! Yes – I was flirting with your husband, Stella! (Griffin 57)

However, Stanley, not “the type that goes for jasmine perfume” (*SND* 45), says, “If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you” (*SND* 41). We, readers, can infer what ideas he would have got about Blanche if she weren’t Stella sister. Stanley does not take much time to regard her “as not just different but downright loco—nuts” (*SND* 121). The patriarchal concept of woman, particularly the middle-class one, has been divided in a Madonna/Whore binary opposition, especially since the mid-Victorian period. His skepticism to accept Blanche’s liberating sexuality, and inability to situate her transgressive sexuality in a patriarchal discourse makes him find a challenge in her. George Hovis correctly points at Stanley’s dilemma of locating Blanche’s sexuality in the patriarchal discourse: “If Blanche were recognizably and openly a prostitute, then she would be much less threatening to Stanley. Because she is both ‘whore’ and belle, she occupies a liminal space in which labels are less easily affixed” (185). Stanley must maintain his supremacy at any cost, reminding us that he is “the king around here” and must not tolerate any challenges in any form (*SND* 131).

Therefore, it is certainly Stanley’s fear of losing control over his wife and his home that makes him expel Blanche by destroying her from the very last shelter she has. Blanche’s presence makes him uncomfortable in his own home. He wants to live like a king with Stella, following the gender code of the society. Nancy Tischler correctly explains the rape of Blanche as a consequence of power struggle between Blanche and Stanley. She argues: “Stanley senses in this woman a challenge to his authority and to his family. He must be rid of this meddling woman but finally realizes that he can be rid of her only by destroying her himself” (Tischler 51). Critic Welsch also locates this fear in Stanley, capturing a moment of national confusion of America in the late 1940s when basic anxieties like sex, violence, and displacement of the women were circulating in American popular culture. She attempts to

find a connection between Blanche's sexuality, displacement, and trauma after losing the ownership of Belle Reve. Welsch argues how, in *Blanche*, Stanley finds a threat: "Stanley Kowalski, newly home from the war, wants to live as lord of the domain, in sexual union with his wife. He wants nothing to interfere with his dominion" (27). Thus, she situates the play in the historical context of the post-World War II when men returning from the war were troubled by the apparent liberation, both economic and sexual, of the women. It is apparent from the play that Stanley is disturbed by Blanche's presence, and her power over Stella. He seems to sense that the displaced, assertive sexual being called Blanche must be ostracized from the society so that she cannot germinate his home and the society, and he can rule unchallenged.

The very conventional Mitch is also shocked by Blanche's transgressive sexuality and her owning it openly. He seems to be more disturbed than Stanley because Blanche was not playing the victim card in her confession to her sordid past. Mitch confronts her after he is informed of Blanche's sleazy past at the seedy Flamingo Hotel in Laurel. After her initial hesitation, she candidly speaks her heart out and playfully refuses to be judged by the patriarchal standard.

MITCH. Didn't you stay at a hotel called The Flamingo?

BLANCHE. Flamingo? No! Tarantula was the name of it! I stayed at a hotel called The

Tarantula Arms!

MITCH [*stupidly*]. Tarantula?

BLANCHE. Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims. [*she pours herself another drink*] Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection—here and there, in the most—unlikely places—even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy— (SND 146)

Mitch is utterly traumatized, less because of her previous lies, more because of her shameless confessions. His decision echoes the traditional idea of a woman's purity: "You are not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (SND 150). Mitch's subconscious comparison of Blanche with his mother reveals the patriarchal standard of womanhood and domesticity. Bringing in someone not clean enough will jeopardize the concept of his home, a miniature patriarchal unit of the larger society. In the patriarchal concept of family, the mother is always a Madonna, and the wife is always a pure angel. A house can only be a

home for men with women with submissive sexuality, not with transgressive sexuality. The double standard of patriarchy lies in the fact that it is bizarrely silent on male transgressive and violent sexuality. In fact, male sexuality cannot be transgressive; patriarchy rather celebrates it as masculinity or potency which is made obvious by the portrayal of Stanley. However, Mitch's fear lies, subconsciously, in not agitating his mother, but the sexist society. When Blanche declares, "I don't want realism ... I'll tell you what I want. Magic!" (SND 145), the traditional Mitch seems puzzled. He can afford entertaining realism, but not magic. Blanche's preference of magic over realism offers him a challenge. His sense of powerlessness against the overpowering sexuality of Blanche is unbearable to him. It is this sense of his defeated masculinity that prompts him to avenge her by ravishing Blanche, in which he fails miserably. The stage direction says: "*After a moment, Mitch rises and follows her purposefully. ... He places his hands on her waist and tries to turn her about*" (SND 149). However, Blanche has to be silenced and ostracized for the agitation and dismay she has caused to patriarchy not by the meek Mitch, but by Stanley who personifies patriarchy than anyone else in the play.

However, patriarchy must terminate the threat posed by Blanche in order to maintain its supremacy. It is no surprise why finally Stanley Kollawaski's carnality is pampered, and Blanche DuBois's sensuality is curbed in the play. Still, one of the astounding creations on stage, Blanche, evokes pathos, undoubtedly, in the readers and viewers for her tragic fall, and her subsequent collapse into madness. While critics mostly agree that because of repressive patriarchal rules she loses her sanity, few argue that her excessive sensuality causes her downfall. Drawing references to some established criticism, Anca Vlasopolos sensibly argues both the sides of the contention, saying: "Perceptions of Blanche as the sole representative of sensibility destroyed by a callous society stand beside descriptions of her as sexually immoral or as a prostitute and nymphomaniac" (150). Instead of perceiving patriarchy as a catalytic backdrop, or an instigating agent, this article perceives the whole process of Blanche's descent into madness as the sheer plotting of patriarchy since her transgressive sexuality upsets the patriarchal status quo. What is tempting to see is how patriarchy uses its institutions and discourse to control and cage transgressive female sexuality in order to terminate any prospective collapse of the existing system. Blanche's future has been mapped out by the agency of patriarchy: she is made insane, and subsequently caged in an asylum to make her voiceless and powerless.

Insanity and women have been linked together since time immemorial. O'Connor rightly asserts: "Ever since the Greeks mistakenly associated hysteria with a disorder of the

womb, female sexuality and insanity have been linked by theories of cause and effect” (48). Since the nineteenth century, because of the increasing number of cases of male and female insanity, society has witnessed the rise of asylum as an institution. It is no wonder that like any other institutions within patriarchy, asylum has been used as a tool for exploitation, and is not free from patriarchal bias. Pointing at the bias, Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, discusses how the traditional history of psychiatry paid little attention to gender questions. She maintains that the standard sources for psychiatric history, such as medical journals, psychiatric textbooks, asylum records, and court cases “leave out, indeed silence, women’s voices” (Showalter 6). She goes on criticizing one of the pioneering works on the history of insanity *Madness and Civilization* by Michel Foucault, contending Foucault “brilliantly exposed the repressive ideologies that lay behind the reform of the asylum, [he] did not explore the possibility that irrationality and difference the asylum silenced and confined is also the feminine” (Showalter 6). She also discusses how female malady has been categorically associated with the sexuality, vulnerability, and essential nature of women. Hence, one can certainly argue that both asylum and insanity have been under the domain of patriarchy since both the institution and the concept were constructed by a male chauvinist society. One of the earliest feminist theorists Mary Wollstonecraft in her unfinished novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* tells the tale of a woman who is a victim of the partial laws and customs of the society. Her heroine Maria has been forcefully sent to an asylum by her abusive husband who wanted complete control over her wealth and freedom. Therefore, labeling insanity to women in order to control, subjugate and captivate her is not a pristine idea in the society.

Blanche’s descent into madness can be first traced in her unsuccessful marriage at the age of sixteen with her homosexual husband Allan who deceives her, by never letting her know his true desire. Later, she discovers that “there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s” (*SND* 114). Despite being very young and innocent, she develops a sense of guilt when Allan commits suicide by sticking the revolver into his mouth. She shares her inner feelings with Mitch: “He came to me for help. I didn’t know that. I didn’t find out anything till after our marriage when we’d run away and come back and all I knew was I’d failed him in some mysterious way and wasn’t able to give the help he needed but couldn’t speak of!” (*SND* 114). Her sense of guilt never left her, rather makes her fixated on young boys. Consequently, she seeks sex with men and young boys because she is psychologically wounded because of what happened with

Allan. In a patriarchal society, shame and guilt are always channelized toward women, and, culturally, women also find themselves identifying with them.

A displaced young widow Blanche must have gone through hardship and trauma. The play neither offers us any details of her past nor does present the events of her past life in a chronological order. It is only through Blanche's memory and Stanley's query we get some ideas of her past. Stella leaves Blanche selfishly amid decay and death in Belle Reve to pursue love and happiness. Soon Blanche loses her family to death, and discovers herself all alone amid legal battle and debt. The horror of that time is passionately expressed to Stella: "I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin!" (*SND* 21). Eventually, she loses her place, her home Belle Reve to the lawsuit, even though she "fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it" (*SND* 20). However, the carnival of death Blanche witnessed, starting from her husband to all her relations except Stella, makes her morbid; she starts looking for a distraction. She shares her nervous breakdown with Mitch: "Death—I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are..." (*SND* 149). For survival, she discovers the antidote to death: "The opposite is desire" (*SND* 149). The play does not reveal her complete story of struggle and survival. Those long years, she must have fought bravely with whatever skill and strength she owns to survive in the southern, conservative society of Laurel.

Blanche's final destruction was staged by Stanley. The rape is crucial in the plot; Blanche must be removed from the domestic sphere of life. Her very presence puts a big question mark on the very idea of gender, sexuality, marriage, and power of patriarchy. Blanche's vulnerability is made obvious in the play, yet it cannot be denied that she has been portrayed as a survivor as well. Blanche's charm, sophistication, literary taste, rhetoric, and most importantly, her desire to love and live are impossible to ignore. It seems that she has learned the craft of manipulating the flawed patriarchy and the art of surviving using her sexuality, putting on "the colors of butterfly wings" (*SND* 92). Blanche shares her secret to Stella: "men don't want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over-thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to – the vulgar term is – 'put out.'... And I – I'm not 'putting out'" (*SND* 94-95). Therefore, the termination of Blanche is crucial, and can be only achieved by an extreme form of subjugation and control. Stanley, male sexuality and masculinity personified, will make use of the age-old patriarchal force that relies on, as Kate Millet discusses in *Sexual Politics*, "a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape"

(44). The play makes it clear that it is less of Stanley's sexual desire and more of his sense of antipathy and control that initiates the rape. Finally, this cruel male violence completely breaks her and takes away her sanity.

Williams carefully coincides Blanche's rape, her insanity, and Stella's childbirth. His own words are the testimony of the patriarchal dynamics of rape. Angered by the suggestion of the omission of the pivotal rape scene by American motion picture censor board from the first film version of the play, Williams writes to Joseph Breen, a powerful enforcer of Hollywood's Production Code Administration:

“Streetcar” is an extremely and peculiarly moral play, in the deepest and truest sense of the term.... The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society. It is a poetic plea for comprehension.... (qtd. in Schumach 75-76)

Blanche was punished for transgressing the laws of patriarchy and transcending the boundary of female sexuality. Stanley proudly professes Blanche's fate to Estella, “Her future is mapped out for her” (*SND* 127). O'Connor finds a nexus between female captivity and madness. She argues how, in William's plays, the attempt of silencing and controlling women does not result in death, but in institutionalization. She maintains: “Since the rape precipitates her madness, and it occurs while Stella fulfills one of her most important wifely duties, the rape stands as a representation of Blanche's inability to conform to the sexual standards for women in her society, and she is punished for that shortcoming” (O'Connor 50). This extreme act of cruelty performed by Stanley was the final trigger that forced Blanche to retreat from the world of sanity.

In *Streetcar*, insanity and maternity are the two key concepts which are manipulated by patriarchy to bring back order on stage, and in the society in general. In this regard, I am equally interested in dissecting the insanity attributed to Blanche and the stage-managed maternity of Stella. Maternity as a concept has not been developed in the play the way insanity has been. Stella's pregnancy is briefly mentioned in scene II and scene III, and, then, at the end of scene VII when Stella is taken to a hospital after a fight with Stanley. Finally, there is a reference to her baby sleeping at Eunice's place in the final scene. This brief reference to maternity apparently may prove insignificant to many readers. Similarly, Stella's absence in the house when Blanche is raped in scene X is considered as a sheer coincident by many. However, maternity is crucial to understanding the patriarchal politics of the play. The rape of Blanche in scene X occurs when Stella fulfills her role as a woman, giving birth to a

baby. Considering the concurrent event as a “plot device,” critic O’Connor argues that it manifests the marked contrast between Blanche’s sexuality and Stella’s: “Stella’s sexual encounters with Stanley produce a baby; Blanche’s sexual encounter with Stanley results in her madness” (49). Thus, Stella has been given the status of a Madonna because of her submission and loyalty to the patriarchal order.

The cult of domesticity and true womanhood was still in practice and an accepted idea in the mid-twentieth century, which gained its momentum since the mid-nineteenth century. Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women. Barbara Welter, in her influential article “True Womanhood,” discusses how Victorian society expected women to practice submission as her most feminine virtue. By categorizing men as the movers, the doers, the actors and women the passive, submissive responders, she defines the four cardinal virtues of ‘True Womanhood’— “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” by which “a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society” (Welter 152). The judgement of true womanhood and domesticity was reinforced in American society after the end of World War II, which coincides with the setting of the play. Blanche’s frustration certainly captures the then patriarchal society’s fixation with a young, beautiful, and virgin woman: “But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—and I have all of those things—aren’t taken away, but grow! Increase with the years! How strange that I should be called a destitute woman!” (*SND* 156). Her defiance of domesticized femininity stands in sharp contrast to patriarchal power structure, questioning its long-held legitimacy.

To legitimize the violent and unjust patriarchal process of eliminating the threat with a view to bringing back order in the society, the patriarchal discourse has been used and manipulated. Attributing insanity to Blanche tends to be a safer option for Stanley. Using patriarchal discourse, Stanley easily manipulates his action and gets back his complete power over Estella and his home. From the end of scene IV, Stanley starts gathering the evidence he needs to prove that Blanche is lying about her past. However, Stanley’s “most reliable sources” are not authenticated (*SND* 119). One of his sources is a supply-man who has been going through Laurel for years. If we refuse to believe Blanche’s version, why would we believe in Stanley’s version? Mitch also checks on the story after he hears Blanche’s past from Stanley. Mitch talks to the same supply-man and a merchant on the phone. Blanche protests in vain: “The merchant Kiefaber of Laurel! I know the man. He whistled at me. I put him in his place. So now for revenge he makes up stories about me” (*SND* 146). Similarly, during the heated confrontation with Stanley, Stella’s judgement on Blanche – “You didn’t

know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change” – also falls short as evidence since the ultimate power to construct the truth is not invested in a woman (*SND* 136). The community of both Laurel and New Orleans, thus, can be considered as a typical patriarchal space where only men verdict the truth. Stella initially refuses to believe the story Stanley delivers, considering it a “pure invention” (*SND* 121). Rather, she comes up with her own version of Blanche’s past: “when she was young, very young, she married a boy who wrote poetry.... He was extremely good-looking. I think Blanche didn’t just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on!” (*SND* 124). Then, she goes on asking: “This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate. Didn’t your supply-man give you that information” (*SND* 124)? Stanley’s reply can be read as an example of manipulating history by patriarchy: “All we discussed was recent history. That must have been a pretty long time ago” (*SND* 124). It seems that patriarchy has given him the power to decide how much he would acknowledge and how much he would refuse.

However, Stanley understands very well that all of Blanche’s actions and words can be dismissed if she is labeled as insane. Finally, Stella’s disbelief of Blanche’s version of rape was established when Stanley was able to prove Blanche’s madness, and arranged a place in an asylum. Therefore, once Stella returns after childbirth, she cannot “believe her [Blanche] story and go on living with Stanley” (*SND* 165). Locating the general tendency of preferring patriarchal discourse, Vlasopolos argues how Stanley’s use of the dominant discourse of patriarchy allows him to triumph over her. The authoritative power of patriarchal discourse is evident in her criticism of the process of subjugating any marginalized forces:

Stanley’s success in transforming Blanche into victim has less to do with the steady erosion of her authority than with the conventions of social discourse that discredit her speech while valuing Stanley’s. Labeled as an outsider by her costume when she enters the stage, Blanche is pushed forcibly to the margins as her escape routes – to Mitch’s home, back to Laurel, to Shep Huntleigh’s yacht – are blocked as her position in her sister’s household becomes increasingly defined as that of an intruder. Both Mitch and Stella eventually accept Stanley’s version of Blanche. (Vlasopolos 164)

Hence, it is this patriarchal discourse that proves Stanley’s words and actions normal, and Blanche’s words fictitious and actions bizarre.

Therefore, Blanche’s tragic fall is not her personal fault; it is her inability to conform to the parameter designed for her by her sex and class. If she stayed within the boundary of her gender and class, if she married and lived like her sister Stella with a husband with a fixed

gender and spatial identity, Blanche could have had a so-called sane life. The disturbance created by her displacement and sexuality unnerve the patriarchal system, thereby bestowing her a sense of power which she uses adeptly. However, Blanche's antagonist Stanley wins in the quest of authority because he benefits from the privileges of his sex and class. Vlasopolos rightly observes this double standard of patriarchy: "Stanley is perceived as normal: his pleasures are sex, bowling, drinking, and poker. Except for his rape, nothing Stanley does threaten the social fabric. Blanche, on the other hand, is deviant in regard to her class and sex" (167). The unpunished rape has been portrayed as a form of patriarchal force to be used to keep things in order. Fleche, on a similar note, argues how crucial it is for patriarchy to contain the threat of disorder for the survival and enrichment of heterosexual patriarchal order. Referring to Blanche's rape, she particularly discusses how the suppression of inordinate desire resumes the order of sanity, and subsequently, helps the play's return to realistic (heterosexual) logic. She comments: "Reenacting the traumatic incestuous moment enables history to begin over again, while the suppression of inordinate desire resumes the order of sanity: Stella is silenced; Blanche is incarcerated. And if there is some ambivalence about Blanche's madness and her exclusion, it is subsumed in an argument for order and a 'healthy' redirection of desire" (Fleche 231). Once Blanche is subdued by her insanity, patriarchy is in a position to rewrite her story of sexuality and desire, which is evident in Stanley's version of rape. Blanche's story can now be used in Laurel and New Orleans as a cautionary tale of the consequences of violating the existing socio-cultural norms. Thus, by ostracizing Blanche from the society, patriarchy not only expels the fear of anarchy but also fortifies the supremacy of patriarchal metanarrative.

"Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (*SND* 166) -- Eunice's plea to Stella at the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire* echoes the collective sub-conscious voice of patriarchy, which demands our complete compliance with hetero-normative patriarchy. It is no surprise, then, that both Stanley and Stella are rewarded for accepting their gender roles while Blanche is penalized for that shortcoming. To patriarchy's relief, Blanche, the fear, has been terminated, and the Madonna/Whore dichotomy has been restored. Yet, Tennessee Williams seems to achieve what he wished through his empathetic portrayal of Blanche's tragic saga: the fear of patriarchy is exposed, and the dynamics of patriarchal subjugation are divulged. Williams's words for Blanche testify her rebellion against a man-made, unjust world:

In a small southern town like Laurel, Mississippi, to live such a life is totally revolutionary and totally honest. She was over-sexed, dared to live it out, without

harming anybody.... She was demoniacal. She was a tigress, yes. She had the strength to take on the whole society of Laurel, and she also had the strength to take on Kowalski. When she was thrown out, the story calls for her to go to an asylum, yes. But her fantasy world was probably an improvement on her real world. (*Gay Sunshine Interviews* 316-7)

Thus, a feminist reading of the play reveals the vulnerability of the patriarchal system, exposing the fear of a male chauvinist society. Patriarchy's manipulation of the discourse of insanity and maternity confirms its desperate attempt to bring back normalcy in order to expel the fear caused by transgressive female sexuality. A close study of Blanche, once again, attests to the fact that the patriarchal prescription of naming and shaming of women in an attempt to subdue them is nothing but patriarchy's fear of losing its power and privilege.

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How to cite this manuscript: Shibaji Mridha, Blanche and the Fear of Patriarchy in A Streetcar Named Desire, *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 2019, 2(4), 16-32.