



## Left Out: The Subjugation of Women in “Desire under the ELMS”, “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “The Crucible”<sup>1</sup>

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Received: 30 October 2018, Accepted: 15 December 2018

### ABSTRACT

The condition of women was not very bright as regards to equality in the early-twentieth-century America, as they were tyrannized by male power. While the times meant prosperity and hope for the growing power of the world, there was little light at the end of the tunnel for women. Women’s hoarse cry was subdued by men who dominated them in every single facet of life. Literature can be deemed as the reflection of life and correspondingly, the plays of the era did not turn a blind eye to the problems that women encountered during the period. This article aims to analyze the way women were made less valuable and it also intends to underscore the strains that they had to confront along with the inequality and the bigotry within the scope of the groundbreaking plays *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Crucible*, written by Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller respectively. This article argues that the woman was incontrovertibly perceived as the inferior sex and was tyrannized under male power in the twentieth century. Thus, the isolation and maltreatment of women due to their condition as ‘the Other’ along with the corrupted approaches and myths behind misogynistic notions forwarded by men and witnessed all around the world are discussed in the twentieth-century America, for it was America that proved unable to back their rights and their place in society, despite her endeavors. Lastly, how women’s alienation at such a high level negatively affects their psychology is problematized in this article by referencing to the aforementioned plays. On the surface, the female characters selected for this study can be considered to be ill-fated. However, this article puts forward that the subjugation and disenfranchisement of women is a direct consequence of patriarchy, masculine parameters and discourses.

**Keywords:** The Subjugation, Disenfranchisement of Women, Masculine Parameters, Women Psychology, 20th Century America.

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

#### *Purpose and Significance*

The condition of women was not very bright as regards to equality in the early-twentieth-century America, as they were tyrannized by male power. This article aims to analyze the way women were made less valuable and it also intends to underscore the strains that they had to confront along with the inequality and the bigotry within the scope of the groundbreaking plays *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Crucible*, written by Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller respectively. This article argues that the woman was incontrovertibly perceived as the inferior sex and was tyrannized under male power in the twentieth century. Thus, the isolation and maltreatment of women due to their condition as ‘the Other’ along with the corrupted approaches and myths behind misogynistic notions forwarded by men and witnessed all around the world are discussed in the twentieth-century America, for it was America that proved unable to back their rights and their place in society, despite her endeavors.

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### *Method: Woman before the Law*

The United States Declaration of Independence necessitates that all men should be treated equally, for God created them that way. The law also points out clearly that its governments' task to establish equality. However, the declaration for a new order did not mention the condition of women or their rights. This is to say that the glorious American Dream was just a bad dream for those who were born with female genitalia. Women were on their own in terms of their every need. It should not be overlooked that the laws of countries tend to hold a mirror to the realities of the people that live there and the way those people think.

### *Findings: Monetary and Psychological Status of Woman*

The reason why Abbie Putnam of *Desire Under the Elms* is concentrating on acquiring the house is that land gave women power. Furthermore, it paved the way for other rights that they were to gain in time. It must not be forgotten that one cannot be emancipated without monetary freedom. A Streetcar Named *Desire's* Blanche Dubois, whom the reader cannot help sympathizing with, had to put up with a great deal of masculinity from the moment she met the seemingly manly man, Stanley Kowalski. The way he mitigates her personality and strangles her endears Blanche to the reader, including those who despise her way of life. In her diminished state as the other sex, Elizabeth Proctor of *The Crucible* becomes extremely selfless, when she makes the ultimate sacrifice by standing by her faithless husband's decision to practically end his life. She knows too well that John cannot live without his honor and respects him for that, even if it means losing him forever.

### *Conclusion*

The simplest way to tyrannize a person is to deprive him/her of monetary freedom, once monetary power is detached from a person, s/he is most vulnerable and menacing. This was the case with Abbie Putnam. The only seemingly superior quality of men over woman is his physical strength. It is most heinous for a human being to abuse this against a woman, for it is the very moment a woman feels completely overwhelmed by power. Blanche Dubois can hardly put behind what she had to go through with Stanley. Debauchery is unfair, it is a severe fault and it is not a petty crime one can ignore. Elizabeth Proctor was a saint who got a raw deal. At the core of what happened to the female characters in the aforementioned *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Crucible* lies the dominance of men. It is incontestable that men saw women as lesser beings and the way women were treated is a hard proof for their maltreatment. That this corruption spread to every inch of America is a shame for every single person in that country. Furthermore, it must not be disregarded that even the laws of America did not back women or envisage them as 'essential'.

# Dışlanılmış: “Karaağaçlar Altında”, “Arzu Tramvayı” ve “Cadı Kazanı” Oyunlarında Kadının Boyun Eğdirilişi<sup>1</sup>

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**Başvuru Tarihi:** 30 Ekim 2018, **Kabul Tarihi:** 15 Aralık 2018

## ÖZET

Yirminci yüzyılın başlarında kadının toplumdaki pozisyonu eşitlik açısından çok parlak değildi, keza erkek hegemonyası tarafından zulme maruz kalıyorlardı. Bu dönem yükselen güç Amerika için refah ve umut anlamına gelirken kadın için tünelin ucunda çok az ışık görünüyordu. Kadınların boğuk çığlığı, onları hayatın her alanında mahrum bırakan erkekler tarafından bastırılıyordu. Edebiyat hayatın bir çeşit yansıması olduğundan, o dönemde yazılan tiyatro oyunları kadınların karşılaştığı sorunlara göz yummadı. Bu makale, kadınların değersizleştirilmesi bir incelemesidir. Kadınların karşılaştığı sorunların altını çizmek ve yine kadınların karşılaştıkları eşitsizlik ve haksızlıkları Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams ve Arthur Miller'ın önemli eserleri Karaağaçlar Altında, Arzu Tramvayı ve Cadı Kazanı oyunları kapsamında irdelemek hedeflenmiştir. Bu çalışma, kadının tartışma götürmez şekilde erkek egemenliği karşısında alt mertebeye yer aldığını ve onun zulmüne maruz kaldığını savunmaktadır. Amerika, yirminci yüzyılda kadın hakları, kadın psikolojisi ve kadının toplumdaki yeri bakımından büyük bir hayal kırıklığı yaratmıştır. Bu sebepten, kadının “öteki” olmasından ötürü yalnız bırakılışı ve kötü muameleye maruz kalışı, bununla birlikte; erkek tarafından öne sürülen ve tüm dünyada sergilenen kadın düşmanı fikirlerin arkasındaki yozlaşmış yaklaşımlar ve mitler yirminci yüzyıl Amerika'sı çerçevesinde tartışılmıştır. Çünkü Amerika çabalarına rağmen, kadın haklarını ve kadının toplumdaki yerini koruma bakımından yetersiz kalmıştır. Ayrıca, kadının bu denli soyutlanışının onun psikolojisini ne denli olumsuz etkilediği, yukarıda adı geçen oyunlara atıflarda bulunarak ele alınmıştır. İlk bakışta, bu çalışma için seçilen kadın karakterleri şanssız olarak adlandırmak mümkün olabilir. Ancak bu makale, kadının boyun eğdirilişi ve haklarının mahrumiyetinin eril etkenlerin ve söylemlerin doğrudan sonucu olduğunu öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Boyun Eğdirme, Kadının Mahrumiyeti, Eril Etkenler, Kadın Psikolojisi, Yirminci Yüzyıl Amerika'sı.

## 1. Introduction

The condition of women was not very bright as regards to equality in the early-twentieth-century America, as they were tyrannized by male power. While the times meant prosperity and hope for the growing power of the world, there was little light at the end of the tunnel for women. Women's hoarse cry was subdued by men who dominated them in every single facet of life. Literature can be deemed as the reflection of life and correspondingly, the plays of the era did not turn a blind eye to the problems that women encountered during the period.

This article aims to analyze the way women were made less valuable and it also intends to underscore the strains that they had to face along with the inequality and the bigotry within the scope of the groundbreaking plays *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Crucible*, written by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller respectively. This article argues that the woman was incontrovertibly perceived as the inferior sex and was tyrannized under the man in the twentieth century (Beauvoir).

Thus, the isolation and maltreatment of women due to their condition as the Other along with the corrupted approaches and myths behind misogynistic notions forwarded by men and witnessed all around the world are discussed in the twentieth-century America, for it was America that proved unable to back their rights and their place in society, despite her endeavors. Lastly, how women's alienation at such a high level negatively affects their psychology is problematized in this article by referencing to the aforementioned plays. On the surface, the female characters selected for this study can be considered to be ill-fated. However, this article puts forward that the subjugation and disenfranchisement of women is a direct consequence of patriarchy, masculine parameters and discourses.

<sup>1</sup> Bu çalışma 3. BELL Uluslararası konferansında sunulmuştur. (17-18 Mayıs 2018, Zonguldak)

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## 2. Method: Woman before the Law

Abbie Putnam, a woman in her thirties, is a character from the playwright Eugene O'Neill's acclaimed *Desire Under the Elms*. The beautiful young woman was a destitute person before coming across Ephraim Cabot, who yearns to live forever in spite of his old age. It becomes unambiguous that the young Bella is after Ephraim's riches, once she consents to marry him. Her move is foreseeable considering the hardships of being poor, especially if this person is female. Women had trouble finding jobs due to the conservative approach of American Federation of Labor under the rule of Samuel Gompers in the early 20th century (Murphy). Women making up half of the society had to take care of themselves one way or another. That Abbie wanted to save her life and secure her future is quite understandable within this framework. Nevertheless, the huge difference between them in terms of age needs to be taken into consideration as well. Whether Ephraim can please a relatively young woman or not is not a great enigma, although he has no plans for dying soon. What happens in the story next is the cold reality of nature; Abbie will attempt to seek love so as to please her heart, just as she aims not to perish in poverty. It may be argued that her choosing to fulfil her heart's desire with the son of the man she married was against the codes of ethics. Nevertheless, Ephraim Cabot's actions should also be questioned within the same set of values which people are so enthusiastic to protect, in that they are stated by United States Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed (U.S. Const., art. 1, § 1.).

The declaration necessitates that all men should be treated equally, for God created them that way. The law also points out clearly that its governments' task to establish equality. However, the declaration for a new order did not mention the condition of women or their rights. This is to say that the glorious American Dream was just a bad dream for those who were born with female genitalia. Women were on their own in terms of their every need.

Blanche Dubois is the protagonist of Tennessee Williams's acclaimed play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her story touches the hearts of the reader despite her character which is not nearly perfect. Nonetheless, what she had to go through and her tragic experiences in a world tyrannized by men endear Blanche to the reader in the play. She refuses to give up when she finds out that her husband is homosexual and that he was cheating on her. Blanche finds solitude in young men who probably gave her the energy she so longingly asked from life and who probably used her as a one-time sex object, which came as another wave of attack on her self-confidence. The heaviest blow to Blanche came when her sister's wild husband could not come to terms with her haughty manners and southern airs and did the unthinkable; took advantage of her:

The legal history of rape is the history of male domination. Definitions of offense, evidence, legal defenses, and appropriate penalties were passed by males in accordance with traditional perspectives of propriety and the nature and character of females. Historically, two types of females were implicitly recognized by the law—the chaste and the unchaste. The rape of a chaste female brought forth the full force of the law; the rape of an unchaste woman often not only went unpunished but often resulted in the trial being a public degradation ceremony of the "nonvirtuous" female. (Giacopassi & Wilkinson, 1985, p.368)

It can be observed that even the laws of the country had a corrupt view about the way a crime should be penalized. What is more, it should not be overlooked that the laws of countries tend to hold a mirror to the realities of the people that live there and the way those people think. It can hardly be said that she was a misunderstood poor woman. Having said that, it must be recalled that she was a human being, which means that all persons should be treated equally before the law. There were no rape claims in the play and Stanley was never troubled with such accusations. Nevertheless, the trauma Blanche went through after the horrific incident worsened her already damaged spiritual health.

The seemingly unapproachable Elizabeth Proctor is married to John Proctor, who is another eminent character in the famous 20th century play *The Crucible*. What makes her different from the other female characters is her selfless personality. The one incident that possibly took hold of her psychology most was her husband's debauchery. Elizabeth did not abandon her husband's side in spite of his infidelity and was with him literally till his last breath. At first, it can be presumed that it was silly of her to keep faith in her husband and wait for him to find the right path and it may be argued that her faith in her husband stems

from her faith in religion, in that she really is a devout Christian. To be fair, there is some truth behind the assumption that she was a true Christian and she internalized that. However, that she wants to remain on the right path in life is her life motto regardless of religion. That being said, the inequality between the two genders unveiled itself in adultery as well and America was not alone within the scope of this sin:

The penalty for adultery was heavier for the unfaithful wife, although equality before the law was the basis of French post-revolutionary law. Whereas adultery by the wife could be established anywhere and under any circumstance, adultery by the husband existed only when it was apparent that a concubine was being kept in a conjugal living arrangement. The term "kept," which implies a repeated offense, allowed casual liaisons to escape penalty. (Sohn, 1995, p.470)

The French law is a hard evidence regarding the fact that bigotry against women was not peculiar to American and was witnessed all around the world. What is more, the laws were clearly bent in accordance with the need for the advantage of male sex. The second aspect of what Elizabeth Proctor went through is the psychological burden of adultery and the way she coped with it. It might be asserted that she found herself guilty in her husband's infidelity and this is due to the patriarchal atmosphere she was living in. After all, there should be no justification for what her husband John Proctor did to her. The following excerpt is an attempt to shed light into the life of the cheated:

In this state of powerlessness, we are confronted with our lack of control over what happened to us. At times, we feel drained and depleted; we feel hopeless and helpless. We are without energy and emotion. We are stuck in our circumstances; circumstances we did not create. Our voice is gone. It serves only to remind us that we are bound by the ties of betrayal, pulled so tightly that we are paralyzed. We are frightened because we are without the resources we thought we had. (Kenley, 2016, p.33)

It is this desperation that causes Elizabeth to lose confidence in herself, when she should stand tall and know that the blame is not hers.

### 3. Findings: Monetary and Psychological Status of Woman

As a born survivor like Blanche Dubois, Abbie Putnam of *Desire Under the Elms* feels the pressure on her when she reminisces about the time when her husband dies, knowing that she will become penniless once again lest she takes the necessary measures. Consequently, she soon becomes obsessed with the idea of owning Ephraim's house and finds out that her husband Ephraim will leave it to her if she gives birth to a son. The reason why she is concentrating on acquiring the house is that land gave women power. Furthermore, it paved the way for other rights that they were to gain in time (Sullivan). It must not be forgotten that one cannot be emancipated without monetary freedom. Likewise, money is one of the best ways of subjugating people. Correspondingly, the strategy of Abbie Putnam is a logical one, though, the morals of her move can be questioned. On the other hand, Ephraim is a cunning man who, without doubt, gathers what Abbie's hidden agenda is. The old man for whom "God's hard" (Weiss, 1974, p.268) was well aware of the fact that Abbie married him for his monetary power, not for her love for him. That both sides were well informed about these realities made the marriage an agreement to which they consented. Hence, the moral side of the marriage cannot be questioned on Abbie's side or it should be considered for both parties. What came next in the story is an unpreventable consequence and it is highly unlikely that Abbie Putnam intended to cheat on her husband with his very son. What happened should be evaluated in terms of the psychology of a thirty five year-old woman who could not think of her sexuality before, since more vital matters such as survival were at stake. Contrarily, this happiness was not to last long, as women apparently do not deserve to be happy:

ABBIE. (gently) Did ye believe I loved ye--afore he come?

EBEN. Ay-eh--like a dumb ox!

ABBIE. An' ye don't believe no more?

EBEN. B'lieve a lyn' thief! Ha!

ABBIE. (shudders--then humbly) An' did ye r'ally love me afore?

EBEN. (brokenly) Ay-eh--an' ye was trickin' me!

ABBIE. An' ye don't love me now!

EBEN. (violently) I hate ye, I tell ye!

ABBIE. An' ye're truly goin' West--goin't' leave me--all account o' him being born?

EBEN. I'm a-goin' in the mornin'--or may God strike me t' hell!

ABBIE. (after a pause--with a dreadful cold intensity--slowly) If that's what his comin's done t' me--killin' yewr love--takin' yew away--my on'y joy--the on'y joy I ever knowed--like heaven t' me--puttier'n heaven--then I hate him, too, even if I be his Maw! (Weiss, 1974, p. 277)

All mothers adore their children, especially when they have affections for the father. It is dreadful for a woman to part with her very children. Furthermore, to kill an innocent baby is an act beyond comprehension as well as being a huge crime. It is easy to perceive that Abbie Putnam was not emotionally stable at the time of the horrifying deed. The only logical explanation is that she is passionately in love with the man she is having an illegal relationship with. In other words, her attraction could only be likened to faith where there is total submission. "What woman means by love is clear enough: total devotion (not mere surrender) with soul and body, without any consideration or reserve ... In this absence of conditions her love is a faith; woman has no other faith" (Nietzsche, 2011, p.227). Abbie Putnam feels that she is living in a fairy tale when she and Eben become lovers. Eben is tender, he is tempting and flirtatious. In short, Eben is what his father is not.

Blanche Dubois, whom the reader cannot help sympathizing with, had to put up with a great deal of masculinity from the moment she met the seemingly manly man, Stanley Kowalski:

STANLEY. My clothes're stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable? [He starts to remove his shirt.].

BLANCHE. Please, please do.

STANLEY. Be comfortable is my motto. (Williams, 1974, p.30)

His confidence in himself is in line with Beauvoir's view on how man sees woman and how he positions himself against the other sex. "Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: he is a womb, an ovary; she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: 'He is a male!" (Beauvoir, 1956, p.33). That Stanley has been brought up with the aforementioned values is an incontrovertible fact, one that is observed throughout the play. The way he mitigates her personality and strangles her endears Blanche to the reader, including those who despise her way of life. The conversation just before the rape shows us the most vulnerable moment of a woman. Blanche is terrified beyond words knowing that she will not be able to resist his sheer strength:

BLANCHE. Stay back! Don't you come toward me another step or-

STANLEY. What?

BLANCHE. Some awful thing will happen I It will!

STANLEY. What are you putting on now? [They are now both inside the bedroom.]

BLANCHE. I warn you, don't, I'm in danger! (Williams, 1974, p. 130)

To think only women can appreciate the terrible experience of Blanche would be erroneous since this is a person's clash with a stronger one. Stanley "picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed" (Williams, 1974, p.130), as there is no escape and she is powerless against his strength. She succumbs to the culprit whose crime is beyond words. It is the weakest moment any woman can think of in her entire life. Blanche could be more intellectual than him and, she could be much smarter than him. However, she cannot fight this losing war despite all her qualities and that's why this scene is the most tragic one in the entire play along with being the most appalling one. It is most noteworthy that the notions of ordinary people were sick due to their patriarchal upbringing:

The cultural concept of seduction forms a central barrier to prosecuting acquaintance rape. Seduction commonly denotes a man's use of flattery and persuasion to entice a woman to have sex with him. The belief that male aggression and female passivity in the sex act comprise moments of seduction instead of coercion is one of several rape myths that effectively equates consent with its opposite. (Donovan, 2005, p.63).

Judging by the myths that spread around people, it can be remarked that the other sex namely women were alienated on a high degree and were misconceived on a large scale. Also, the traumatic experience for Blanche would have been worse, if she reported what happened to her in the room with Stanley, as the legal authorities would have humiliated Blanche even further by not backing her.

In her diminished state as the other sex, Elizabeth Proctor of *The Crucible* becomes extremely selfless, when she makes the ultimate sacrifice. Elizabeth or Goody Proctor apparently loves her husband, hence she does not want to be separated from him. However, she knows too well that John cannot live without his honor and respects him for that, even if means losing him forever. This kind of selfless love is hard to come by and definitely not for the primary sex, men. Elizabeth, most reluctantly, utters the following: "Do what you will. But let none be your judge. There be no higher judge under Heaven than Proctor is! Forgive me, forgive me, John -I never knew such goodness in the world! She covers her face, weeping." (Miller, 1976, p.124)

Her selfless character is not of her making but the result of a chain of reactions within the society.

Shut up in the sphere of the relative, destined to the male from childhood, habituated to seeing in him a superb being whom she cannot possibly equal, the woman who has not repressed her claim to humanity will dream of transcending her being towards one of these superior beings, of amalgamating herself with the sovereign subject. There is no other way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented to her as the absolute, as the essential... Love becomes a religion for her (Beauvoir, 2011, p.609).

The society that Elizabeth lives in shapes her in line with its morals; she is not a woman who surmises that there are choices for her as a life partner. She loves John Proctor more than anything and this includes her self-respect as well. It cannot be expected from a woman that lives in her society to be self-dependent. Nevertheless, she did not turn out to be a hypocrite like Abigail Williams, who practically destroyed the lives of many in the town of Salem. Elizabeth is a saint or she has been turned into a submissive robot by the society she lives in.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the light of what has been said, it is conspicuous that the women of the twentieth century were subjugated in every way possible and were not perceived as equals to men. The simplest way to tyrannize a person is to deprive him/her of monetary freedom, once monetary power is detached from a person, s/he is most vulnerable and menacing. This was the case with Abigail Putnam. The only seemingly superior quality of men over woman is his physical strength. It is most heinous for a human being to abuse this against a woman, for it is the very moment a woman feels completely overwhelmed by power. Blanche Dubois can hardly put behind what she had to go through with Stanley. Debauchery is unfair, it is a severe fault and it is not a petty crime one can ignore. Elizabeth Proctor was a saint who got a raw deal. At the core of what happened to the female characters in the aforementioned *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Crucible* lies the dominance of men. It is incontestable that men saw women as lesser beings and the way women were treated is a hard proof for their maltreatment. That this corruption spread to every inch of America is a shame for every single person in that country. Furthermore, it must not be disregarded that even the laws of America did not back women or envisage them as 'essential'. The deeds of Abigail, Blanche and Elizabeth can be comprehended, only if one attempts to grasp the cruelty of the other sex. Only then their endeavor can really be appreciated.

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