

# **Chapter III**

### CHAPTER III

#### THE SEA CHANGE : AN INDEPTH PROBE

“About their lives, people ought  
 to remember that when they are finished,  
 everything in them will be contained in a marvelous  
 state of repose which is the same as that which they unconsciously  
 admired in drama. The rush is temporary.....Snatching the eternal out of the  
 desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence. As far as we know,  
 as far as there exists any kind of empiric evidence, there is no way to beat the game of  
*being against non-being*, in which *non-being* is the predestined victor on realistic  
 levels.” (italics mine)

- “The Timeless World of a Play” by Tennessee

Williams. (New York Times, January 14, 1951).

Williams’s view of life had undergone a radical change at the juncture of the late fifties and the early sixties. In fact, in the Newsweek interview he declared that “... from now on my plays will be different. I’ll still deal with life and reality of course - and sometimes caustically, perhaps. But, I won’t be pointing out the bestiality in life. I’m through with what have been called my ‘Black’ plays.

Bestiality still exists, but I don’t want to write about it anymore. I want to

pass the rest of my life believing in other things. For years, I was too preoccupied with the destructive impulses. From now on I want to be concerned with the kinder aspects of life. May be these 'Non-Black' plays won't be all white, but I hope to cast a kinder shadow, with more concentration on the quieter elements of existence."<sup>1</sup> The previous chapter (Chapter II) had shown what exactly the coinage "Black" meant to the playwright. This chapter, is a study of the sudden and the obvious change in outlook of the dramatist.

Long before Tennessee Williams, the poets like John Donne, Mallarmé; playwrights like Arthur Miller, (a contemporary playwright); Baudelaire, the 'idolator', Genet, Kafka, Sartre and novelists like Faulkner, Norman Mailer perceived mundane existence as "black". They had emphasized it and their view had been accepted unanimously by few. To them, the manifestation of the "Black" is nothing but an *Oasis of horror* in a *desert of ennui*. Perhaps, Williams was aware of the wails resounding the confines of Baudelaire's condemned soul -

"Any where , Any where, As long as it be out of the world ,

But where to 'Set Sail'?"

("Voyage" Baudelaire).

Hence, a "come back attitude" towards the earth, an affirmative response to the gravitational pull of life on earth, an existence in the world.

So far as Mallarmé is concerned, his early poems deviate considerably from the later and mature ones. In the early poems, his "love for life" is pronounced, while in the later ones a sharp negative view of life can be discerned. Baudelaire's quest for a new self was a harsh declaration of a tormented soul -

"To drive into the gulf, Hell or Heaven

What matter ?

Into the unknown in search of the New." ("Voyage" )

Here we are sure that Baudelaire is not pining for the “Transcendental Truth”, but, the truth that might have laid embedded in the quagmire of day-to-day existence. In Mallarme', the disinterestedness in the “here” and “now” of reality, comes much later. The poet in his early days, felt a “philia” towards the azure sky. But the poet of “Azure” is hardly traceable in the poet of “Faun’s reverie”. There the dreams are splintered and they disappear in the thin air like bubbles that might have never existed. Jacques Maritain in his “Creative intuition in Art and Poetry” coins Mallarme’s poetry as “an elaboration of pure artefact mirroring only the void”. From plenitude to nullity, from existence to void - that was the ken of Mallarme'.

Even Arthur Miller was not beyond the influence of the stimulus of “change in attitude”. “The shift of focus in Miller’s later plays of the Sixties from the earlier ones of the forties and the fifties, from the societal oppression and individual failure to individual<sup>^</sup>culpability and responsibility, is an expression of the inward orientation in human concern that characterizes much of the intellectual mood of the sixties in America.”<sup>2</sup> In Williams, the change was for the better from the “Black” to the “Non-Black”, of course, according to the observation of the dramatist himself. However, the plays could not be totally shorn of the “Black” elements. The change in attitude in the dramatist had an ample of reasons behind it. Both personal and theatrical causes demanded of him a different stance towards life and work. Just at the juncture of the sixties, an extensive change had been noticed in almost all spheres of American life. “The sixties becomes a period of self-examination in every sphere of life in America ... The youth embraces everything from sexism to mysticism that appears to oppose the established set of values. Impatient to assert the essential vitality and sense of activism, the average American, more specifically the youth, violently protests against the prolonged and unsuccessful war in Vietnam.”<sup>3</sup> Even the sixties watched a new consciousness, on the part of women, who claimed equality with men in every walk of life. So the time, when Williams had undergone a drastic change in mental plane, had coincidental impact upon the extensive

change the society had experienced. Naturally, it had some relevance to the American social ethos which kept on changing and getting remoulded anew. It might be an indirect cause.

The direct causes which affected Williams were mainly as follows :

(a) The eminent director, Elia Kazan, who brought Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and some other plays alive on the stage, broke with him and it was a shock of his life. "The relationship between Williams and Kazan was based on a mutual affection, trust and admiration that supported their freedom to experiment artistically. It also contained destructive elements that strained the relationship as time went on and resulted in its eventual dissolution. Williams conceived of Kazan as an *Apollonian consciousness* who could bring order to the *Dionysian chaos* of his artistic genius. He relied on his director to advise him about the structure of his plays and he trusted Kazan to uphold his artistic values throughout the pragmatic with producers, theatre-owners, agents and lawyers. Over the years, Williams also developed an emotional dependence on Kazan that made him increasingly reliant on his direction for approval and support".<sup>4</sup> When this seemingly indissoluble collaboration came to an abrupt close it hurt Williams deeply. A violent unrest shook him from within. A nostalgic pining for Kazan's friendship is evident from an interview "Williams on Williams" in 1962 :

"Interviewer : Do you feel any freedom being away from Kazan ?

Williams: No, No, No, I don't. One of the most regrettable things in my life is that, I don't think that Kazan and I'll ever work again together and it wasn't my choice. It was his. I think that he is the most brilliant director we have.

Interviewer : Then there is a complete break between you and Kazan ?

Williams : Well, there was certainly on my part at least - there was certainly, no change in my friendship for him, and, I think probably he still likes me but our liking is ambivalent you know".<sup>5</sup>

Elia Kazan's direction was always Williams's favourite. Even in a later interview he had opined that, he had full faith in Kazan's direction making all his plays throbbing with life. But, the sad rift in the relationship was a great loss to the playwright.

Kazan, in the beginning of his relationship with Williams preferred to maintain the astute restraint regarding Williams's creative pursuit. In course of time, he felt a need to reflect on the plays and "fought for control over the process of artistic collaboration in all of his directing works - both plays and films" (Brenda Murphy). However, while directing Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Sweet Bird of Youth Kazan could not hold himself back from expressing his own ideas and opinions. By 1960, the fragile dynamic of their collaborative relationship had become destructive rather than productive.

In a book extract, captioned "Purple Moonlight" by Balwant Gargi, the dissension of Williams with Elia Kazan has been clearly stated. Here, the director Elia Kazan has something to relate to the posterity regarding their questionable "walk-out" on each other. At least, the chance of getting fobbed off with facile remarks is much less here. While interviewed by Balwant Gargi, "Why have you stopped directing Tennessee Williams's plays"?, EliaKazan's pat retort was, "Well, Tennessee is a talented playwright, I love his writings full of tenderness and passion ... beautiful images .... we've often differed in the structure of a scene. We had a thundering argument over the end-scene of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. I insisted on my version. The play is published with two versions of the last act, offering the reader a choice. May be his third act is good literature, but mine is good theatre. Now, I'm not interested in Broadway anymore. Good-bye, commercial theatre"❦

Admittedly enough, Elia Kazan too had acrid experiences to refer to, so far as directing theatres. in Broadway was concerned. His forking of "good literature" and "good theatre" was of course, impregnated with meaning. So, the uproar regarding Williams-Kazan relationship was not to be pooh-poohed outright. It had much impact on the temperament of the playwright as well as the director. Balwant Gargi, in a relevant

portion of his book mentions -

“I contacted Miss Ross Glider, grandmother of the American theatre who I had met during her visits to India... A squat spinster in her eighties, she had a crystal - clear mind and resonant voice, ‘Tennessee used to come here and sit in that chair’, she reminisced - ‘like a school boy - a gifted writer always tortured by success and failure.’”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the observations of Miss Glider reveals Tennessee Williams as reacting in maximum to the castigation and applause of the theatre frequenters, critics and comments of the stalwarts of thespian world.

(b) The death of his confidant and nearest friend Frank Merlo had a great effect on Williams’s creative career. Before the demise of Merlo, he had undergone emotional stress and strain. The last heart-rending appeal to Williams, “Are you going to leave me without shaking hands? After fourteen years together”<sup>8</sup> was a proof of Merlo’s love for Williams. The demise of Frank Merlo owing to lung cancer had a great impact upon Williams’s mind.

In a “Playboy” interview Williams when asked whether his decline began with Frank Merlo’s death, retorted - “That wasn’t the beginning, no. My professional decline began after Iguana”.<sup>9</sup> Again, in emoir she expressed his feelings vividly :

“As long as Frank was well, I was happy. He had a gift for creating a life and when he ceased to be alive, I couldn’t create a life for myself. So, I went into a seven-year depression”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Frank Merlo’s sudden death affected Williams’s personal as well as professional sphere. Williams found a trustworthy friend in Frank Merlo. Of course, they often had serious altercations between them. Before Frank’s death, Williams did not hesitate to draw a curtain upon their long-existing relationship and left off with a painter-friend deserting Merlo. Being left in the lurch, Merlo too, took revenge upon Williams by leaving the world for good and slumping Williams in a deep, depressive lull.

(c) The death of Diana Barrymore, an actress - friend of Williams had a great impact on Williams. Her death was quite mysterious. She was a great admirer of Williams's plays. She had fallen in love with the playwright. Tennessee Williams, too, had great love for her. Gilbert Maxwell analysed the relationship trenchantly : - "Any number of people have asked me about the relationship of Diana and Tennessee. They were often together, and once when the gossip columns were filled with conjectures regarding marriage, Audrey Wood took the whole thing seriously enough to remark her client, 'If you don't watch out, boy, I'm going to be flower girl at your wedding'. There is no doubt Diana had convinced herself that she cherished an unending love for Tennessee, but I always felt, as I have suggested before, that she had unconsciously confused the playwright with the man in forming this dogged attachment."<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the dichotomy between the "Man" and the "Playwright" was the root-cause of Williams's psychological aberrations. After dismissing Diana Barrymore's selection for Sweet Bird of Youth Williams felt no qualms of conscience, though after her unnatural death, he declared :-

"I'm pretty sure, that, whether she had played in Sweet Bird or not, sooner or later Diana would have done the same thing,.... I was deeply disturbed by what happened."<sup>12</sup>

But, the abnormal demise left him with a sense of emotional void. Deeply saddened by her death, Williams went to Key West to concentrate upon Period of Adjustment. But, the severe mental laceration could not be healed till death.

(d) Further, the disparaging attacks of the critics had adversely affected Williams's creative progress. The critics were sceptical about the artistic decline of Williams after the sixties. The characters like Amanda Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie, Blanche du Bois of A Street car Named Desire, Alma Winemiller of Summer and Smoke, Val Xavier of Orpheus Descending cannot have the delineation of characters of equal



merit in the persons portrayed in The Period of Adjustment, A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur. However, the critics were more harsh about Williams's sterility and their adverse remarks and comments dampened the spirit of Williams.

In an interview Williams blantly admits : "As a matter of fact, I never got a good review after 1961. Reviews can be devastating to me. A barrage of bad reviews contributed enormously to my demoralization. The plays weren't that bad - Slapstick Tragedy and Kingdom of Earth and In the Bar of Tokyo Hotel and The Seven Descents of Myrtle and The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore".<sup>13</sup> S. Alan Chesler enumerates some feasible reasons behind Williams's decline in creative powers. He has divided his explanations into four major categories :

1. Williams has been unable to separate his life from his writing during this period, making it impossible for him to achieve the necessary aesthetic distance from his work.... It also includes the mere trenchant claim that Williams is no longer able to convert his private feelings into universal forms that could be recognized and responded to by an audience.

2. Williams has been unable to create new characters and themes and has done little but rehash old work.

3. Williams has been unable, during this period, to create characters who are believable and sympathetic. He is also charged with creating characters that are simply not interesting.

4. Williams has lost his ability to control his medium, to put together workable, craftsman-like dramas...He no longer creates protagonists and antagonists worthy of combatting each other, his plots do not move effectively towards climaxes, nor do they sustain significant suspense."<sup>14</sup>

However, the negative barb had a positive facet too. Esther Merle Jackson in later decades, successfully discovered the period to be "a stage in the unceasing

progression of a poetic consciousness".<sup>15</sup>

The artist, however, enjoyed a greater emotional calm in this period. In a conversation of Don Ross with Williams in 1958, it has been understood that all the tensions of past years have relieved him of their inextricable maze, "If I am no longer disturbed myself, I will deal less with disturbed people and with violent material. I don't regret having concerned myself with such people, because I think that most of us are disturbed. But I think I have pretty well explored that aspect of life and that I may be repeating myself as a writer. It would be good if I could write with serenity".<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the plays he wrote in this period, are generally held to be the fruits of "a period of gloom". These were actually the productions of his "calm" years.

The plays written in "serene mind" deal with people who are less disturbed, less violent. Perhaps, this is a reason why the critics fail to find in the late plays that *Tennessee Williams* they are generally familiar with. Critics cannot detach Williams from "Violence" and "Sex" and herein lies the crux of their dissatisfaction with the Williams of the late plays.

Esther Merle Jackson, while stating her views on the change in attitude of the playwright in the sixties comments : "It can be said that the plays of the late sixties and seventies represent yet another stage in the evolution of the art of Tennessee Williams. Changes in form and content which these later works display, appear to be expressive of alterations in the playwright's vision, alterations which have their origin not only in the artist's consciousness, but also in the world which he observes."<sup>17</sup>

Again, in an interview in 1960, (Newsweek June 27, 1960), Williams had declared that he would produce "Non-Black" plays which dealt with "quieter elements of existence". "But, Williams's work in the 1960s began with the highly deceptive Period of Adjustment (1960) which many critics dismissed as 'The Broadway marital comedy, it pretended to be'."<sup>18</sup> With Period of Adjustment some theatre critics detected an

inclination of Williams towards light comedy.

The change in attitude in Williams has been differently interpreted by Ronald Gordon Perrier of University of Minnesota (1970) in his doctoral dissertation : "A study of the dramatic works of Tennessee Williams from 1963 to 1971". While commenting on the characters created by Williams in his post-'60 plays, Perrier asserts "Many of the characters in the plays written after 1963 are variations of earlier character types, but the emergence of the toughened artist figure is a new direction. The sensitive characters tend to have grown talons to withstand the brutal primitive forces of an unsympathetic world....."

Thematically, Tennessee Williams has continued to develop his familiar civilized versus primitive dichotomy. In the plays before 1960, Williams seemed to imply that there was a hope that man might really be on the road to civilization, to sensitivity, compassion. In the plays of the 1960s, however, there seems to be a growing skepticism of such an idealistic point of view."<sup>19</sup> Sometimes it seems to us that Williams has suddenly become optimistic about the world, the relationship, the milieu - both social and theatrical. In an interview with Lothar Schmidt - Mühlich in 1975, he casts a longing look behind and accounts for the change in his attitude : "I believe that society can identify again with my current problems". He explains now more clearly what has actually changed. "The relationship of people to each other, the need to escape from loneliness, the problem in all its aspects - all that of course has its social and political dimensions. These relationships which I earlier did not see in this way, I now portray in my new plays". For him "a person must simply continue. For me, only that is realistic".<sup>20</sup>

The bleak period, when he had lost Frank Merlo, when his oldest and closest friend Professor Oliver Evans yielded to recurring illness, when theatre-goers turned a nonchalant eye to the playwright he wrote in the Foreword of his Memoirs (P. XVII) :

“There is a duality in my attitude toward an audience now. Of course, I want their approval, I want their understanding and their empathy .... They seem to be conditioned to a kind of theatre which is quite different from the kind I wish to practice - I am doing a different thing which is altogether my own, not influenced at all by other playwrights at home or abroad or by other schools of theatre”... (Memirs, P-203)

But, a conflicting emotion caught him in its grip. The playwright wailed - „“Almost immediately after Merlo’s death, I flew down to Key West, where I had dispatched the poet Angel months before. But Angel was unable to help me now and it is hard to think of a single person who could. Probably, I should have been hospitalized for a few months, willingly or not. It is strange how alone you are at time of great personal crisis.”<sup>21</sup>

Again, he reverted to psychoanalyst Lawrence Kubie’s misguiding analysis. He was in a gloom of remorse- “He taught me much about my true nature but he offered me no solution except to break with Merlo, a thing that was quite obviously untenable as a consideration, my life being built around him”.<sup>22</sup> However, he hardly had any reason behind the crumbling sensation in the sixties when his search for a new self seemed to be in vain. He yielded to the devouring clasps of emotion.

“Going to pieces in ‘the sixties’ my ‘stoned age’, suggests to me a slow-motion photo of a building being demolished by a dynamite, it occurred in protracted stages, but the protraction gave it no comfort - I’m certainly not at all eloquent upon the difficult subject of my collapse ‘in the sixties’.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite all the causes behind the precarious slump of Williams in the sixties, it would be wise to study the mysterious personality of the playwright. The dejected and battered playwright, flogged severely in the hands of life had no hope to turn back. Again, when he actually thought of veering the style of his writing, he looked around him, and found to his dismay, that all his good and supportive companions were either dead or had left him for good. The critics too, were ready to disparage him and pin him down to

the cruel ground.

In this darkest hour, what can we expect of a playwright who enjoyed the limelight since fifteen years? His reaction was accountable, if not wholly laudable. Though it might not seem germane to the tune of the analysis, we can take the playwright's mind to be a "psychological specimen".

He, no doubt, had become a neurotic personality by the sixties with hopes being smashed to smithereens, with relations ending in bitterness, with applause of previous days thinning down to nullity. Love; attachment to favourites and basking at the helm of wide acceptance by the critics as well as the audience- are three requisites Williams might need to prop up the dwindling figure he had been transformed into!

Dr. Karen Horney in his Neurotic Personality of Our Time (1966) had accounted for the behaviour of a neurotic :

"There are in our culture, four principal ways in which a person tries to protect himself against the basic anxiety : affection, submissiveness, power, withdrawal.

First, *securing affection* in any form may serve as a powerful protection against anxiety. Second, when the attitude of compliance is not attached to any institution or person it takes the more generalized form of compliance with the potential wishes of all persons and avoidance of everything that might arouse resentment. The *submissive attitude* may also serve the purpose of securing reassurance by affection.... A third attempt at protection against the basic anxiety is through *power* - trying to achieve security by gaining factual power or success, or possession, or admiration or intellectual superiority. The fourth means of protection is *withdrawal*. The preceding groups of protective devices have in common a willingness to contend with the world to cope with it, in one way or another".<sup>24</sup> (italics mine)

Almost all the four characteristics are evident from different interviews and confessions of Williams. Naturally, he became neurotic and he was in dire need of

affection and togetherness. It might be a valid reason for the contentment of the artist through the characters whom he produced to enjoy an artistic affinity through detachment. He, perhaps, wanted to enjoy this crucial period through a new device- "artistic compromise". He portrayed characters to fulfill his unattainable dreams, wishes and desires. However, the progress in artistic revelation is the credit the playwright might claim.

The sad demise of Cornelius Coffin Williams in 1957 in the hotel-room of Knoxville had cast a pall of gloom on Williams. Though, apparently he had expressed hatred towards his father, he could not suppress the onslaught of grief he had undergone. Perhaps, the perception of grief was more than he himself could discern. Williams often went down the memory lane; only to come up with a remembrance. Of a day when his father went to the mental asylum to see his sister, Rose. "I can never forget one time when he went with me to see my sister in the state asylum. He bore up pretty well till we'd left her. Then, in the hall, he dropped his face in his hands and tried to control himself but he could not".<sup>25</sup>

The tenderness of his father's heart was never felt by Williams before that day. He felt inwardly moved by his father's demeanour. It might have affected him to change his outlook towards "Man", from *negative* to *positive* aspects of life, from *destructive impulses* to the *quieter elements of existence* from *Black to Non-Black*. (italics mine) His yearning for togetherness got real articulation in the plays written after 1960. Hence, he chose the idiom "Non-Black". "It is evident that his father's passing affected Tenn far more than he could know in 1957. He has since come to feel not only sympathy and compassion for C.C. but a nostalgic regret that he and this lonely man were never able to communicate except in a kind of yearning, mutely embarrassed discomfort in each other's presence - both the Older Man and the Younger being 'condemned to solitary confinement within the prisons of their own lonely skins'."<sup>26</sup>

Williams's change in attitude in the sixties corresponds to Arthur Miller's

lull in achievement in the sphere of drama. Like Williams, Arthur Miller had been perturbed by personal causes and unlike Williams, Miller had an ample of political and aesthetic reasons behind his change in attitude towards "drama" in the sixties, and his dour reticence from 1957 to 1963. Among personal reasons, the deplorable self-destruction of his wife Marilyn Monroe was the most plausible one. He received a great shock on her committing suicide. It dawned upon him that innocence was nothing but a long-cherished illusion.

The political causes centred round two major events - the refusal of international passport to Arthur Miller in 1954 and his forced appearance in front of the House Committee on Un-American activities on 26th January, 1956. Naturally, he felt himself to have lost everything. Most of his allies betrayed him and he felt utterly alone. Subsequently, his voice trailed off to silence for six years (1957-63).

The aesthetic causes could not be brushed aside. He became sceptic towards the Aristotelian standards of tragedy - the difference between social drama and tragedy. His concept of "social drama" had undergone a drastic change and he concentrated upon "psychological drama" in the sixties. "The first problem", he wrote, "is to discover our own relationship to evil, its reflection of ourselves".<sup>27</sup> Thus, the responsibility of world's evil is being shared by "Everyman" as Miller came to understand in the sixties. Thus, the sixties was the era of change and alterations, of quest for a meaning of art-form and finding it, of search for a new self which seems to be an end in itself. But, the search never ends, the perfection seems to be a far-cry to have ever been responded to.

Williams's change in the sixties must be due to a striving to establish a nexus between his "being-in-itself" and the "being-for-itself". Having all intimate relationships snapped, getting negative critical response, Williams felt dejected and desperate. The "inert-being complete and fixed" remained cocooned in its incommunicable exterior. "Being-for-itself" is characterised by lack of determinate structure by openness towards the future and by potency. As man realizes that his existence is open to "unpredictable future", the emptiness of universe makes him shudder from within. So,

he tries to fill up the “emptiness” with his chosen actions. He remains in permanent flux and is “condemned to be free”.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Williams was in permanent flux, The quest for self showing what one must be or should strive to become.

In the sixties, the change in outlook that held Williams in its sway, and that made him produce plays which received harsh criticism from detractors and cold response from the audience, had its roots in the “modern intellectual oscillation” between the two extremes of “self-absorption” and “self-abandonment”. Ibsen had experienced the pull of both and like Whitman he managed to avoid alike the fear of self and the fear of history and society that reinforces the natural egoism of the aesthete.

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