

Female Representations in American and Syrian Dramas with Particular Reference to Tennessee Williams and Sa'dallah Wannus

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□ ABSTRACT □

This paper aims at studying the female presentations in the dramas of two contrasting cultures in America and Syria. Female characters are sometimes - in varying degrees- conceived very similarly in the dramas of Tennessee Williams (1914-1983) and Sa'dallah Wannus (1941- 1997). Some examples depart from this generalization.

Despite cultural and personal differences between them, Williams and Wannus are surprisingly similar in the way they dramatized women. Both writers are concerned about the lost land and culture, the American south in Williams and Palestine in Wannus. In both cases it is women who mourn the loss and suffer as consequence. Both playwrights were brought up in societies that had similar notions of masculinity, femininity and sexual morality. Women in the works of both writers do not conform to the stereotypes prescribed by the society. Moreover, both wrote compulsively for the stage as they were under the threat of impending death. Williams was a hypochondriac who was convinced that he had cancer and heart condition, while Wannus was bravely fighting cancer in the last few most prolific years of his life. Both writers sympathized to a great extent with their heroines and were fascinated with sexually active female characters. Women in the plays of both dramatists have great desires and have conflict between body and soul. They undergo a repressive upbringing and rebel against it in a Lawrencean manner. Their excessive desire is more akin to that of men. Such female characters are empowered in various ways and assume reversed gender roles. The most outstanding meeting point between both writers is that both upset the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity familiar to their backgrounds.

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صورة المرأة في المسرح الأمريكي والمسرح السوري:

تنسي وليامز وسعد الله ونوس أنموذجان

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□ الملخص □

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة صورة المرأة في المسرح في ثقافتين متباينتين في أمريكا وسوريا وتأخذ تحديداً الأعمال المسرحية للكاتبين تنسي وليامز (1914-1983) وسعد الله ونوس (1941-1997) على الرغم من التمايز الثقافي والشخصي بين الكاتبين فإن وليامز ونوس متشابهان في الطريقة التي أبرزتا فيها المرأة كان كلا الكاتبين متأثر بضياح الأرض والتشوه الحضاري الناتج عن فقدان الجنوب الأمريكي في حالة وليامز وفلسطين في حالة ونوس. وفي كلتا الحالتين كانت المرأة هي التي تحزن حداداً على الوطن وتعاني على المنصة بأشكال شتى. لقد نشأ الكاتبان في مجتمعين متشابهين في نظرتهم إلى الأنوثة والذكورة والتربية الجنسية وظهرت النساء في أعمال الكاتبين ثائرة على القوالب الجاهزة التي تزج بها عموماً. تعاطف كلا الكاتبين مع بطلاتهما إلى حد بعيد وقد افتننا بشخصية الأنثى الناشطة جنسياً. فالشخصيات النسائية في إرث كلا الكاتبين تتطوي على رغبة أسطورية وتعاني من صراع بين الجسد والروح. تمر هذه المرأة بطفولة يسيطر عليها الكبت ثم تتمرد وتثور بشكل مماثل لشخصيات دي اتش لورنس. وغالباً ما تتخذ هذه النساء الثائرات أدواراً قوية وفاعلة تنسب عموماً للجنس الآخر. تتجلى نقطة الالتقاء بين الكاتبين في الطريقة التي قلبا فيها المفهوم التقليدي للذكورة والأنوثة رأساً على عقب .

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"I am an exhibitionist! I want to be noticed, seen,
heard, felt! I want them to know I'm alive"
(Carol Cutrere in *Orpheus Descending*) (Sc.1, p.251)

I want to cut out the coarse fiber ropes that engrave my
flesh and restrain my body... I want to be free and settle
in the orbit intended for me by God, just like the roses and
tree leaves, like the moon and the grass of Earth,...like
light, and everything that is alive in this world"
(Almassa in *Rituals for Metamorphoses*)

This paper aims at studying the female presentations in the dramas of two contrasting cultures in America and Syria. Female characters are sometimes - in varying degrees- conceived very similarly in the dramas of Tennessee Williams (1914-1983) and Sa'dallah Wannus (1941-1997). Some examples depart from this generalization.

It is noteworthy that the most famous woman in America in mid twentieth century while Williams was practicing his dramatic career was the actress Marilyn Monroe, the symbol of physical beauty and sexual allurements. On the other hand the most famous woman in the Arab world contemporary to Monroe and very alive in the memory and background of Wannus was Om Kalthoum, the great singer who commanded a great deal of respect and admiration from men and women alike. Although both women excelled in popular arts, the contrast between them is blatant; the Arab celebrity consciously resisted becoming the object of the male gaze. She transcended the traditional gender image and appeared sexless. She maintained fame and grandeur on the basis of perfection of her art, incredible natural gift in addition to her dedication to the national cause and intellectual abilities. In bridging over rigid class and gender barriers, she set an admirable example of female empowerment. This contrast may establish a ground for the difference in the ideal of the female image in both societies.

However these two examples are by no means representative of average female types in the real world. My focus here is not on women status in American and Arab societies but the reflection of that in the dramatic work of Tennessee Williams and Sa'dallah Wannus.

Very little biographical data is available about Wannus, so, it is not viable to confirm that the Syrian playwright was familiar, directly or indirectly, with the work of Williams, despite the widespread fame and popularity of the latter. Thus it would be intriguing to investigate how Wannus's text can be read as an intertext of Williams's. Julia Kristeva introduced the idea and designation of intertextuality believing that "every text is constructed as a mosaic of citations, every text is an absorption and transformation of another text"⁷. Roland Barthes used further the naming and the idea contending that "any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it at varying levels in more or less recognizable forms...Any text is a new tissue of past citations".⁸ Wannus was aware of his intertextualist dramatic practice. He dramatized episodes from historical texts and infused them with his contemporary reading and analysis. His revolting female characters seem to be in varying degrees conceived from the nymphomaniac archetypes provided by Williams

Despite cultural and personal differences between them, Williams and Wannus are surprisingly similar in the way they dramatized women. Both writers are concerned about the lost land and culture, the American south in Williams and Palestine in Wannus. In both cases

⁷ Quoted in Nicholas Pagan, *Rethinking Literary biography: A Post modern Approach to Tennessee Williams*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Press) 1993, p.43, from his own translation of Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike: Recherches pour une Sémalyse* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1969), p. 146

⁸ Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text" in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) pp.32-47. p. 39.

it is women who mourn the loss and suffer as consequence. Both playwrights were brought up in societies that had similar notions of masculinity, femininity and sexual morality. Moreover, both wrote compulsively for the stage as they were under the threat of impending death. Williams was a hypochondriac who was convinced that he had cancer and heart condition, while Wannus was bravely fighting cancer in the last few most prolific years of his life

Both writers sympathized to a great extent with their heroines and were fascinated with sexually active female characters.⁹ Women in the plays of both dramatists have great desires and have conflict between body and soul. They undergo a repressive upbringing and rebel against it in a Lawrencean manner. Their excessive desire is more akin to that of men. Such female characters are empowered in various ways and assume reversed gender roles. The most outstanding meeting point between both writers is that both upset the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity familiar to their backgrounds.

Perhaps the difference in the attitude towards femininity in the backgrounds of both writers is not as diverse and huge as one would think. Williams was brought up in the American south, in Mississippi and Missouri. The old South was the place of gentility, culture, high breed of people, and certain elegance. "The creed of the old South dictates restraint and careful protection of virginity, the complete repudiation of the "jungle of physicality"¹⁰. Just as in the Victorian society or modern Muslim background of Wannus, "woman was the pure pedestaled goddess worshipped from afar by the impure animalistic man whose savior she was supposed to be".¹¹ Williams's grandfather was a minister in the Episcopalian church. His mother contributed a great deal to the puritanical side of his personality. However he himself held the seeds of revolution and change that he inherited from his father. He was the rebellious puritan who experienced the conflict between the body and the soul, felt guilty about his own homosexuality and came to terms with it later in life. Thus his drama reveals a great deal of sympathy with women who are held by the southern society as the protectors of values and ideals. They can no longer uphold such ideals because the society itself has disintegrated. His female characters who take center stage may not end up as winners, but definitely they are the central characters that hold the play and win the audience's sympathy.

When the old south was lost in the Civil War in the 1940s and 1950s Williams was never able to adapt himself to the ideals and the commodified life style of the North. He mourns the old South as he remembers it: "The south once had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember- a culture that had grace, elegance...an inbred culture, not a society based on money, as in the North. I write out of regret for that."¹² He lived in nostalgia for the south which was for him as "a dark wide spacious land that you can breathe in."¹³ The Civil War was as destructive to the southern landlords as the French revolution had been to French nobility. Where once had been a rigid social system based on slavery and ruled by many cultured and wealthy aristocrats, there were, after the Civil War, complete anarchy and loss of

⁹ As this applies to all of Williams's plays, it is true in the case of later plays by Wannus. The latter's early plays have predominantly male cast. From Hanzala's *Journey from Unawareness to Awakening* (1978), women characters started to take more center stage and individuality. With the following plays such as *The Rape* 1989, *A Day of Our Times* 1993, *Naughty Dreams* 1994, *Historical Miniatures* 1993, *Rituals for Metamorphoses* 1993-4, the Syrian playwright became increasingly aware of gender issues and included women in his general themes concerning human condition, class struggle, social and political liberation.

¹⁰ Lindy Melman, "A Captive Maid: Blanch Du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*", *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* vol. 16, 1986, p. 141

¹¹ Robert Emmet Jones, "Tennessee Williams' Early Heroines" *Modern Drama* vol. 2 (1959) pp. 211-19. p. 213.

¹² Louis Davis, "that Baby Doll Man: Part 1", in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* in David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The politics of Masculinity in the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) p. 89

¹³ Nancy M. Tischler, *Tennessee Williams, Rebellious Puritan*, (New York: The Citadel Press) 1961, p. 15-6

values. When the economic system on which this society had been based was destroyed, the society itself fell with it. Robert Emmet Jones provides a fitting analysis of the changes experienced by the Southern aristocrats.

"When his plantation was broken up, the Southern aristocrat was faced with three alternatives. He could accept the changes the war had made and conform to the new society. He could migrate west and start again, or he could retire from active life in the new South, live in a world of false values, and become increasingly alienated from the society which he had sired unknowingly and which had rejected him. The proudest (and weakest, perhaps) chose the last way. It was certainly the easiest."¹⁴

Williams belongs to this third group which retained the pre-war viewpoint and ignored all that were not acceptable by the old standards. His world in his plays is that of the South with special emphasis on the place of the impoverished aristocrat in it. It is a world of fragile beauty, lost dreams, repression, animal sex, failure and unhappiness.

The south was often reflected in the setting of his plays, and it was the southern heroines who suffered most this loss. Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanch in *A Streetcar* are dramatized as the relics of a dying culture. They experience the loss of land and social status and cannot come to terms with their new impoverished and mediocre situations. One critic adeptly connects between land and women: "To lament the loss of land, the lack of home, is a typical female experience".¹⁵

Some of Wannus's female characters suffer similar and more acute cases of loneliness and loss: loss of Palestinian land, freedom, dignity and family members. Unlike Blanch who escaped to madness, Dalal and Faria in *The Rape* delve deeper into reality. They are transformed into active participants of the opposition against the occupying forces. Similarly Souad in *Historical Miniatures*, fights the Tartars and defends Damascus. Williams used women as representatives of a lost land and culture just as Wannus made female characters *The Rape* representative of the whole Palestinian nation. The main difference between both writers' conception of Blanch and Amanda on the one hand and Dalal, Faria and Souad on the other hand is that in the first case loneliness and alienation are imposed from within, while Wannus highlights outer forces of oppression on the female character who transcend her gender to include all the society.

Syrian society, on the other hand, a combination of a Muslim majority and a Christian minority, stresses the value of family and female chastity. Its sexual morality is strongly akin to that of Victorian England or the US South before the Civil War. Like most patriarchal societies, men are not always shackled by such restraints, although none of the existing religions allows such a double-standard morality. Men are often given freedom to exercise their virility, power, superiority and macho privileges, while women are expected to remain pure, chaste, guardians of morality. Hence is the phobia of prostitution in some of the plays such as *A Day of Our Times*, and *Rituals*. The most poignant tragic action, parallel to death or destruction, is the ravishing of a female body. Such events take place recurrently in *The Rape* and *Historical Miniatures*.

Although a reflection of this society is to be found in his plays, Wannus' male and female characters do not always conform to the stereotype of femininity and masculinity common to

¹⁴ Robert Emmet Jones, "Tennessee Williams' Early Heroines", op.cit. P. 211

¹⁵ Nada Zeineddine, *Because it is my Name: Problems of Identity Experienced by Women, Artists, and Breadwinners in the Plays of Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller*, (Braunton Devon: Merlin Books Ltd.) 1991. P. 98. The author bases her argument on William Robert Taylor's study of the historical connection between land and the dilemma of women in his *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York, 1961)

his background. He infused his female characters with power and an exaggerated physical desire normally ascribed to men. Wannus' representation of female image is akin to that of Williams in that both playwrights upset to an extent the common or traditional notions about sexual identity. Williams valorized female desire and conceives of his female characters such as Blanche, Alma Winemillier, Maggie (Cat) Lady (Orpheus), Maxine (Iguana) as sexually active while men such as Brick, Chance and Shannon are passive sexual objects to be sought by female predators. Similarly, Hanzala's wife (Hanzala's Journey from Unawareness to Awakening, Fares in Naughty Dreams, Souad in Historical Miniatures and Moumena in Rituals are superior to their male counterparts.

Both Williams and Wannus upset, to an extent, the common notion about masculinity and femininity. Both of them dramatized the empowered sexually active female whose desire is not normally ascribed to her gender. David Savran points aptly to the reversal in gender role and legitimacy in Williams's drama.

Williams' destabilization of mid-century notions of masculinity and femininity is accomplished, in part, by his ability both to expose the often murderous violence that accompanies the exercise of male authority and to valorize female power and female sexual desire. In the same gesture his work undermines the hegemonic and hierarchical structure on which its normative formulation is based and by celebrating various subjugated masculinities.¹⁶

The same statement is true to describe the reversed sexual roles in Wannus's plays, although his men do not so much appear as subjugated. Most of the female characters in Williams's cannon and the later plays by Wannus share the same sexual ambivalence apparent in the reversed roles of men and women. Their women combine in varying degrees both feminine and masculine traits. Wannus dramatized nymphomaniac female characters who use men for their pleasure and are impatient with the marriage institution. They readily threaten or obtain divorce - like in Hanzala's wife and Almassa (Ritual for Metamorphoses)- or have extramarital affairs, like Yasmeen (HistoricalMiniatures), Fadda (Epic of Mirage) and Najat (A Day of Our Times). Wannus's female characters are strikingly close to Williams's women in their preoccupation with sex. Characters in the work of both playwrights become obsessed with sex. They are constantly conscious of it. Serafina (The Rose Tattoo), Maxine (Night of the Iguana), Lady (Orpheus Descending) find life and rejuvenation in connubial fulfillment. This exaggerated preoccupation with sex on the part of both playwrights is due to the repressive backgrounds of both.

Blanche, Alma and Almassa are case studies of nymphomania for different and similar reasons. Blanche realizes that her youth is passing. Thus she let go of her desires, became desperate and eventually she slept with men on one nightstand because she wants to be acknowledged by a human being. Dura Da Ponte contends aptly that "the search for love and security in a hostile world turned Blanche eventually into nymphomaniac."¹⁷ Alma in *Summer and Smoke* embodies more clearly than Blanche the spirit of a sexually starved woman and reveals more acutely the conflict between body and soul. "She is Blanche Du Bois at the beginning of the down hill slide to degradation. Blanche is Alma at the end of the road"¹⁸ She is in the process of revolting against the limitations of her scheduled life as a minister's daughter. Throughout an obvious metamorphosis, parallel to Moumena's transformation into Almassa, a change from

¹⁶ Savran, *op.cit.*, pp. 80-1

¹⁷ Dura Da Ponte, "Tennessee Williams' Gallery of Feminine characters", *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, vol10, pp.7-26 edited by Richard Beale Davis and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1965) p. 16

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19

a creature of repression to one of sexual license, she becomes a willing magnet to traveling salesmen. Da Ponte has a further insight of the significance of these characters' nymphomania: "It is a study ...of the collapse of a whole system of ideals, of an entire way of life, an allegory perhaps, of the south, its ruins and debasement, its decline and fall".¹⁹ Almassa's nymphomania in *Rituals* invites similar interpretation. Her behavior is a revolt, but one that takes on a more feminist and social perspective. It is a wish and an effort to put an end to her segregated condition; to become part of the public life and male sphere. More importantly, her rebellion is against the double standards of a society where women are restrained while men go free with their corrupted hypocritical lifestyle. All three characters Blanch, Alma and Almassa share similar aspects in their backgrounds. Both the southern puritanical upbringing of Blanch and Alma and the Muslim Middle Eastern code of morality in Almassa's life stress to a great extent the issue of female chastity and sexual abstinence. The Arabic background may go to an extreme in this case. Thus all characters have suffered sexual repression which is suffocating in most cases. They rebel in their own ways.

Female characters in the works of both writers are transgressive. They break the rigid barriers of distinct sexual identity and acquire the power ascribed to men. Robert Emmet Jones notices the interchangeability between the male and female identity in Williams's characterization.

Despite certain archetypal characters in Williams's cannon, many of his major dramatis personae are basically sexually ambivalent and could, as the characters of most other major dramatists, could not, easily have been portrayed as members of the opposite sex.²⁰

The sexual identity of his main characters is ambiguous because Williams is fond of reversing sexual roles. The conventional role of male as the aggressor in a sexual relationship is rarely to be found in Williams's plays, the most notable exception being *Streetcar Named Desire*. Women in late plays have valorized sexual desire while men are the sex objects sought by desperate women whose interests are usually predatory. Take Maggie in contrast to Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Maxine in contrast to Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana*, Lady in contrast to Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*, Alexandra Del Lago in contrast to Chance in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and Serafina in contrast to the truck driver in *The Rose Tattoo*. "Men are passive sex objects and children to be manipulated by aggressive mother figures and they masochistically seem to enjoy it"²¹. On the other hand the aforementioned women are uninhibited matrons of physical pleasure who celebrate the body and equate desire with life. They are "the feminine counterpart of D.H. Lawrence's sexually contended male."²² None of these women are shackled by the puritanical moral code. They have bypassed it just as Williams himself had. As his puritanical burden was alleviated in time, he came into terms with his own homosexuality. All of these women become more empowered than Blanch, or Alma; less vulnerable, less guilt ridden and manifesting stronger desire. They convey the same message that sex and desire are equal to life and the opposite is repression and death. It is exactly the same message that becomes the leitmotif of Wannus's play *Rituals*.

Profligacy as a symbol of female rebellion and empowerment is seen most clearly in Williams's *Orpheus Descending* and Wannus' *Rituals*. Lady (*Orpheus*) celebrates life versus death and desire versus repression. In this play, desire is not merely a strong physical drive that gives life meaning as in Serafina's case. To Lady desire takes further social implication of rebellion against repression and prejudice. But Lady's triumph does not last

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Robert Emmet Jones, "Sexual Roles in the works of Tennessee Williams", *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, edited by Jac Thrope, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977) pp. 545-57. p. 545

²¹ Ibid., p. 549

²² Signi Lenea Falk, *Tennessee Williams*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1961) p. 95

long. However strong and full of life, she is killed by her very dying husband who accuses Val of shooting her. The play ends with the men of the town pursuing Val with blowtorches. Her rebellion and empowerment are short lived and the conventional patriarchal system has to restore itself. The only optimistic vision rests with Carol who "represents freedom and isolation in a play that denies all human connection except brief encounter."²³ Lady and Carol seem to be the base of Wannus's later conception of Moumena/Almassa.

Almassa is the peak of Wannus's feminist revolt. In her transformation from a creature of repression to one of sensuality and freedom she owes a great deal to the conception of Williams characters Blanch, Alma, Serafina, Lady and Carol. She is ironically named Moumena (believer in God, or conformer), but she turns out to be a feminist rebel. She starts out as a domesticated noble lady, wife of the notable Naquib Al-Ashraf. Typical of her class and gender, she is expected to be guardian of moral and social values. Contrary to the expected stereotyping, she is a fully-fledged woman conceived in the playwright's imagination as highly aware of her physical desires and gender-based social inequality. She is an intellectual person who has read almost all the books in her father's library and that of her husband. She is also witty as revealed in her repartee with Mufti. She adeptly and cleverly wins her divorce and freedom by means of her clever planning. Her attitude to marriage is atypical. Contrary to the common perception, she does not value the role of wife as the most respectable and sacred duty. Her own perception of marriage owes something to the extreme views of the feminist Kate Millet. It is not too far removed from prostitution as it "involves an exchange of the female's domestic services and sexual consortium in return for financial support"²⁴. Moumena flirts with this dichotomy in her playful remark: "Wife-whore and whore-wife, a nice and dangerous playing of words" (Rites, Sc.4, p.494). Moumena's rebellion against the values of her society is two-fold. On the one hand, her nymphomania is a natural reaction against repression, as she speaks of breaking "the first shackles that restrained me since my birth" (Rites, Sc4, p.500) Her awareness of her repression is suffocating. This accounts for the huge desire to break free. She used to envy her husband's concubines not because they have a share in him but because they were uninhibited and unrestrained.

She is similar to Alma Winemiller (Summer and Smoke) in that both come from a religious background. Having been sexually repressed all their lives, they experience a conflict between body and spirit and eventually set free. The reversal of sexual roles in the cases of Almassa and Alma is strikingly analogous. Both exchange places with their male counterparts. Alma is metamorphosed into sexual license at the same time when Dr. John Buchanan is converted to spirituality. Similarly, Moumena breaks the shackles and restraints and moves to complete profligacy, while her husband undergoes a complete transformation of personality. He divorces the body and leads a spiritual existence of the extreme Sophist kind. Clearly Moumena in the beginning is trying hard to fight and conquer the temptation of profligacy. In Alma's case she calls it "doppelganger" a schizophrenic duality. In Moumena's case she assumes another name "Almassa" as she is metamorphosed to freedom.

Almassa's nymphomania could be accounted for as a genetically inherited desire from her lecherous father. She holds him responsible for teaching her sensual pleasures as she watched him having secret relations with the domestic servants and being hypocritical about them. However, to blame genetics for her physical desire is to evacuate the play from its feminist message. Moumena's rebellion should be seen, like that of Blanche, as a reaction against the double standards practiced in the patriarchal world she lives in. Blanche was repelled to watch her male relatives overspending on their "epic fornication", while she was expected to

²³ John M. Glum. "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in Suddenly Last Summer, Orpheus Descending and Sweet Bird of Youth, The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams, edited by Mathew C. Roudane, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 140

²⁴ Kate Millet, *sexual Politics*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970) P. 47

remain the guardian of values despite the huge financial and social changes in the south. Likewise Moumena witnessed her respectable husband and pious father leading secretly dissolute lives. Thus Almassa's conversion to prostitution, like that of Blanche and Alma, is meant to be a bid for freedom and sexual equality versus repression and double standards of morality. Ironically, in her prostitution, she proves to be more honest and straightforward than the corrupted male society represented in Naquib, the Mufti and the Sheik who have their own crooked ways.

Wannus and Williams, both influenced by D.H.Lawrence, equate life with desire. Souad in *Historical Miniatures* insists on consummating their marriage during the war. Connubial pleasure will make her surpass death and defeat:

Who is looking for serenity at this time? We are dreaming, Let us dream; let us soar over the ruins and the suffering. Let us invent a small victory for both of us. We will surpass Tamburlane and the Tartars. We will surpass the bitterness and the defeat. We will soar up in a blue summer sky. Close your eyes and slide into the dream. We are flying. Do you feel that we are flying?" (*Historical Miniatures* Sc.8 p. 450)²⁵

Similarly Almassa's nymphomania indicates her love for life versus repression and death. One should not forget that Almassa/Moumena is conceived in the poetic imagination of the playwright. Her poetic expressions, florid language, and the required stylized lofty acting make her depart from the realistic mode and be closer to a mythical figure; female Dionesus or an earth goddess of pleasure and freedom, beyond reproach or moral judgement. When she is asked about her aim in taking up this profession she answers:

"This seems ambiguous and difficult to explain. As I am wavering on the brink and am invited by the abyss, I feel, at the moment of my fall, as if my pores will grow colorful feathers. The feathers will come out complete and they blossom from roots of my own soul. I will soar in space just like birds and breeze and sunray. I want to cut the coarse fiber ropes that engrave my flesh and restrain my body. They are plaited ropes made of fear, decency, chastity and the phobia of uncleanness. These ropes are made of sermons, verses, exhortations, proverbs and wills of ancestors.

Tin pates upon tinplates, the body withers and shrinks underneath. Oh Sheik Kassem, I want to set my body free, to untie these ropes that suck my blood and repress my body." (*Rituals*, Sc. 5, p. 554)

When she is killed by her brother, she confirms this allegorical and mythical conception: "Safwan, I am a story, stories cannot be slaughtered. I am an obsession, longing and allurements". (*Rites*, Sc.15, p.597)

Just as she is collapsing she finalizes her mythical characterization:

"My story will bloom now like the orchards of Damascus after a rainy winter. Almassa is expanding and spreading. It is spreading with the thoughts, with the obsession and the stories." (*Rites*, Sc.15, p. 597)

This is how Wannus escapes the moral judgement of his audience. He appeases them by having her killed on the realistic level while transcending realism to put his theme across. This brings to mind Marlowe's practice when Dr. Faustus who represents Renaissance ambition had to be killed in order to appease the mediocrally inclined audience. Similar to the murder of Almassa, Lady, the earth goddess who is healed by sex and fertility in *Orpheus Descending*, is killed at the hands of her dying husband signifying the ultimate victory of the male order. Both authors at the end have to restore the sex/gender system. "In killing Val and Lady, the men kill part of the potential for a new, non patriarchal order".²⁶ The one who is left alive at the end is

²⁵ All quotations from the plays of Sadllah Wannus are my own translations.

²⁶ Mathew C. Roudane, *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, (UK: Cambridge University press 1997), p.140.

Carol who, like the growing myth of Almassa will stand for freedom and defiance of traditional morality To round up the argument, it is noteworthy that both playwrights rejected the idealized stereotypes of female characters. Williams rejected the beloved American stereotype: the good wife, good mother, and loving sweetheart. His female characters are anti-heroines manifesting varying degrees of vulnerability and power. Instead of the sentimental stereotype of the loving mother, we see the unnerving nagging mother in *Glass Menagerie* and the monstrous possessive mother Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Instead of the prim and respectable southern lady we have Blanch and Alma in *Streetcar and Summer and Smoke* who are plagued with nymphomania and at different stages of their lives turn to prostitution. Nancy Tischler in her study of Williams's female characters finds that Williams from his early plays broke the southern tradition of polite evasion and chivalric gynolatry. Yet in his very violation of the American tradition, Williams has delved deeper than most of his contemporaries into the essential feminine"²⁷

Wannus, on the other hand, flirts with the traditional notion of femininity. He presents some heroines as idols of power and resilience such as Dalal and Faria in *The Rape and Souad in Historical Miniatures*. Such superwomen are contrasted with multiple minor female characters who represent the low status women have in some sections of the society However, on the whole, he is similar to Williams in that he resists in the rest of his female characterization the idealization and stereotyping of women practiced in his culture and popular drama. Instead of the angel of the house, the good unselfish mother, the virtuous demure decent wife, his plays abound with female characters that are bitter and angry. His female characters are very often presented as extremely sexually active, ambitious and impatient with their domestic limitations. Thus they are sometimes externally conceived as harpies that are greedy unfaithful wives (Hanzala's wife, Najat, Farouk's wife in *A Day of Our Times*, Fadda in *The Epic of Mirage* and Yasmeen, wife of Jamaledin Sharaeji in *Historical Miniatures*). Some other times they are more sympathetically conceived as victims of male subjugation who turn out to become social rebels that will no longer adopt the traditional role of guardians of values like Moumena/ Almassa in *Rites*, Ghada and Mary in *Naughty Dreams*.

Just as Williams is the rebellious puritan, to borrow the title of Tischler's book, Wannus is the rebellious Muslim who shatters in Almassa's characterization- just like Williams did in Blanch- the chaste heroine/whore dichotomy and show women in their complexity.²⁸ Faucault, in his analysis of the patriarchal world, suggests that in the Greek world there was a dividing line between active actors in the drama of pleasures and the passive actors. The former were men, the subjects of sexual activity and the latter were women, boys and slaves, the objects of possible pleasures.²⁹ Wannus and Williams's sexually active female characters use men for their own pleasures. They are the subjects rather than the objects and thus behave not like women, boys or slaves but like men.

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²⁷ Nancy M. Tischler, "A Gallery of Witches", *Tennessee Williams, A Tribute*, edited by Jac Thrope, (Jackson: University press of Mississippi, 1977) pp.494-509).

²⁸ See Roudane, op.cit., p 22 for a similar view concerning Williams.

It is noteworthy that in *A Day of Our Times*, the playwright has a phobia from prostitution that spreads everywhere even in schools. He depicts it as a result and symptom of more serious social illnesses and general corruption.

²⁹ Nicholas Pagan, *Rethinking Literary biography: A Post modern Approach to Tennessee Williams*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993) p. 25

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