TRANS-MEDIATION OF GENDER IN ELIA KAZAN'S ADAPTATION OF A *STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

Zahra Nazemi
Razi University and University of Cordoba
zahra.nazemi72@gmail.com
Hossein Aliakbari Harehdasht
Persian Gulf University
haliakbari@pgu.ac.ir
Abdolmohammad Movahhed
Persian Gulf University
amovahed@pgu.ac.ir

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Abstract

Elia Kazan is among the first directors who adapted Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) for the cinema. Kazan's film adaptation was almost faithful to the original manuscript by sticking to Williams's words and sentences. However, even if one ignores the cultural and historical contexts, the alterations that take place in the process of trans-mediation cannot be disregarded, since the telling mode in the text changes to the showing mode in the media. With this hypothetical basis, the present study aims to detect the possible alterations in the adaptation of the play to examine gender roles in both texts. Using the ideas of Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), the authors have studied the verbal signs in the play together with the verbal and visual codes in the movie to assess how the film adaptation has incorporated the ideas of femininity, which are the main concerns of the play, too. The results of the study suggest that the alterations from the literary text to film have contributed to the development of female identity.

Keywords: Gender, Trans-mediation, Literary Adaptations, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Elia Kazan.

TRANSMEDIACIÓN DE GÉNERO EN LA ADAPTACIÓN DE ELIA KAZAN DE *UN TRANVÍA LLAMADO DESEO*

Resumen

Elia Kazan se encuentra entre los primeros directores que adaptaron el drama *Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo* (1951) de Tennessee Williams para el cine. La adaptación cinematográfica de Kazan es bastante fiel al libreto original, al seguir de cerca las palabras e ideas de Williams. Sin embargo, incluso si uno ignora los contextos culturales e históricos, no se pueden soslayar las alteraciones que suceden en el proceso de mediación, donde el modo de narración en el texto cambia al modo de visualización en el medio audiovisual. A partir de esta hipótesis, este estudio tiene como objetivo detectar las posibles alteraciones en la adaptación de la obra, para examinar los roles de género en ambos textos. Utilizando las ideas de Linda Hutcheon en *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), los autores han estudiado los signos verbales en la obra frente a los códigos verbales y visuales en la película para examinar cómo la adaptación cinematográfica ha incorporado las ideas de feminidad, que constituyen, asimismo, las principales preocupaciones de la obra original. Los resultados del estudio sugieren que los cambios operados del drama a la película contribuyen a la construcción de la identidad femenina.

Palabras clave: Género, Transmediación, Adaptaciones literarias, *Un Tranvía Llamado Deseo*, Elia Kazan.

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Persian Gulf University
haliakbari@pgu.ac.ir
Abdolmohammad Movahhed
Persian Gulf University
amovahed@pgu.ac.ir

1. Introduction

In 1951, Elia Kazan worked hand-in-hand with Tennessee Williams to adapt the latter's play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), into a movie. Kazan was determined to be as faithful as possible to the play. Although Oliver Saul had intended to write the script for the movie, he "mostly followed the dramatist's version" (Tüttelmann 2006: 3). As a result, the movie appeared to be very similar to the play. Nonetheless, the play's "notoriety and the censorship problems" made Hollywood producers doubtful about adapting it (Davison 2009: 61), and a few changes had to be applied to the movie to satisfy "the Production Code Administration" (51). For instance, Kazan was asked to censor the scene of Blanche's rape as well as her explanation about Allan's homosexuality (Phillips as cited in Blaschke 1999: 9). Eventually, twelve changes were made to the movie, "amounting to about four minutes of screen time" (9). Thus, despite Kazan's fidelity to the source manuscript, there are moments in the film in which differences can be noticed from Williams's play (see Hurst 2009: 3). In this article, however, the similarities between the original text and screen script will not be the focus of the study because, as already noted, critics have verified the fidelity of Kazan's movie to Williams's play.[1] Instead, because the two works are products of almost the same historical periods in America, we will try to investigate the differences regarding the gender roles of women in both works by examining

[1] See Ellen Dowling's commentary in (Davison 2009: 74).

the verbal and visual signs. The aim is to assess how this particular adaptation has re-constructed the gender identity of women, even though both the play and the adaptation belong to the same place and time, that is to say mid-20th century America.

2. Literature Review

Many critics have examined Kazan's adaptation (1951) of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Davison, for example, believes that the play was more successful than its movie adaptation (2009: 72). Hirsch also states that, due to Williams's "exotic" setting in the play, its film adaptations "are all visually interesting" (1979: 103). He argues that, although most of the scenes have been filmed in an apartment, "the film is not static" (103). Rather, "with its ominous shadows, prominent spotlights, tight close-ups and sharp camera angles, the film has a rich, brooding texture, [and] a compelling visual personality" (103-104). He, thus, suggests that Kazan has introduced "a new level of naturalistic performance" to the American cinema (106).

Cahir declares that the movie's efficacy results from the way the playwright and the director "made potentially destructive constraints work constructively in the movie" (Davison 2009: 74). Davison goes further to claim that both the play and its 1951 movie adaptation are open to interpretations (2009: 73). As she explains,

> Where expressionism offered Williams a means to communicate multiple views or positions within a framework of apparent reality, and thus explore the inability of language to express 'truth,' Kazan sought to rationalize characters' behaviors in terms of social and psychological causes, though he also sought to objectify their behavior—and their conflicts—via motion, action, and other visual elements. (260)

She, then, comments on the role of Stella and Stanley. As she asserts, Stella has a central role and Kazan introduces her as "the apex of the play's triangle" (58). The director, then, considers "her living in a 'sensual stupor,' with Stanley as the sole focus of her life" (58).

Admittedly, some critics have specifically addressed the question of gender. Byars, for instance, describes Kazan's movie as a "male-oriented melodrama" (1991: 73). He argues that in this movie, women are identified in terms of men and according to the "moral polarities" (64). Earthman also believes that the play, along with Kazan's adaptation of it, portrays "an epic struggle between ultramasculine and ultrafeminine forces" (2003: 274). In a similar way, O'Neill suggests that, at the heart of both the play and Kazan's

adaptation of it, lays "the portrayal of woman as the lynch-pin of the relationship between the individual and society" (2004: 169). All the above studies are interesting and informative in their own ways. However, this article is going to give a new perspective by presenting a detailed comparative reading of women's representation in Williams's play and Kazan's adaptation within the framework of Adaptation Studies.

3. Women in Williams and Kazan's *Streetcar*

Kazan's film adaptation is quite faithful to the original manuscript, sticking to the play's words and sentences. However, as Linda Hutcheon notes, the way text and media narrate stories are quite different. Thus, even if we ignore the cultural and historical contexts of adaptations, the alterations from the "telling mode" in plays to the "showing mode" in media can result in significant changes (Hutcheon 2013: 23). Hutcheon argues that showing "involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experiences in real time" (13), which is missing in the narratology of written texts. In fact, through the showing mode, the audience can enter a new stage of "direct perception" of the material (23). As she further explains,

> The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural "equivalents" for characters' emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects. (23)

In addition, media uses "indexical and iconic signs", while texts possess "symbolic and conventional" ones (43). As a result, the two modes can convey different meanings. Accordingly, although Kazan has been apparently faithful to Williams's manuscript, he has inevitably engaged in the act of re-creation of the play by employing visual and aural signs. In other words, he has used a variety of techniques to "visualize" Williams's work (Tripković-Samardžić 2016: 101). For example, he has made use of "close-up[s] and deep shadows" to represent "the complexity of the characters" (102). Also, the application of walls and the design of the furniture help him portray Blanche's entrapment in the apartment (Blaschke 1999: 8).

3.1. Domestic Roles

Hutcheon argues that "[s]ometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or

controversial; at other times, the adaptation 'de-represses' an earlier adapted text's politics" (2013: 147). The spirit of patriarchy that is highlighted in Williams's play makes the study of the traditional gender roles of women significant. However, in the movie adaptation, one finds more emphasis on the traditional gender roles of Stella and Blanche, and specifically, on the cult of domesticity and fidelity. Both in the play and its adaptation, Stella tries to show her allegiance and obedience to her husband on different occasions. For instance, when Stanley begs her to come back home after the quarrel in the third scene of the play, her "return down those stairs" testifies to her fidelity to him (Bloom 2005: 71).[2] Also, when Stanley stands in protest and asks for the dinner, she assures him that she has already prepared supper for him, which is indicative of her submission (Williams 1947: 32; Kazan 1951: 00:15:52).

In the adaptation, this obedience and allegiance is more highlighted. For instance, Stella never appears half-naked in front of strangers and hides her body to every man except to her husband (Kazan 1951: 00:15:23 and 00:33:11). By this, in fact, she tries to show her allegiance to him. In the movie, Stella respects her husband and cares for him much more than she does in the play. She hugs and kisses him frequently (for instance, 1951: 00:16:19 and 00:51:03), talks to him using kind and gentle words (1951: 00:15:28) and obeys him. These indicate her adherence to her traditional gender roles as a wife. Moreover, we find Stella and Blanche cleaning the house (1951: 00:52:01) and "making … some new slipcovers" (1951: 00:51:41), which are missing in the play. Consequently, in his adaptation of Williams's *Streetcar*, Kazan has intensified the traditional roles of women as wives by portraying the domestic roles that are either not mentioned in the play, or not as highlighted as in the movie.

3.2. Family Obligations

Blanche and Stella's first encounter happens at the bowling club. Unlike Stella's anxious look after Blanche's arrival in the play (Williams 1947: 16), Kazan's Stella greets Blanche with great eagerness and joy, and it is she who runs towards Blanche, calling her "Blanche, honey" to finally hug her tightly (Kazan 1951: 00:04:14). This signals the difference between the sisters in the play and the movie. Unlike in the play, Stella is not anxious about Blanche's arrival in the movie. Instead, she is worried about Blanche's anxiety and health, which is represented in her distressed facial expression when she finds

[2] This also happens in the movie. See Kazan 1951: 00:32:45.

Blanche hysteric in the bar (1951: 00:05:50). Stella loves Blanche very much. She prepares the bathtub for her to take a shower (1951: 00:07:23), hugs and assures her that she and Stanley will "get along fine together" (1951: 00:08:35), and tries to calm her down in every way (see for instance 00:05:22; 00:06:53; 00:16:23; 00:05:13). By adding these features to Blanche and Stella's relationships, Kazan portraits a closer and more intimate relationship between the sisters, as a result of which they find it crucial to take care of each other.[3]

3.3. Mental and Sexual Inclinations

Tennessee Williams starts his play with the picture of Stanley throwing meat over Stella and disdaining her in front of Mitch (Williams 1947: 10), whereas Elia Kazan prioritizes Blanche's arrival. Blanche is represented as a young, beautiful girl, dressed in fine clothes, which unlike Blanche's dress in Williams's play, are not white. Everything seems fine and nice with Blanche. Even the scene in the play in which Blanche robs the whisky bottle out of the closet without permission and drinks it (1947: 15) is omitted in the film; this gives a good impression of her to the audience from the beginning of the movie. However, examining the later scenes, we realize that she is as hysteric as Blanche is in the play. Her hysteria is even more intense as she screams and runs into the street (Kazan 1951: 00:10:34). By this, as well as demonstrating her "sweating and drinking" and showing "multiple sounds to which Blanche reacts emotionally," Kazan has tried to visualize her "anxiety and uneasiness" (Tripković-Samardžić 2016: 101).

The visual representations of Blanche's anxiety reduce the distance between her and the audience. Consequently, the audience will understand her more. Furthermore, as this introduction to her hysteria is a bit delayed, the prejudgments about her will also be delayed. Her anxiety is revealed to us when she starts to talk about her past in the bar while smoking a cigarette and shaking (Kazan 1951: 00:05:42), not when she is talking about ordinary issues. Thus, the director makes it clear to the audience that there is a strong reason behind her anxiety, which cannot be properly understood without knowing about her tragic past. Eventually, Kazan accentuates the picture of a woman who is psychologically ill.

When Blanche gets off the train, she immediately encounters a young boy (Kazan's replacement for Eunice), whom she asks for the address (00:02:03).

[3] For an analysis of the relationship between the Stella and Blanche in Williams's play see Nazemi, Aliakbari Harehdasht and Movahhed 2018: 559-560.

With her smile and flirting gestures, she tries to attract the boy even though she does not know him. The young boy then helps her, taking her hand and luggage, to get on the streetcar (00:02:30). The selection of a young gentle boy instead of an old woman and Blanche's immediate flirtations with him foreshadows her later coquetries with Mitch and Stanley, and suggests her strong inclinations toward men and sex.

Furthermore, by highlighting this characteristic from the very beginning of the movie, Kazan attempts to emphasize this aspect in her character. Although in the play her coquettish behavior is frequently implied, it is more visible in the movie because the audience can see her gestures and looks. Even though Blanche asserts that she finds Stanley "common" (Williams 1947: 80; 00:48:05), in many instances she talks to him seductively, attracting his attention to her beauty and physique, and eventually, contributing to the final rape. Stanley, too, "Despite his violent nature, … is at times an appealing—even charming—character" (Koprince 2009: 53). He is also very "handsome, unaffected, and down-to-earth" (2009: 53), and the female characters in Williams's play "desire spectacular males." This is the reason why Blanche finds "the sight of Stanley's rippling muscles" attractive and, at the same time, alarming (Hirsch 1979: 11), and tries to attract and win him over Stella.

In the movie adaptation, to attract the attention of Stanley, Blanche frequently uses gestures that signal her flirtations. For example, when Stanley tells her that "a woman must lay her cards on the table" for him, she laughs (Kazan 1951: 00:23:40), signifying her consent to his demand. When she makes sure that Stella is out, she asks Stanley to button up her dress (00:21:40). While Stanley is busy buttoning up the dress, she looks playfully at him and appears willing to flirt with him (00:22:12). During the discussion over the loss of Belle Reve, Blanche pours perfume on herself coquettishly in front of him (00:24:34) and seductively takes the fur in front of herself and asks Stanley whether she is attractive or not (00:22:44). Moreover, she looks at Stanley's body when he tries to change his T-shirt (00:13:18). She also touches him in several instances. For example, when she hears the scream of a cat, she jumps in fear and touches Stanley's hands (00:13:48; see also 00:23:53). All the instances indicate her attempts to arouse Stanley sexually. Eventually, Blanche's gender identity is associated with desire and sexuality.

The sexual inclination of Blanche is not restricted to her treatment of Stanley. For example, in their first encounter, Blanche smiles and talks to Mitch very gently and coquettishly (00:31:39), or, when he wants to show her the inscription on the case of the cigarette, she does not ask him to take

the light closer so as to see the inscription better but moves Mitch's hands herself (00:35:11; see also 00:35:17), trying to provoke his desire. All the instances mentioned indicate that, in the movie, Blanche's identity is recognized as more inclined towards sexuality. Kazan also intensifies this picture by the use of close-ups that help reduce the distance between the audience and the characters, revealing the characters' emotions to the audience, who can now "witness a subtle way in which Blanche encourages Stanley's [and Mitch's] interest in her and contributes to the act of rape" (Tripković-Samardžić 2016: 103). By her "exaggerated femininity," therefore, she tries to put "Stanley into an exaggeratedly masculine position" (Earthman 2003: 275), and eventually, Stanley's rape of Blanche suggests the "the complete defeat of everything Blanche is" (275).

Moreover, both in the play and the movie, Blanche possesses unique feminine characteristics that all contribute to her gender identity. By her excessive attention to her appearance, she does not rise above her gender roles, but acts in favor of them. For example, "she wears frilly cocktail dresses and white gloves, soaks for hours in a hot bath, lies about her age, refuses to be seen in strong light, and attempts to enchant every man she meets" (Earthman 2003: 274). As Tripković-Samardžić argues,

> special attention in the film is given to the choice of costumes (Blanche's selected, sophisticated, feminine garments made up of chiffon, rayon, silk and lace) and props (fans, creams, perfumes, pins, rollers, depilatories, suitcase with carefully selected items) … are part of Blanche's identity. (2016: 101)

Kazan stresses this image by portraying Blanche as a person who does not agree to meet Stanley before she takes a shower and looks fresh (1951: 00:05:18). This indicates that she uses her appearance as a means to attract men. We always find her fresh and pretty in the play, much younger than her age. However, Kazan also refers to the reality of her life by showing the wrinkles on her forehead and the glasses that she has to wear when reading papers in the movie (00:26:39). Thus, in Kazan's version, a degree of reality behind Blanche's alluring appearance is also given to represent a more honest picture of her identity.

This concern with sexuality exists to some extent in Elia Kazan's Stella, too. She adores her husband's physique, but not moral and behavioral characteristics (00:05:06). She touches him frequently (00:16:20), is duped into coming back home by Stanley's kisses after all the quarrel that he has made (01:25:04), and forgives him for his violent attitude at the poker night

after the two make love (00:43:14). She, like Blanche, is in need of somebody to support her (Blaschke 1999: 10) although she is aware of Stanley's brutal attitude. She, like Blanche, is obsessed with sexuality. However, because she has a man in her life, she does not need to cling to strangers. The source of all these portrayals of sexuality in the movie might be Hollywood's emphasis on love scenes. To attract more groups of audience, Hollywood movies are replete with similar love scenes in which the audience's desire would be inevitably stimulated.

3.4. Gender Violence

Hurst argues that the most significant difference between Tennessee Williams's play and its 1951 adaptation is that "Stanley has a more powerful role" in the movie (2009: 4). This might be a result of the cult of masculinity and the dominant male stereotypes in the cinema in the 1950s because, as Gauntlett observes, at the time, most of the films "focused on [a] male hero", who "made the decisions which led the story, and were assertive, confident and dominant" (Gauntlett 2008: 50). Women, on the other hand, as in the case of Blanche DuBois, "had important roles," but they were usually "shown as frightened, in need of protection and direction" (2008: 50). In addition, the notions of "desire and sexuality" that are represented in the play are usually associated with domestic violence (Kolin 1993: 1), and that is the way Stanley, as the main male protagonist, violates Stella and Blanche, considering them the 'Other'. Hence, there is a relationship between men's violence and women's gender identity: as men become more aggressive against women, women's portrayal will be more associated with Otherness.[4]

The very manifestation of the bowling scene in which Stanley is "making all the rhubarb" (00:05:01) shows his inclination to violence. Stanley, who, in Williams's words, is "a richly feathered male bird among hens" (Williams 1947: 28), "loves all that is male-identified" like "bowling, poker, whiskey …, crude jokes, and his 'baby doll,' Stella" (Earthman 2003: 274). He is the one whose loud masculine cries frighten the audience, too. His violence is so intense that he can beat all his friends at the poker party and push them out of the house (Kazan 1951: 00:39:54). However, attacks on women in the movie are much more intense than in the play, since "the main conflict" in the play "is between Old South gentility and a brutal new order" (Kolin 2000: 54). Stanley, in Kazan's version, is "more violent and vicious," and it shows the

[4] Nazemi, Aliakbari Harehdasht and Movahhed (2016: 68-69) discuss the question of Otherness from a feminist perspective in Williams's play.

audience from the beginning "that he has already planned something in mind" (Hurst 2009: 4), which is to finally rape Blanche. In other words, the screenplay attributes "a direct criminal intent to Stanley" which is not implied in the play (5). By this, the movie gives more power and dominance to the men and less to women, contributing to women's portrayal as the Other.

While Williams describes Stanley's harsh attitude towards women and reports the way he considers them as sexual objects (Williams 1947: 28), Kazan visualizes this, portraying the way Stanley gazes at Blanche's body when she talks to him (00:13:18). He also represents Stanley's rape of Blanche in the final scene after beating her, pushing her forcefully on the bed (01:48:11) and breaking the mirror in which the picture of Blanche is reflected while she is struggling with him and finally, is defeated by his violence and desire (01:52:34). In many instances, Stanley beats and pushes Stella harshly although he is aware of her pregnancy.[5] He not only has no respect for women to the point that he abuses his wife in front of the others frequently[6], but also does not allow the other men to have respect for them, either (00:31:03). As a result, the movie highlights Stanley's violence towards women more than the play does and intensifies women's oppression under his domineering attitude using the visual representations of these brutalities. Eventually, as Kleb argues, Blanche becomes "the Unreason, the feminine 'Other,'" (Kolin 1993: 7), while Stanley is "the brute," "the absolute monarch" and the one "who interrogates and then punishes physically" (8). Therefore, women's identity is associated with their being 'the Other' under the ruling ferocity of men who are considered the 'self'.

This patriarchal empowerment against women can also be detected in the image of Mitch. Although in both the play and the movie he is described as a kind and polite man who acts gently towards Blanche and Stella and who "seems superior to the others" (Kazan 1951: 00:32:10), he, like the others, follows the codes of patriarchy, and this is represented in the movie more than it is in the play. When Blanche asks him to bow in front of her and then present the flowers, he hesitates a little bit, looks around to make sure that nobody is looking at him and disdaining his respect for her, and then acts as Blanche has asked for (01:03:14). Another instance is when Blanche laughs loudly: he asks anxiously whether she laughs at him and checks the surrounding to make sure that nobody is looking at them so he wouldn't be

[5] See Kazan 1951: 00:18:36; 00:18:44; 00:19:22; 00:39:05; 01:28:25; 01:28:42; these cases are not mentioned or highlighted in the play.

[6] Kazan 1951: 00:31:22. Also see the third scene in Williams's *Streetcar*.

belittled by the others (01:05:14). He is afraid that others would notice his respect for Blanche –a woman– and deride him. This reveals that Blanche, and generally women, are the 'inferior' type in the society and Mitch, who belongs to patriarchy, nonetheless, submits to this binary opposition of man vs. woman. Furthermore, Mitch is the person who breaks the door to enter the house angrily when he understands about Blanche's misdeeds (01:30:37), while in the play, it is she who "lets him in" (Williams 1947: 130). He also beats Blanche so harshly that she is pushed away on to the chair as a result of which she cries (Kazan 1951: 01:34:33); this is also missing in the play. The violence that is so explicitly emphasized in the movie adaptation contrasts with what the censors had asked for: that the director should be conservative about the "explicit" representations of "violence" and similar taboo issues (Davison 2009: 9). Thus, Kazan attempts to represent men as more violent and disdaining towards women in the movie than in the play, and portrays women as the oppressed, inferior, weak type against the powerful, violent, and domineering men.

Furthermore, unlike the play's ending, in which Stella and Stanley find their reunion marked by love after Blanche's departure (Williams 1947: 166), in Kazan's adaptation Stella punishes Stanley by rejecting him and decides not to live with him anymore (1951: 02:03:27). Blanche argues that this is how society punishes Stanley for his brutal actions (Blaschke 1999: 10) so as to represent the negative consequences of his cruelty and to reconcile all the violence directed towards Blanche and Stella. Obviously, the cinema, which addresses a wider and more diverse audience than literature, should display less inhumanity and savagery. As such, Stella's punishment is, in fact, a very difficult one for Stanley because "losing Stella and his child had always been his weak spot" (Blaschke 1999: 10; see also Kolin 1993: 10).

Finally, the way Stella beats Stanley's friends and pushes them out of the house in the movie (Kazan 1951: 00:39:02) provides the audience with the picture of a woman who attempts to act against her repressed position, imposed by patriarchy. In the same manner, Blanche rises against Stanley, violating her privacy, by pushing him away when he tries to find the papers in Blanche's luggage (00:25:29). Stella and Blanche shout at Stanley and Mitch in several instances (00:18:34; 00:23:56; 00:38:56; 01:35:04). In the play, Blanche admits that she has told Allan that she knows that he hates her (Williams 1947: 109), while, in the movie, she declares that it is she who has told Allan that she hates her (01:14:09). Therefore, although women are abused more harshly in the movie, women in Kazan's version struggle more

to escape their prescribed gender identity and to fight the "brutal, unattractive, and villainous" men, using Davison's words (2009: 74).

4. Conclusion

In this article, Tennessee Williams's female characters were compared to those of Kazan's movie adaptation. Although the scripts of the two works were similar and the two were products of almost the same historical periods in America, the transition from the written text to the cinema not only imposed changes on the overall structure of the adapted play, it also had an impact on the gender identity of women as well. After examining the roles of women as wives and sisters, their roles in terms of behavioral and moral traits and also their identity as associated with Otherness, it was concluded that, in Kazan's movie adaptation, women's traditional roles as wives doing housework, obeying and respecting husbands and sticking to the codes of fidelity are more highlighted than in the play. Moreover, a more intimate relationship between the sisters can be noticed in the play, compared with the movie. In the adaptation, women's identity is highly associated with sexuality, probably as a result of the influence of Hollywood's needs. Finally, while there is more violence directed against women in the movie, this violence and animosity is mediated by the punishment that the director has decided for Stanley at the end of the movie.

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