



Marriage: An Illusive Reality in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Abstract

*The deep uneasiness in the mind of Albee regarding the American way of life made him a satirist. He attacked the manners, the mores and the cultural assumptions that characterized the Americans. His strong feeling for the alienation of the individuals, their loss of faith and human values brought him closer to the continental playwrights of the absurd. The intention of Theatre of the Absurd is to make a man face the human condition as it really was. So the necessity arose for new modes of expression, new convention of art. In his plays Albee violated all the standards by which a normal play could be judged. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the relationship between Martha and George is absurd because it is based on an illusion. Albee explores personal failure of a mother who tries in vain to solve the problems of her existence in marriage, motherhood and her barrenness. The paper attempts to expose the illusion made in marriage and Albee's faith in humanity, as it is proved through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

Keywords-*Absurdity, Illusion, Reality, Marriage, Sterility, Alienation, Dream child*

American Society

The Second World War which left nothing untouched, unmobilized and undisturbed gave a rude shock to the whole world. It made the US the most powerful and richest nation of the world out of which the American Dream was born. However, the dream was turning into a nightmare for the more conscious American. The society was succumbing to the paradox of materialism. Social harmony, proximity to nature and love within the family circle was a distant cry. Racial strife, the rise of cosmopolis, the decentralization of the family life, the rise of individualism and the emptiness of togetherness were in vogue. To fill the moral vacuum, the modern dramatists like Edward Albee and others responded with an imaginative picturisation of the social changes.

Edward Albee

Edward Franklin Albee's first literary effort was largely confined to poetry and he continued to think of himself primarily as a poet. Even then he was a professional playwright. He was strikingly productive of ten plays, an opera and three adaptations. Albee sets *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in a fictional 'Carthage', a new city which was razed to the ground by very real Romans in 146 A.D. by 5th century, and has found in the 19th century B.C. by semi legendary, deceitful Dido. It had again become a power which St. Augustine in his 'Confession' called 'A Cauldron of unholy loves'. Albee's unholy lovers are George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, whose names evoke America's first and childless white house couple.

Absurdity in Albee's plays

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The deep uneasiness in the mind of Albee regarding the American way of life made him a satirist. He attacked the manners, the mores and the cultural assumptions that characterized the Americans. Although he was not an absurd-dramatist in the tradition of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet, his strong feeling for the alienation of the individuals, their loss of faith and human values brought him closer to the continental playwrights of the absurd. Albee defined 'The Theatre of the Absurd' in *New York Times Magazine*: "The Theatre of the Absurd makes no sense in man's attempt to make sense for himself because the moral religious, political and social structures which man has elected to 'illusion' himself, have collapsed" (30). The intention of Theatre of the Absurd is to make a man face the human condition as it really was. So the necessity arose for new modes of expression, new convention of art. In his plays Albee violated all the standards by which a normal play could be judged.

Illusion

Albee suggests that illusion is an American weakness and the American drama has also been much concerned with illusion. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the relationship between Martha and George is absurd because it is based on an illusion. Continuously for twenty-one years they are living with the idea that they have a son. The child is conceived in the mind and is growing with time. The fact of living with an illusion – a growing mental child – is absurd. The drama is also a drama of human error, disappointment and frustration. Albee explores personal failure of a mother who tries in vain to solve the problems of her existence in marriage, motherhood and her barrenness.

George and Martha talk nonsense while waiting for the late night guests to come. Martha, treating the illusion to be real before the guests, becomes responsible for the death of the illusion, their mental child. The plot does not move, but the image of human situation in the American society unfolds gradually. The open end of the drama does not give any solution because Albee leaves it with the audience/reader. After the death of the 'mental son', the destruction of the illusion, the end of the make-belief world of happiness, one does not know whether there is any promise of realization. As Sandhya Rani Sahoo finds, "Albee focuses on the twisted nature of human relationships that evolves within the establishment as a result of materialism and parasitism, on the deceptive nature of ambition, emotional insufficiency of individuals and the marriage of convenience" (133).

Marriage

Albee points out that in marriage the major motivating forces as seen by Americans are economic and social. Marriage which is an institution for procreation through togetherness loses its meaning to mechanical and physiological reflexes. Corrosion of feeling, intimacy, commitment and sex are treated not as acts of consummation but consumption. Marriage becomes a matter of expediency, an occasion for vivid antagonism, a highway to success and an opportunity for sexual fun and games.

Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Dominates the scene and towers over her husband. As Stenz observes she is "the product of a society which encourages a woman to believe that marriage and motherhood are the only solution to the problems of living" (28). Martha, the daughter of a college president, got married to George with an ambition that one day George will take over her father's place in the college. She is six years elder to George. George and Martha are intelligent and sensitive enough to build proper weapons for their war with each other. Though she is as bright as George, she is vulgar and earthy. Her undirected intelligence and imagination dissipated her energy in vain. Martha is the victim not only of her lack of self-esteem but also of her won thwarted aggressiveness. She mercilessly abuses her husband. It turns her scornful and she remains isolated.

Human beings are alienated from each other in fulfilling their various dreams and desires. They have confined themselves to their small world of selfishness, ambition and impotence. As Sandhya Rani observes, "Albee is disturbed and agonized by the extent of the dislocation of people's relationships and the imprisoning isolation" (109). Loss of human relationship leads to lack of human feeling and contact. And the ultimate result is 'sterility'. Sterility is the central image of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and is typical of the society as a whole. It is created out of the American way of life and gradually has engulfed the human race. Paul Goodman says, "Our present organized system of abundant society does not want men" (12). As a result, the American dream – the young man – is born with sterility, and not been able to love anyone with body.

As an allegory of American society, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* attacks the conventional American society and the people living therein. George is 46 years old and is an

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Associate Professor of History. He is capable of enforcing the old ideals and his commitment to a vision of private and public responsibility. He is a failure; he has not achieved anything in his life. He does not do anything and never does anything. Out of utter disappointment in his profession he says: "Professor of Latin was buried...under the shrubbery around the chapel...I have no reason to doubt it...that we make excellent fertilizers" (31). George is opposed to the idea of American Dream child. Once the test tube baby is born, nature's diversity will no longer be the goal. All the children will be 'superb' and 'sublime'; the imbalances will be corrected; propensity of various diseases will be gone and longevity assured. But the divinity of nature will also be lost, and result in alienation. The man will be left to drift and face his own evil.

Nick and Honey are another couple in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, who are also the product of American society, function as a contrast to George and Martha. Nick is a young and ambitious biologist, and is full of smugness. He does not like to get involved with people but gets married to Honey because of her hysterical pregnancy, and for her money. On his sexual attractiveness Nick makes himself a foil for Martha and in the sterile world they act for sham creation. Honey is again an image of sterility. She is the defenseless female and a weaker partner. Peter Wolf says, "the enormous personal sadness in the marriage of George and Martha, Nick and Honey springs from their failure to have a child" (260).

Hope in Reality

Stenz goes further to say that "the presence of one real child would not have guaranteed them a harmonious life. The real child would have born into the unholy cauldron of his mother's and his father's unresolved personal and emotional problems" (33). With this crucial revelation, Albee ends the play with the 'exorcism' of the fantasy-child. The ambivalence between the illusion and reality leads to the death of the dream child. George, in order to bring back Martha to reality declares their imaginary son's death. The game they were playing for last twenty-three years has to be renounced. The time for illusion is over.

Martha is afraid of Virginia Woolf because it may symbolize illusion, imaginary child, sterility, childlessness, etc. Camus suggests that man deprived of illusion, feels a stranger. But Albee's contention is that absurdity springs from continued adherence to illusion. Albee attacks the absurdity of illusion rather than absurdity of reality. He is very confident that the ideals that

shaped and sustained a societal institution can be misinterpreted. But the hope that flickered and kept the life going is repetition of slogans of love, relationships and togetherness and affirmation of faith from time to time.

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