

Edward Albee: A Dramatist in Protest

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This study is an attempt to explore the major social and moral concerns of Edward Albee (1928-) in two of his famous plays: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* . In these plays Albee reveals his protest against corrupt cultural values and the false concept of manhood and womanhood .

He also exposes the perverted husband-wife relationships which lead to frustrations and nightmares . Themes of social inequality , racial distinction , loss and death are never absent of Albee's mind. In his representations of the American social life , Albee focuses on the artificial nature of many human relationships in his society .

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? is a realistic portrayal of the dominance of the illusive dreams of the American elite . The play is set in an American college.

It presents the events of one night spent by two couples who stay up drinking after a party given by the President of the college. The four characters of the play reveal the history of their marriages. George is a middle-aged professor of History. Martha, his wife , is the daughter of the President of the college. Nick is a young professor of Biology. Honey, his wife, is a rich heiress of her father. Albee criticizes their mercenary marriages.

Edward Albee believes that despite the material richness of the American society , the American civilization is essentially empty . This idea is reflected through the sterility of the characters in the play. The two families in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* are childless. George and Martha create an illusive dream by pretending that they have a handsome child. The episode of the imaginary child is used to expose the loneliness of those people. The child does not exist at all ; it is a shared illusive dream of George and his wife to add some solace to their barren life :

George: ...Our son ...

Martha: ...Our son was born in a September night not unlike tonight, though tomorrow, and twenty ... one ... years ago ...he was a healthy child, red, bawling child, with slippery firm limbs...

George: Martha thinks she saw him at delivery ... *

Their dream of having a child is a lie and it will never come true. They try to escape their painful reality by creating a fantasy –son. They want to keep their marriage alive though they are incapable of giving birth to any baby. The twenty-first birthday of their son-myth is meant to show the falsehood in which they have been living during these long years.

Nick and Honey are also childless for Honey does not want to have any children. This sterility is both moral and symbolic. These people have lost contact with the traditionally cherished values and they live in complete disharmony. Hence, the life of the intellectuals has become a barren desert. No wonder, then, that the whole civilization of the U.S.A. has become decadent. The personal failure of the characters in the play represents the failure of a culture that revolves only around power and money which are the cornerstones of the American dreams of happiness and fulfillment.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee attacks the husband-wife relationship. Marriage, which is supposed to be a moral bond between man and woman, has become false and artificial. It becomes a means to an end. Martha marries George simply because she wants him to succeed her father in the college.

When he fails to satisfy her materialistic drives, she begins to humiliate him even in front of his guests:

Martha: You've really screwed up, George.

George [spitting it out]: Oh, for God's sake Martha!

Martha: I mean it ... you really have.

George [barely contained anger now]: You can sit there in that chair of yours, you can sit there with the gin running of your mouth, and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart ALL NIGHT ...and that's perfectly all right... that's OK... .

Martha: YOU CAN STAND IT!

George: I CANNOT STAND IT!

(p. 92)

The married life of George and Martha is qualified by George's failure to advance in his profession. Notably he has no hope of any

* Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Penguin Books(1962), p.127. Further references will appear in my text.

achievement . He has remained as an associate professor for more than twenty years . Martha teases him with his intellectual failure :

Martha: I mean he'd be ... no good ... at trustees' dinners, fund raising .
He didn't have any ... personality, you know what I mean ? Which was disappointing to Daddy , as you can imagine. So, here I am, stuck with this flop

George (Turning around) : ...don't go on , Martha ...

Martha : This BOG in the History Department .

George: ... don't , Martha , don't ...

Martha: ...who's married to the President's daughter , who's expected to *be* somebody , some bookworm , somebody who's so damn... contemplative , he can't make anything out of himself , somebody without the *guts* to make anybody proud of him .

(pp.56-7)

George cannot come upto the standard as a husband since he fails in his job. He is a “flop” who does not deserve Martha's respect .Hence, Martha becomes the dominant figure in the family . Moreover, George is a cuckold for he does not prevent his wife's amorous advances to seduce Nick . Edward Albee attacks this vulgar family and urges the spectators to get the moral lesson.

Nick got married from Honey with an eye on her money which she has inherited from her father . This marriage is artificial because there no passion between them. This is a common defect in the affluent societies .Neither of them is completely sincere and faithful in life.Nick holds the idea that he can get promotion in his profession through making love with the wives of the staff of the college.This is why he tries to seduce Martha as she is the daughter of the President of the college .This shows his obscenity. It is worthwhile to add that the college is called New Carthage . The name is suggestive by itself. It has a dual symbolic significance .Literally , it means a decadent city morally and spiritually. It is approaching its destruction . This is why George's role as a professor of History is reduced meaningless for the last twenty years .Nick is a young professor of Science , but again his role is impotent as he loses connection with humanity .There is no hope in him. On the other hand,Honey reveals her betrayal of Nick as she does not want to have a baby. She gets rid of her pregnancies without letting her husband know about what she is doing.

George teases her sarcastically :

George:Does *he* know that ? Does that ...stud you're married to know about that hunh ?

Honey: About what ? Stay away from me !

George : Don't worry , baby ... I wouldn't Oh,my God, that *would* be a joke , wouldn't it !

But don't worry , baby . Hey ! How you do it ? Hunh ? How
do you make your secret little murders stud-boy doesn't know
about , hunh ? Pills ? PILLS ? You got a secret supply of pills ?
Or what ? Apple jelly ? WILL POWER ?

(pp.105-6)

Honey is a brainless woman . Albee attacks her absolute ignorance .

She is used as a foil to Nick and Martha. The marriage of Nick and Honey is meant to expose the imperfect social life which is based on materialistic drives.

Nick dramatizes the role of a young American person who boasts of his sexual prowess . However, even in sexual relations he proves his sterility.*

Sterility is a major theme in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ?

Though Honey is capable of giving birth to children ,she is afraid of labor pains . This fear prevents her from undertaking pregnancies . The sterility of Nick and Honey is meant to reveal that there is no genuine communication and fulfillment between them . They are as sterile and barren spiritually as they are physically. This emotional and spiritual sterility suggests the degeneration in the civilized society . Albee implicates the whole of American civilization in this charge of sterility . Perhaps it is no coincidence that Albee has chosen the names of George and Martha which are the names of the American President, George Washington and his wife.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ? Albee criticizes some American attitudes ,cultures,morals and values. A close critical analysis of the importance of the games played in the play reveals that Albee wants to expose the hostility of his characters as they are playing their games. The Americans are notably fond of games .These games are part of their cultural heritage .

Usually the players reflect their virtues and moral standards through their respect to the rules of the games . In Albee's play four games are played: " Humiliate the Host" " Get the Guests" , " Hump the Hostess" and " Bringing Up the Baby" . In all these games the rules are significantly broken. The players show disrespect for the rules and by implication ,they corrupt the cultural values of their society . They approach one another by both verbal and physical violence .

* See Allen Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of Contemporary Theatre*. New York : Crown Publishers, Inc. (1966) , p. 89.

Played out publicly , their games have a new dimension and a new danger . Nick is a threat to George : his professional drive and his masculinity both attract Martha who openly taunts George with the comparison they invite . Her account of George's humiliation , such as the "boxing match" and the unpublished novel , combine with a flirtation that is undis- guised and increasingly serious . George successfully retaliates by exposing Nick in the game " Get the Guests" . This process destroys Martha's success in winning Nick sexually .At this point they admit they have reached the point of no return and declare "total war" (p.95) :

Martha:I'm loud , and I'm vulgar , and I wear the pants in the house because somebody's got to , but I am *not* a monster.

George: You're spoiled , self-indulgent,willful , dirty-minded , and liquor-ridden.... I just don't believe you. There is no moment there is no moment any more when we could ... come together .

Martha [armed again] : Well , maybe you're right , baby . You can't come together with nothing ,and you're nothing !

(pp.94-5)

However , the real element in bringing their 'war' to this point is the concept of the imaginary 'son'. Martha has defied George's warning and broken their tacit agreement that their fantasy should be kept secret . The quarrels in which Martha and George engage are not merely the product of drunkenness and ill-nature .Their conflict is more than expressions of a hostile relationship between them .Their conflict is so deep that it becomes the purifying flame in which truth is separated from illusion .

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* the conflict is quite incompatible with normal good manners .In the conflict between George and Nick, the latter is forced out and we feel that he deserves this defeat because we see how hollow and unprincipled Nick is. When Nick's character is fully revealed, the spectators feel he has deserved George's derision and ridicule.

One more thing we would like to add to our analysis of Albee's play is that due weight should be given to the fact that the author has protested against the degradation of his characters in the play . The element of social criticism in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* is enhanced by being directed towards the best that America has to offer by way of civilization . If those people are degrading , it is implied , what can society as a whole be like ?

Albee leaves the play open-ended quite purposely for he does not want to impose his own moral solutions dogmatically .The spectators are left to judge by themselves . The play examines the fate of American values .Albee seemsto feel that there is an intimate connection between the

collapse of individual integrity and the structure of the society . He protests against a society of

self-created victims . The more the characters struggle to escape , the more thoroughly they are trapped in their dilemmas . It is a play full of social satire as it exposes the social and moral diseases that corrupt people from within .

Albee's moral outlook and his deep understanding of his society will be examined further in the next play *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

The Death of Bessie Smith consists of one act in which Albee presents two contrasting worlds that are unable to communicate: the world of the heroine, Bessie Smith , and the world of those around her such as the Nurse and her father, the Orderly , and the Intern . Though it is a short piece of drama , the play is rich in its implications and social criticism .

The play is set in the thirties of the 20th century . It is a period in which the American racism is pronounced and practiced in the American cities. The events of the play are set in the city of Memphis , Tennessee in the south of America where social and racial distinctions create serious problems in the society . The play seems to be dark , gloomy and challenging . Thematically , it attacks inequality , racial distinction , materialism and the substitution of the artificial values for real values . It also exposes social and moral hypocrisy .

The play talks about the tragedy of Bessie Smith , a famous Negro American singer , who is a victim of racism . At the beginning of the play Bessie Smith and Jack, her manager , set off for Memphis after a drink . Jack is a fifty-five years old Negro . He feels the plight and the degradation which lie deep in the heart of Bessie Smith . He is aware of the fact that both of them are derided and rejected by the white people . His suggestion to leave off the city is an expression of his faithfulness to Bessie Smith. He feels that in New York they would find a better life as there is less social and racial distinction .

He urges Bessie : “wake up ... out of this dump” . *

Further references will appear in my text.

Bessie Smith is , of course , quite conscious of her miserable situation in the South . She attempts to put an end to her suffering as she is not treated as a human being by the white Americans. On their way to New York , they have a car accident in which the life of Bessie Smith is

* Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith, The Sandbox*. New York: Coward-McCann . (1960). p.67

seriously threatened. The nearest hospital to them [Mercy Hospital] is a medical institution in which there is no mercy at all . The hospital refuses to receive Bessie Smith despite her critical condition . She is bleeding seriously . So neither fame nor the dangerous state of Bessie Smith could save her life. Because of her color ,the woman is not to be treated in the Mercy Hospital . Hence , Abee exposes the racial distinction of the American society in which the Negroes suffer the pressure of social injustice.

In *The Death of Bessie Smith* the Mercy Hospital stands for a corrupt world . Albee contrasts the dangerous situation of Bessie Smith with that of the Mayor in the hospital . The staff of the hospital would run in obedience if the Mayor wants his cigar lit (see p. 98) . He receives the greatest care in the hospital though his ailment is not serious . Moreover, there is social distinction even among the white people .Hence , the seriously ill white man in the ward receives but little care because he is poor. It seems that white people are treated according to their wealth and power. This inhuman discrimination of the society is highly stressed in the play.

Trying to express her democratic views with regard to the regulations of the hospital , the Nurse criticizes the rules followed by the staff . But her ideas that show dissatisfaction with the system of the hospital do not stem from a genuine moral ideal of the Nurse . Her rejection of the rules of the hospital is really an expression of her dissatisfaction with her job. Because of her poverty, she is not given due respect .In this sense she is a victim of her society . She has no ideal situation to dream about and no hope to live for as she is highly tormented by the pressures of modern life.

The Nurse indulges into a sexual promiscuity with both the Orderly and the Intern . She tries to sooth her suffering as she finds no enjoyment in her life . Nevertheless , she finds no real fulfillment with neither of them :

“I am sick of the sight of you [the Orderly] ... the thought of you makes me itch ... I am sick of him [the Intern]” (p. 124). Hence , she finds neither satisfaction nor social stability in her sexual relations . She has been driven out of her imaginative world to the ugly world of reality in which she is exploited physically and spiritually . She is disillusioned and she breaks out in agony as she finds life unbearable :

I am sick of everything in this hot , stupid ,fly-ridden
world. I am sick of the disparity between things as they are, and
as they should be !...I am tired ... I am tired of the truth ... and

I am tired of lying about the truth I WANT OUT !

(p.125)

She is , of course , tired of the triviality of her life which has gone wrong in a society full of contradictions and moral diseases. The word “tired” is repeated thrice in this short extract to show that she is really tired and there is no glimpse of hope in her life .She feels that her life is trivial ad full of contradictions and lies in a world of confused values . There is no happiness at home nor in her job.

The Nurse’s father , a man about fifty, is an irritable person .He has no business at home because there is no understanding between the father and his daughter . This conceited person feels that he is a man of importance because he is the Mayor’s friend . He is a racial bigot ,selfish and possessive.He is a true product of a materialistic society . He refuses to let his daughter use his car for just an afternoon . There is a feeling of mutual contempt between them . Notably, he is not a moral guide for her . She attacks him viciously:

You going to drive to the democratic club , and sit around with that bunch of loafers ? You going to play big politician today ? ... You going to go down there with that bunch of bums ... you going to sit down there and talk big ... you going to pretend you’re something more than you really are , which is noting but ... hanger- on... .

(p. 76)

Her attack is meant to shake her father from his illusion to which he pledges his life . He accuses her of neglecting him and that her patients get more attention from her than him . He also reproaches her about her boyfriend saying that her relation with this young man would corrupt her social status .

There is anger and conflict between the father and his daughter. Love and understanding are absent from their home . Each one of them lives faraway from the other. She is aggressive and hostile to the nearest people around her .

On the other hand, the Nurse’s relation with the Intern proves futile and fruitless . Though he offers love and suggests the possibility of marriage,the evidence shows that the basis of his attraction to the Nurse is merely sexual .

She is aware of his real intentions and she mistrusts him. She is afraid of his sexual advances towards her . Her real objection against him is financial .The Intern’s salary -\$ 46 a month – is not enough to make her think of getting married to him . Money is her main interest .

However, she keeps on playing with him ,but she does not indulge in a real love relation with him . They may

kiss , touch ,hug , but there is no sex between them . She feels he is unable to satisfy her materialistic needs.

He embarrasses her when he accuses her of having some sort of asexual relation with the Negro Orderly, and that if the Orderly were rich , both the Nurse and her father would have found him an agreeable husband for her.

The Intern actually implies that the Nurse and her father could easily modify their values of racial purity , name and honor of their family to respond to the economic situations. The Intern's accusation is meant to expose the hypocrisy of the Nurse and her father. The Nurse gets very angry with him and threatens to have the doctor expelled from job for insulting the *very honor* of a white woman . The Nurse's rage reaches its peak when the Intern ,at last, goes to treat the wounded Bessie .She tries to prevent him ,but he ignores her warnings. The Intern comes back announcing the death of the woman . Bessie Smith has died because she has been bleeding for a long time . Her death is meant to stress the racial intolerance against the Negroes in the society. Bessie's death becomes Albee's propaganda to illustrate his moral principles quite vividly . She exposes the false values of her society.

Though Bessie is always offstage , she is the centre of the action and everything is related to her. Albee endorses the value of relations, acceptance and compassion.

She becomes the tragic victim of social and racial distinction. The play is not a narrowly didactic piece of art . It is meant to influence people to change their attitudes and their behavior . It is a call for a return to old, forgotten honorable standards and ideals.

Lucina P. Gabbard comments on Bessie's death saying : “ Bessie is not dead before her arrival at the hospital , she is dead before the accident .She has killed her career and her spirit several years earlier by drinking instead of meeting her commitments” . * Gabbard's statement is actually partly true because Bessie Smith drinks so as to escape her spiritual agony .She tries to escape the ugly world of reality to a world of her own imagination . However, Bessie does not escape her commitments

* Lucina P. Gabbard , “Edward Albee's Triptych on Abandonment” in *Twentieth Century Literature : A Scholarly and Critical Journal*. V.28 . no.1.(Spring , 1982) , p.23 .

;otherwise she won't become a famous Negro singer .Bessie is victimized by racism and depression . She suffers from a deep sense of alien- ation in her own society .

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* ,Edward Albee depicts a corrupt society which lacks moral principles and values . The spectators are given a warning that despite their material prosperity , their society is in a desperate need for change because of the absence of tolerance , justice ,truth , love , understanding and compassion . He stresses that the change should come from within the individuals . He suggests that the vitality of the civilized society depends on the ability of the family and the individual ;otherwise moral decay is inevitable . Albee's art is not simply a vehicle for his ideas ,beliefs and feelings ,but the means though which he conducts an exploration of the vitality of his vision of mankind .

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