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Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*: A Journey from Separation to Communion

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Abstract:

Edward Albee is one of the greatest modern playwrights of America who won recognition for American Drama on world stage. Like his renowned predecessors and contemporaries, Albee delved deep into the human psyche to unravel the complexities of the human mind in a time of pulls and pressures. His *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* remains one of the all time masterpieces in the timeline of drama history, dealing with the impact of the two-world-wars and success-myth on human relations. The present paper is an attempt to critically analyze Albee's depiction of human relations in an arid academic world of mid-twentieth century America where failures of high expectations cause loss of warmth in human relations in familial as well as professional walks of life. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the playwright covers a journey from separation caused by harbouring of false illusions in a demanding society to a contented reunion at the realization and acceptance of reality.

Keywords: separation, communion, incompatibility, perspective

Alongwith Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, Edward Albee remains one of the most renowned dramatists that America has ever produced. Following the foot steps of his great predecessors, he experimented with many artistic forms like Expressionism and Surrealism in his body of works, and also borrowed a lot many things, particularly the strains of absurdity from the French and Irish dramatists like Beckett, Genet and Pinter. His *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* threw him into the limelight of worldly fame in the world of theatre where he espoused the cause of loss of warmth in human relations at the cost of moral values. Albee is always at his witty best, sometimes with a wry sense of humour, as becomes obvious from his remark when asked about his play *Virginia Woolf*: "Any play that can be described in one sentence should be one sentence long," (Tracy Smith) and further when he is asked about the prizes he won in his life, he replies nonchalantly: "When people ask you how many Pulitzer Prizes you have, I say, "Three-and-a-half"...The Columbia University drudges took it away from me." (Tracy Smith) Albee was an adopted child who found himself more close to his adoptive mother than to his adoptive father. He was very caring and devoted for his adoptive aged ailing mother, but at the same time he being a keen observer understood very well the nature of his mother who was much besieged with worldly material affairs of pomp and show. He reveals his views about his mother to Smith in an interview:

Smith: It seems that she was quite proud of you.

Albee: She was quite proud of Edward Albee.

Smith: Edward Albee, not you? Is there a difference?

Albee: Edward Albee the playwright, the well-known playwright, yes. She liked [the fame] a lot. (CBS News)

As the modern artists express the aspirations as well as frustrations of the ordinary human beings, Albee's dramatic personae don't find any similarity with those of the Elizabethans like Marlowe or Shakespeare who presented super-human beings with super-human efforts in their plays. The play exposes the decadence in the academic field of American institutions of higher education where the pseudo-intellectual morons seem pre-occupied with success in life and this they want to get at any cost of life. But when failures welcome them, they and the individuals associated with them become jittery and senseless, and this causes loss of warmth in their relations with one-another. But in due course of life Albee affirms when man dispassionately realizes and recognizes himself as well as his milieu of which he is a small part the result will be harmony and reconciliation in the discordant forces. Albee's *Virginia Woolf* stands a testimony to this fact where the dramatis personae gradually inches away from separation and usher into a world of communion.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf depicts the picture of an arid academic world where human decadence and depravity governs the human relationships. It exposes the hollowness surrounding the academic world; all that is associated with professional rivalry as well as ribaldry, personal grudges with perverted designs, moral turpitude and sycophancy—flourishes in the intellectually exaggerated but morally wicked environs of the so-called elitists. Albee a moderate absurdist presents a very pathetic picture of a college and its faculty who are found engrossed in numerous senseless, irrational activities. While acknowledging the influence of Beckett on his works, he also speaks glowingly about Tennessee Williams, and at the same time very candidly owns his responsibility in being influenced or not: "The one living playwright I admire without any reservation whatsoever is Samuel Beckett. Influence is a matter of selection—both acceptance and rejection." (William Flanagan) Devoid of any freshness in ideas or actions, not to speak of their appearances, all the characters appear an image of gloom and frustrations. The depiction of two couples—George and Martha on the one hand and Nick and Honey on the other—reveals how dirty politics has its stamp on whatever happens in a college, the professed seat of learning. The action in the play mainly revolves around the moves and verbal volleys of George and Martha who spare no opportunity in insulting the other, and Martha outshines her husband in this field by calling him a "pig". (p.16) The constant acrimony between the husband and wife is the result of their incompatibility on account of their varied aspirations and goals in life. Further, the deprivation of familial source of love sends them to drifting ways in their respective perspective of their life. The role played by Nick, who in the eyes of voluptuous Martha is "young...and blond and...well-built" (p.9) Professor of Biology in the college run by Martha's father, and his wife Honey supplements and fills the void left by George and Martha in portraying a very honest picture of the vitiated and shallow campus life.

The play begins on the note of utter mistrust and hostility between husband George and wife Martha who is the daughter of the President of the college in which George is a Professor of History. The constant bickering between the two for one reason or another tells the story of their ideological estrangement; they don't seem to be at the same level in their thought processes, always pointing fingers at one another:

Martha: You didn't do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk.

George: What do you want me to do? Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody, the way you do? (pp.8-9)

The couple has a knack for picking up fights over trifles; the clash of their inflated egos further precipitate the situation at home and they are found involved in squabbles:

Martha: You never put any ice in my drink. Why is that, hunh?

George: (*Putting ice from his glass into hers*) I always put ice in your drink. You eat it, that's all. It's that habit you've got of chewing your ice cubes like a cocker spaniel. You'll crack your big teeth. (p.14)

George has developed some sort of abhorrence for her father-in-law and he never lets an opportunity go waste to mock Martha by making fun of her father: "Your father has tiny red eyes like...like a white mouse. In fact, he's a white mouse."(p.57) This bitterness leading to frequent showdowns between the two continues upto first two acts in the play where both remains drifted and divided. But with the course of action in the play and maturing of their experiences, both husband and wife, and the latter in particular, start seeing the things in their true perspective, and Martha shedding her hostility towards George, starts valuing him and accepting him as he is.

The play comprising three acts entitled as *Fun and Games*, *Walpurgisnacht* and *The Exorcism* begins at the note of disillusionment when the couple is found involved in bantering after returning home at 2 a.m. early morning from the party thrown by Martha's father. Martha is quite sarcastic when George excuses himself, citing the cause of his tiredness: "I don't know what you're so tired about ... you haven't done anything all day, you didn't have any classes or anything..."(p.67) *Fun and Games* and *Walpurgisnacht* depict the bankruptcy and degradation not only of the academic world but also of the American social structure in general, and average American in particular. Martha's father chose George as his son-in-law with the hope that one day George would become the President of the college after him, as concurred by Martha: "When you've made something, you want to pass it on, to somebody. So I was sort of on the lookout for...prospects with the new men. An heir apparent." (p.88) But much to the embarrassment of the President as well as Martha, George proved a big failure and this led to rancor between the couple. Martha pounces upon every opportunity to cut her husband to size: "George didn't have much...push...he wasn't particularly...aggressive. In fact, he was sort of a ... (*spits the word at George's back*)...a FLOP! A great...big...fat...FLOP!" (p.59) This feeling of animosity was further aggravated when the couple failed to produce a child. As Martha becomes obsessed with her childless status, her ferocity in verbal volleys at George further intensifies.

Martha, a seductive siren and self called "gigolo"(p.128), is a domineering lady by nature; she tries to express herself through her body but when nobody responds to her overtures, she becomes furious. She gives orders to George, mocks at him and belittles him in the presence of guests, Nick and his wife Honey, who have been invited by Martha at this odd hour much to the surprise and dismay of George. Albee brings out the dichotomy by portraying a childless, infertile woman in Martha who craves for the gratification of her sexual desires and in doing so she becomes lustily inclined to any faculty member she can latch on, and thus her invitation to Nick has obvious implications. George's willing indifference to Martha's sexual orgies and Nick's cuckolding of him in his own home reflects the limit of hollowness and perversions of the mid-twentieth century America. George knows about the disturbed mental state of Martha when he says: "What it is, actually, is it's a pictorial representation of the order of Martha's mind". (p.22) That's why both decide to have an illusory child but when the imaginary child is 'killed', despite George's best efforts

Martha can not come to terms with reality: “I don’t mind your dirty under-things in public...well, I do mind, but I have reconciled myself to that...but you have moved, bag and baggage, into your own fantasy world—.”(p.109) Man reeling under the pressures of expectations and false dreams search for fulfillment not of soul but body and the end result is ennui and boredom, frustrations and disillusionment in life and the dramatis personae of Albee—George and Martha, Nick and Honey as well as Martha’s father are a testimony to this fact.

The world that Albee creates is a lost world; all around there prevails a sense of disenchantment and emotional vacuum which gives space to vices like back-stabbing, sycophancy, cuckoldry and public bashing of one another and in such a situation man retreats into a world of make-believe. Here, George and Martha become the consenting partners in harbouring illusions about their imaginary child because this can get them some relief from their painful present and bring them some recognition in life. According to Roudané, “The three acts which structure the play, chronicles George and Martha’s realization that their pipe dream—their imaginary son—is kidding as well as killing them.” (p.46) But as it happens with these illusions and pretensions, this approach of self-deception only further sours the relationship between husband and wife. The pressures of the outside world as well as their own imperfections lead to the estrangement between the couple. It is in the final act when the couple decides to come out of their illusory world and accept the reality as it is that mutual understanding and reconciliation descend between the two. C.W.E. Bigsby comments on the desperation of Martha and George for conjuring up and tearing apart of illusions: “The process of the play is a slow and relentless stripping of illusion, a steady move towards the moment when their myth will collapse without benefit of their fantasies or the protective articulateness which has been their main defence.” (p.266)

The syndrome of material success affected the life of average American in every walk of life in the second post-world-war situation where one could get recognition only if he had the capacity to amass more and more. This craving for material success finds ample manifestation in the works of many dramatists like Albee’s early contemporaries Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* and Williams’ *A Street Car Named Desire* speak of this hankering for wealth and position in life. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* also confirms to this American characteristic which has come to be identified as American Success Myth. This quest for more and more in terms of material success leads human beings nowhere; rather it affects the healthy human relations wrong way, creating barriers and separating one from other. The setting as well as the delineation of the various characters in the play shows that ‘success’ is the boom-word, where ends justify the means, and not the vice-versa as the moralists would prefer. George gets the hand of Martha as well as job in the college run by Martha’s father because the latter hopes that one day George, following his foot-steps would become his successor and get hold of his legacy by becoming the President of the college. George’s possession of the eligibility for becoming a professor and Martha’s father’s search for the claimant of his legacy culminates in the marriage of Martha and George. But the disappointment sets in as George fails to live upto the expectations not only of his father-in-law but also of Martha. Martha rues over George’s lost opportunities in making mark in his career despite being the son-in-law of the college’s President: “It should be an extraordinary opportunity...for some men it would be the chance of a lifetime!” (p.30) George’s failure in academic field as well as at home becomes the main cause of quibbling between the husband and wife. The blind yearning for wealth and material success knows no ethical values and all that is associated with morality and integrity goes for a toss. The motivating force behind George’s decision to marry Martha, despite the latter’s

shoddy past of brief marriage with a gardener and her taste for nasty things, was to excel in life by becoming the son-in-law of the President of the college, because he knew, as it becomes evident from his advice to Nick, the way to high positions: "Musical beds is the faculty sport around here." (p.30) The title of the games played by the two couples as 'Hump the Hostess' and 'Humiliate the Host' have clear innuendos of perversions and hollowness prevalent in Albee's world.

Nick and Honey who represent younger generation of America are also victims of this success syndrome. That's why they start praising effusively the party thrown by Martha's father just to keep Martha in good humour because her father is the employer of Nick. Honey speaks highly of Martha's father: "And your father! Oh! he is marvelous!"(p.23), and this session of flattery is further extended by Nick: "Yes...yes, he is quite a guy."(p.23) George who has seen enough of this sycophancy comments sarcastically: "He's a God, we all know that."(p.23) Nick's taking sides of Martha in couple's argumentation with one-another tells about Nick's clear understanding of which way the wind blows so far as his career advancement is concerned. His comments about Martha to George reveals how he wants to use Martha as a tool to excel in life: "And I'll bet your wife's got the widest...most inviting...avenue on the whole damn campus...I mean her father being president, and all."(p.75) But Martha understands well the ulterior motives behind Nick's amorous persuasion and flattery: "You're ambitious, aren't you? You didn't come back here with me out of mad, driven passion, did you know? You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you? Well, you can just houseboy your way up the ladder for a while." (p.127)

In a scenario where every thing is assessed and analyzed in terms of outward, ostentatious appearances, there can be no place for interiors. The warmth of healthy, cozy relationships gives way to a sterilized way of life where there is no love, affection, fellow feeling, individual integrity or commitment. The dialogue between Martha and George tells of the loss of spark in the relationship between the two:

Martha: Why don' you want to kiss me?

George: Well, dear, if I kissed you I'd get all excited. I'd get beside myself, and I'd have to take you, by force, right here on the living room rug...(Martha cackles) ...and then our little guests would walk in and...well, just think what your father would say about that.(p.15)

Money or desire for money leaves no place for nurturing of fruitful strong relationships. Albee points out that all norms of civility and decency are thrown to the winds just for the sake of amassing wealth and obtaining position which can bring some recognition and identity in the life of man. George and Nick unabashedly are in the same league in this regard:

Nick: Take over a few courses from the older men, plow a few pertinent wives...

George: Now that's it. You can shove aside all the older men you find, but until you can start plowing pertinent wives, you really aren't working. That's the way to power---plow 'em all. (p.74)

But the price that one pays for this is too high as man becomes so blind in pursuing the success that he loses all sorts of connection with the essential goodness of human heart and

this leads to his mental disintegration and alienation from his environs. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is replete with the idiosyncrasies gifted by the American culture reeling under the success myth. The mistrust and animosity in the relations between George and Martha and George's attitude towards Martha's father and other faculty members is the result of this post 1950's culture of America. It poisons the healthy relationship between husband and wife and separates them emotionally as well as physically to certain extent. As a result of this the repressed sexuality of Martha finds expressions in transgressions of numerous social familial mores of the time. The incompatibility in their individual personalities puts George and Martha into opposite camps, and they vent out their frustrations by pointing fingers at one-another.

Man's social, physical, emotional and professional aspirations and needs work as stimulus for him and their not realization and fulfillment cause disenchantment and bitterness. The problem is rooted in the society and its cultural mores of the time of which the individual is a very small unit. The American society of post 1950s acknowledged and worshipped only those who could make a mark in any walk of life; rest of them were derided upon and looked down upon—at home as well as in the outside world. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* George and Martha are the product of their times and their longings, their attitude and subsequently their behaviour have the bearing of their contemporary times. Lee Baxandall very holistically speaks about Martha: "Martha isn't stupid, she is capable of criticizing her own actions, and she can be very affectionate, but she can have no realistic hope of becoming more than a Discontented Housewife." (p.19) Come what may, success is must, even at the cost of values that society for centuries built and preserved. Devoid of love and fulfillment at every field in life Martha becomes lyrical about her painful illusions and tortured mental self:

I cry all the time too, Daddy. I cry alllll the time...but deep inside, so no one can see me. I can cry all the time. And Georgie cry all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put them in the icebox, in the goddam ice trays...(begins to laugh)...until they are all frozen...(laughs even more)...and then ...we put them ...in our... drinks...(121)

Albee like Miller is an optimist who always hopes for betterment and looks forward for greener pastures in life. In Albee's world, the word 'life' in itself gives hope: "I think it's all a crap shoot. Am I optimistic about what, being alive? I've always been optimistic about being alive, because as I said, I prefer 'yes' to 'no.' I prefer being alive to being dead. I prefer all those things, yes."(Smith) This optimism becomes instrumental in rapprochement between George and Martha towards the end of the play. In the beginning, Martha and George appear belonging to different planets but when they revisit their life and have a re-look at its journey, full of misgivings and uneasiness, ego-clashes and incompatibility, then husband and wife, particularly the latter, adopting a more kind and gentle approach towards George relent in her hostilities towards one another and become considerate and start acknowledging the contribution of each other, leading to a bonhomie in their barren life:

There is only one man in my life who has ever ...made me happy...George who is out somewhere there in the dark...George who is good to me , and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off; who can me laugh, and I choke it back in my

throat; who can hold me, at night, so that it's warm, and whom I will bite so that there's blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy, and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy.
George and Martha: sad, sad, sad. (125)

And in a sense of defeatism as well as self-realization she admits: "It's the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too high on our tiny heads." (123) For Albee, the couple despite their seeming absurdities and intended delusions has the exact understanding of things; they are intelligent people who have taken the shelter behind illusions only to move forward in life. But the reality keeps clawing at them and leaves them no option but to come out of their deluded selves: "Though they're much too intelligent to make that confusion. For me, that's why the loss is doubly poignant. Because they are not deluded people." (William Flanagan,) One can feel a sense of relief and contentment when they come out of their self-made illusions and accept reality as it is, and this acceptance of truth and mutual understanding brings them closer, and finally to the rapprochement and re-union of their hearts when George opines: "Accommodation, malleability, adjustment...these do seem to be the order of things." (p.100)

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