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**EDWARD ALBEE'S ECO-CONCERNS IN WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? : A RANDOM READING****Dr. J. Arul Anand**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is indeed a modern classic in many ways. The present paper on this shocking classic attempts a random reading recalling the important reactions and responses to the play. All the readings of the play are obviously common observations and interpretations. Numerous reviews and research articles have been written on these lines. It is a campus tragedy; it is also an attack on the negative impact of the American dream on the lives of the common people; truly a thesis on marital disharmony. The play is a rich treasure house for many layers of interpretations. However, no studies have been attempted to see the ecological concerns of Albee hinted at in the play. Science and Technology contributed a lot to humanity's healthy strides, at the same time resulting in alarming causative issues that threaten the very survival of humanity on earth. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, while bringing to light the many maladies of the affluent modern world, attempts to suggest that Humanity will be safer with History than with Science.*

**KEYWORDS:** Albee, modern classic, campus tragedy, success myth, humanity, and history.**INTRODUCTION :**

The success of the failure story of George and Martha viz. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is indeed astounding. Undoubtedly, the play (by one of America's greatest playwrights of all time) can be considered a modern classic in many ways. After the success of a series of one-act plays, Edward Albee literally stormed the American theatre with his first full length play and shocked everyone with the failure story of George, an Associate Professor of History. It was not just the failures of George alone which shocked everyone. The adulterous adventures of Martha, the ambitious advances of Nick, and the hysterical revelations of Honey had also greatly disturbed the audience who are, indeed, forced to reel under the devastating ripples caused by the Saturday night orgy at the New Carthage.

Even to the ordinary theatre-goers, the play provides a lot of food for thought. This 'campus tragedy' can be viewed as a thesis on the shocking moral degradation in campus life in America. Normally the educated, especially the teachers, play the much respected constructive roles in any society. A nation can be healthy only when it follows the precepts derived from the lives of teachers. They are certainly the living examples for others. But the drama that unfolded around 2 O'clock in the night after the routine Saturday night party in the New Carthage College campus involving an Associate Professor (and his wife, the only daughter of the President of the college) and an ambitious Scientist from the Department of Biology (and his young wife, Honey) leaves much to be desired.

Martha has been in the habit of seeking sexual adventures outside the marriage. Even before her marriage with George, she had an affair with someone. Poor George married this only daughter of the

President of the college, and since then had to swallow a lot of unpleasant adventures of his wife. Martha's father arranged such Saturday night parties with an intention to provide a platform for his employees so that they can have a relaxed and, at the same time, a meaningful rendezvous. Such meetings, Martha's father believed, would create a healthy academic atmosphere in the campus. But for the loud-mouthed, hard-drinking, bad-mannered, and ill-tempered Martha, such parties provided plenty of opportunities to seduce someone to realize her unfulfilled great expectations. Though these illicit affairs did not cause any damaging frictions in the marriage life of George and Martha, cacophonous notes can be heard loud and clear.

These jarring notes are discernible from the night long drinking spree in the suburb of New Carthage. The play presents two couples, two educated couples, and there is no morality in their married life. The absence of allegiance in marriage is the first easily noticeable malady. The institution of marriage controls our sexual behavior. In the marriage of the elderly couple in the play, there is no such control because their marriage is not controlled by love. Martha has been in the habit of seeking extra marital affairs. It is not that George is impotent. Martha herself confessed that George is the only person in the world "who has ever...made me happy." George knows his wife and still accepts the reality and continues to live with her. However, even George is greatly shocked when Martha flirts with Nick in his presence and that too in their own drawing room. She moves in with Nick who proves to be a flop too. George alone is not shocked. This voluptuous digression of Martha is indeed a great shock to all the theatre-goers who watched the play. Albee's intention is to shock his audience and he has just done that.

Morality lost its meaning in the affluent consumerist society. The event that unfolded in the drawing room is a clear pointer. It can be argued that Martha's infidelity and her sexual adventures are a hysterical reflection of her deep rooted disappointment. It may be contented that her actions are an attempt to escape the hostile (actually self-inflicted) realities of her life. Amacher contends that "She is suffering from a long-standing psychological repression of an unsolved problem that the alcoholic intoxication and the consequent events of the play in the third act eventually flush out of deep hiding in the labyrinth of her subconsciousness" (69). Whatever may be the arguments justifying her deluded actions, the fact remains that she committed adultery. She betrayed the traditional, accepted patterns of life. She violated the promises made at the time of her nuptial hours. She is not faithful to her partner in life. What is more shocking is her age. She has not just blossomed into beautiful lass. She is well past the fifties. Her obscene attitude at that age is quite absurd and shocking.

The life of Nick and Honey is no different. Though a love marriage, Nick confessed that he had no love for his wife Honey, who was, in fact, his childhood friend. A more shocking bit of information about his marriage with Honey is that he married her because he thought she was pregnant. She "blew up" before marriage, and to his utter shock "went down" after the marriage. However, he reconciled to his lot because Honey was blessed with money. Even Martha's father, after the death of his wife who is none but Martha's mother, decided to marry a wealthy aged lady hoping that his aged new wife may not live long, and when she dies he would inherit all her wealth. When money matters many other matters would surely mushroom. In a society, where success is everything, even marriages revolve around money. Marriages that are not based on love and affection and mostly solemnized by money would never last long. This campus tragedy proves this point beyond even an iota of doubt.

Marital strife, though a theme in Albee's early one act plays, is so poignant and pungent only in his first full length drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The harangue in the suburb is an exemplary delineation of discontent marriage. The play is indeed a celebrated dissection of married life in America. Martha, yet another variant of Mommy, is highly disappointed with her husband. She is a product of the consumerist culture which forced people to view everything as property and means to prosperity. Even human relation is no exception. Martha is deeply drenched in such a culture that her expectations are high. It is with this great expectation, she fell for George when he came to the campus as a new faculty member in the department of History. When he falls pathetically short of her expectations, the problem starts for the couple. Their marital journey runs into deep trouble as Martha begins to give vent to all her bent up feelings.

The night long verbal pyrotechnics had obviously echoed the now much frequented theme of the so called 'success myth' of a nation considered to be the land of opportunity, plenty and prosperity. When expectations run high, disappointments go headlong into disastrous depths. When success alone is considered the sweetest, even the slightest slip will cause a severe hemorrhage. This is exactly what happened in the lives of George and Martha, and Nick and Honey, their guest. Unable to bear the brunt of the harsh realities of the complex modern world, they sulk into soothing illusions which proved to be nothing but floating bubbles in the air. The play is certainly about the American dream and the resultant 'success myth'. The emergence of industrialization and capitalism and the economic expansions after the World Wars have changed all. With the new wealth, the growing middle class moves to the suburbs where they find spacious homes, get better education for children and have feelings of greater social security. With these rapid economical expansions, people have started measuring success and happiness only in financial terms. Money and material affluence occupies the core of modern life (actually the core of grief of modern life), clearly replacing love, affection and moral values. Degraded into viable financial units, the basic family structure simply falls apart. When this fundamental social institution called marriage is in disarray, the family tree is sure to be denuded. Albee is all at pains to see the very concept of matrimony becoming a mere means to achieve a financial security promised by the American dream.

It is true that great expectations lead to greater disappointments. Martha's expectations are high. She is really unable to put up with the failures of her husband. George failed on many fronts, and is a big 'FLOP!!!' His most important failure came from his academic life. Even after putting in so many years of service, he could not even become the Head of the Department of History. Of course, he was once the HOD of the department. When everyone else from his department went to the war zone to fight, he was the only one left behind to be completely in charge of the department. Again, socially he is not that active. The Saturday night party proved that point. Above all, the most painful failure of George (and also Martha) lies deep in their married life, which provided no children. Sterility is yet another theme of the play. The younger couple in the play too is not blessed with any child. In the case of Nick and Honey, it is a different kind of sterility. She gets conceived often, but the fear of delivering the baby leaves their life issueless, and thereby sterile. The life of these two couples in the play is highly symptomatic and also symbolic of the sterile nature of the affluent ideals of a great nation.

With materialism gaining a firm grip on the lives of most of the population, especially the middle-class population, the traditional values start losing its rooting in the society. The idea that the very face of America is fast changing and the very land is fast turning out to be the most promising paradise on earth, the land of gold, inundates the social life across the entire country. "The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow surely loomed just beyond the horizon, many Americans felt, even as Albee lamented in 1960 that too many people in America had substituted 'artificial for real values in our society,' and insisted that his theatre was 'a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen'" (*Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, 43). People are so madly drowned in the dreams of a bright and fertile future that they hardly find time for the time-tested values and ideals that have so far formed a protecting layer on their secure life. The symptoms of an inevitable decay start manifesting itself in many ways. As a keen observer of his society, Albee has noticed the deplorable turn of fortunes. In an interview with Adrienne Clarkson, Albee said that he was not certainly happy to see "how people exist in their society and how they cheat themselves..." The welfare of his people and his society remains Albee's core concern.

The above readings of the play are obviously common observations and interpretations. Numerous reviews and research articles have been written on these lines. It is a campus tragedy; it is also an attack on the negative impact of the American dream on the lives of the common people; truly a thesis on marital disharmony. The play is a rich treasure house for many layers of interpretations. A lot has been written about the world of Albee, even about the symbolic nature of the plots of many of his plays including this modern classic. However, no studies have been attempted to see the ecological concerns of Albee hinted at in the play. This article does not aim at providing a detailed analysis of *Who's is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The

intention is to see something new. In an attempt to materialize this intention, it is tried to study all the major characters as symbolic representations of Albee's eco-concerns.

It is a pattern universally accepted and practiced down the ages that there is a conflict in all the stories. Be it a novel or a play, there is a clash between good and evil. The pattern is that something happens, and that something faces a confrontation, resulting in a spar between two opposite forces leading either to a solution or to a catastrophic end. This pattern is discernible in all the oral as well as written stories. In the classical writings, the pattern is often a great war between the Good and the Evil. The Good fights for the humanity's cause. Some monster in flesh and blood, or some monstrous ideologies, or some other perilous proportions have been fought against in order to save the world. In our modern tech-savvy world, the deadly monster is the environmental concerns.

Science and Technology contributed a lot to humanity's healthy strides, at the same time resulting in alarming causative issues threatening the very survival of humanity on earth. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, while bringing to light the many maladies of the affluent modern world, attempts to suggest that Humanity will be safer with History than with Science. One should leave aside the logical arguments and other interpretations of the play to see some sense in this attempt to view the play as Albee's eco-play. Martha may be seen as representing Humanity (or Earth), whereas George and Nick may well be symbolizing History (or Tradition) and Biology (or Science and Technology) respectively. Martha is older than George and Nick, and married to the Associate Professor of History. She expected a lot from her husband whose failures destroyed the very root of her expectations. George, who teaches History, knows his role in the life of Martha. He knows the past, understands the present, and is alarmed about the future which will possibly be dominated by the Nicks (the Scientists). By the very nature of his subject, he is drenched and deeply rooted in the past and tradition. He is not able to digest the manipulations of the young ambitious scientists who are deeply drenched in novel exploits. At the time when the play was first produced, American biologists were busy working on - what would be a major breakthrough in the history of mankind- 'test-tube babies.' It was clearly an attempt to deviate from the normal natural norms. The appalled traditionally bent historians were up against such dreadful deviations. George criticized the ghastly attempts by the Nicks for such practices. He teased Nick with questions on Chromosomes and the new babies without imperfections.

Albee seems to suggest a royal battle between the Tradition and Science over the possession of Humanity (or Earth). George who has been in possession of Martha is challenged by Nick. Even Martha favors and prefers Nick to George. Martha seduces Nick because she is disgusted with George, and is attracted towards the young ambitious Nick. Actually, it was not Martha who seduced Nick, but it was indeed Nick who had successfully lured poor Martha into inviting him for the night's game. Martha entertains greater expectations from this highly promising young scientist who proved to be a greater failure. Martha is greatly shocked by the unexpected failure of Nick, and realized that it would always be George who can emotionally or otherwise satisfy her. This realization of Martha tilts the scale in favour of the Associate Professor of History. Martha turns to the time tested tradition because the promising Nick can only glitter and is not gold. Albee seems to support and advocate the noble truth that Humanity (or our Earth) would emotionally or otherwise be comforted and safely guarded only by Tradition. The failures of Georges hurt; but the failures of Nicks would be far more disastrous.

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