

Empowered Wives: Edward Albee's America in the Early 1960s.

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ABSTRACT: *In some of his plays, namely *The American Dream* (1961) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Albee addresses the rise of women empowerment as a new issue in US society. Going through both plays, one can notice the playwright's critique of newly reversed gender roles as exemplified by such characters as Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream* and Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This paper argues that Albee's critique stems from the then masculine fear of losing ground in the new gender battle.*

KEYWORDS: Albee, American wives, emasculation, empowerment, feminism.

Introduction

Albee's plays cannot pass unnoticed as he has been one of the few American playwrights- if not the only one - to recurrently stage male and female antagonisms. From his early plays, *The American Dream* (1961), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) or *A Delicate Balance* (1966) right to the most recent one *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia* (2003), he has focussed essentially on American family values and husband and wife relations.

Albee's *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* came at a time when the USA was experiencing the second wave of feminism¹, Claire V. Eby tells us. Consequently, they aroused much

¹Albee's work then coincided with the second wave of American feminism, which crested in the early 1960s, seriously challenged this ideal" (Clare V. Eby, "Fun and Games Wit

controversy which led some critics to accuse him of misogyny². While most scholarship took position against his views of women at that time, very few would see a genuine presentation of future sex and gender battles within the American family, adds Claire V. Eby (ibid). For her, the post-war period witnessed a largely disseminated "ideal of the nuclear family, with a subservient and domesticated wife in relation to whom the American man, could know his masculinity" (ibid). In short, she sees *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a play that "registers the crisis in post-war masculinity" (ibid). Albee 's plays shatter this very ideal.

More recently, Mona Hoorvash³ goes against most scholarship on Albee's presumed misogyny by claiming that he has, in his later plays, taken a feminist stance, believing that he may have changed due probably to his observation of the social evolution within American society.

I will argue that Albee's standpoint in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* - both of which were produced at the very beginning of the 1960s - is not misogynist but stems from his apprehension of a new "injustice" lurking ahead, if not already taking place. In these two plays, the family or gender roles are reversed to the point where what is / was supposed to be a new era of justice may lead to question the whole issue of feminist rhetoric on women empowerment as regards family life.

The American Dream

In *The American Dream*, for instance, Mommy blatantly reveals her eagerness to live off her husband's money. Being some sort of "bad wife",

George and Nick: Competitive Masculinity in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*", *Modern Drama* 50 (2007): 601-619.

² R.K.Verma, « Anti-feminism in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* », 2014.

<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Anti-feminism-in-Edward-Albee%27s-Who%27s-Afraid-of-Verma/0c9063a42047ae695e2f26824a39bb93d865258c>

³Hoorvash, Mona. Representation of Women in Edward Albee's Plays. unpublished PhD Thesis, Shiraz University, 2012.

Mommy is the supreme family sadistic authority attacking her husband permanently. At this stage, Mommy recalls Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In fact, authoritarian Mommy emasculates Daddy recurrently and relentlessly, mocking his manliness and terrorizing him into obedience⁴, as a critic rightly observes. Sensing his feminine side, she often teases him on his masculinity as in the following examples:

-Mommy to Daddy: "You were firm; you were masculine and decisive"

-Mommy: "open the door"

-Daddy: Was I firm about it?

-Daddy: Was I decisive?

-Daddy: And masculine? Was I really masculine?

Mommy ironically replies:

- "Oh, Daddy, you were so masculine; I shivered and fainted"

-Daddy: "I shall now open the door"

Mommy: "What a masculine Daddy! Isn't he a masculine Daddy?"

(p.11)

Seeing his reluctance to open the door, she crudely insults him:

-Mommy: "Oh, look at you! You're turning into jelly; you're indecisive; you're a woman (*emphasis mine*)"

Reacting "unnaturally" at being jeeringly called "a woman", he just complies and surrenders to her tyrannical rule and abusive language, by replying:

- "All right. Watch me now; I'm going to open the door. Watch! Watch!"

No wonder then that Albee says *The American Dream* is a "critique of emasculation on the "American scene"⁵ when most critics look in the other direction.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

⁴<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/01/just-folks-4> , accessed on October 20, 2015.

⁵ "In his preface, Albee poses *The American Dream* as a critique of emasculation on the "American Scene".", in <http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/americandream/canalysis.html>, accessed on October 22, 2015.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? like the previous play, tackles American family values, notably husband and wife relations between Martha and George, relations taking the form of a sort of fierce competition both for intellectual and domestic power. Martha challenges him discursively and manages to overpower him domestically, so to speak. She succeeds in taking up the authority as she rightly says:

MARTHA:

- "Go answer the door.

GEORGE: "You answer it"

MARTHA: "Get to that door, you "(ACT1:18)

As he does not move, she adds:

- I 'll fix you, you...". And when the doorbell chimes, she goes on:

- "I said, get over there!" Feeling the threat, he gives in: "All right, love...whatever love wants..." (ACT 1: 18).

Instead of thanking him, she adds: "Screw you! ". He now opens the door

Not only is she authoritarian, to the point of cruelty, but she is also vulgar. While they are all drinking in honour of their guests, Martha says to her husband:

- "You have a poetic nature, George... a Dylan Thomas-y quality that gets me right where I live".

Embarrassed and furious, George replies: "Vulgar girl! With guests here!" (ACT 1: 18)

As a wife, Martha will gradually assume a more apparent libertine and promiscuous image than other wives such as Honey or Mommy. Later on, during that evening, while talking to her young guests Nick and Honey, says about her husband:

- "So, anyway, I married the S.O.B. ...(ACTI 1: 55)

Gender blurring⁶ makes of Martha both a “female” (as her husband calls her) and a “man” as she is very masculine in her speech, constructing her new gender role as through language and action, or through “performance”⁷, to borrow Judith Butler’s term. She is also violent as when she reveals that she beats her husband:

- “My arm has gotten tired whipping you...
- For twenty-three years”(ACT2: 92)

Unhappy with such a “feminine husband”, she voices her grief and unhappiness with emphasis:

“IT’S NOT WHAT I’VE WANTED!” (ACT2: 92)

Adding a short while later

- “I ‘m loud, and I’m vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because somebody ‘s got to...” (ACT 2: 94)

In fact, Martha is frustrated at not having a male authority at home. To put it differently, she may have wanted a man, one with an “emphasized

⁶ Clare V. Eby, op.cit. p.604. Butler defines gender not as “an attribute” but an act... which is both intentional and performative... Thus, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Eby quoting Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, 1990). See also Shams, Parisa; Pourgivi, Farideh, “Gender Trouble in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf“, *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*. 2013. Vol. 3 Issue 2, pp.85-100.

⁷ Claire V.Eby , *ibid*.

Taking her cue from S.de Beauvoir’s much celebrated claim: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” J. Butler makes a crucial distinction between “gender” and “sex”. For her, it is obvious that “gender” is constructed by one’s “performativity” or daily behaviour...”. In other words , we are the “gender” we enact.

<https://www.openculture.com/2018/02/judith-butler-on-gender-performativity.html>

masculinity” so to speak, rather than an emasculated husband who, as she says:

- “tolerates, which is intolerable; who is kind, which is cruel; who understands, which is beyond comprehension ...” (ACT 3°: 113)

Here we are. George, as is often the case with middle-class men and intellectuals in particular, is too tolerant, may be libertine too, to the point that his wife rejects his tolerance and understanding. She bluntly voices her disarray at being married to a not-too manly husband.

As George turns into an emasculated or “feminine husband”, she takes up full authority of the family. Now, gender roles are fully reversed. Both at the level of discourse and performance, Martha gets into the dress of the “husband”. In fact, her language in particular is rather masculine. As she tries to construct her “new” gender via language⁸, she frequently sprinkles her verbal interactions with curse and obscene words.

Moreover, Martha delights in letting people know that George is a “flop”⁹ but recognizes that George is the only person who can satisfy her physically and emotionally. George being six years her junior looks rather disarmed. Age difference may also be taken into account as her husband may look rather less “experienced”, K. H. Burkman writes (pp.241-2).¹⁰

To put it otherwise, Martha is a fully experienced and “mature” woman who is not satisfied with her husband. And so, when Nick, the biology teacher comes for the evening with his wife, she gets excited at the idea of having a younger man around who is also physically strong and

⁸ Clare V. EBY, op. cit

⁹She uses the term flop for George’s career since he did not take over the history department as she had expected, but also uses it for Nick when he could not satisfy her in bed. See WAVW(ACT 2)

¹⁰ In their book entitled *staging the rage: the web of misogyny in modern drama*, the authors see George as “*objectified/ feminized*” because of his relatively younger age than his wife is presented as a “*feminized innocent youth*” (,1998 (pp. 241-242)

talks about biology¹¹, not history. Thus, she blatantly reveals her sexual attraction to the young and strongly built guest in the very presence of his wife, Honey.

On the other hand, Nick and Honey are represented more positively, neither vulgar nor “rough-tongued” (to borrow a metaphor from Larkin), but rather use a more polite language and are embarrassed whenever George or Martha utters vulgar words or phrases. As in this instance:

George talking to his guests about his father-in-law who is the university president:

-...(Martha) “is his...right ball, you might say” (ACT1: 34)

Unhappy, Nick replies: “...I wish you wouldn't talk that way in front of my wife”

Regarding Honey, she manages to keep a more respectable, acceptable image than obscene and depraved Martha (affair with Nick)¹². On the contrary, she appears rather balanced as a wife in contradistinction to the “liberated” Martha. Honey may, in fact, represent the “pre-feminist ideal woman” although she “refuses to be the stereotypical woman”¹³, by aborting her pregnancies.

Given the context of the dominant cultural discourses of that period, Albee's characters struggle and compete to gain the upper hand through language and action¹⁴.. Neither Martha nor George performs as

¹¹ Allusion to materialism in contradistinction to history.

¹² Nicola Chiamonte (1963) considers WAVW as a “pretty unbearable “play.

¹³ Gender Roles in Edward Albee's WAVW? <http://www.inforefuge.com/gender-roles-edward-albee> accessed on octobre 22, 2015. Contrary to the author of this article, Honey is NOT made “uninteresting, remarkably unintelligent and absolutely loathsome” but may also represent the middle of the way wife.

¹⁴ Clare V.Eby, op.cit.

wife and husband¹⁵. Martha is too masculine and seems to have lost her femininity while George is so emasculated that he turns into a “feminine husband”.

Albee's wives are endowed with superiority over their husbands but are strikingly or surprisingly made to look vulgar and distasteful, something which shatters the image of the well-bred and cooperative homely wife.¹⁶ In fact, Albee attacks the institution of marriage by unmasking its supposed ideals and values on the one hand and alludes to some new form of married women's posture, on the other. Both Martha and Mommy terrorize and emasculate their husbands relentlessly and publicly. Now, the potential rebuke of these two female figures is apparently guaranteed.

Conclusion

Contrary to what some critics have claimed, I don't see Albee as a misogynist but as a mere eye-opener to the danger of reversing generally accepted gender roles, leading not only to a gender battle but also to an unexpected crisis and loss of masculinity¹⁷

Albee's world of masculine wives versus feminine husbands may refer to his fear of a new “injustice”. For, in men's search for justice towards women who suffered from patriarchal injustice, a new injustice might arise, he seems to be saying. Instead of the old unjust “hegemonic

¹⁵ Judith Butler's idea that “Gender as performance” (quoted in Eby, 604)

¹⁶ Clare V.Eby, op. cit.

¹⁷ Chiang-sheng Kuo, *Images of Masculinity in Contemporary American Drama: Albee, Shepard, Mamet and Kushner*, published doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1998, p.300. He writes that masculinity has been understood by Albee and other playwrights as “conceptual rather than biological; unstable rather than monolithic; established according to the dynamics of shifting cultures, social changes and political climates; full of negotiation, revision and interaction.”. See also Gender Roles in Edward Albee's WAVW? in <http://www.inforefuge.com/gender-roles-edward-albee> accessed on [octobre 22](#), 2015

masculinity”¹⁸, Albee apparently fears or suspects American society heading towards a sort of new gender hegemony, equally unjust for that matter. No surprise then that recent scholarship and academia has been interested in men's studies or “masculinity studies”.¹⁹

Will the mounting crisis of masculinity lead to a revisionist attitude towards some of the radical forms of feminist expression as apparently represented by Martha? History will tell

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¹⁸R.W. Connell, J.W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity, Rethinking the Concept”, *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19 No. 6, December 2005, pp. 829-859. See also, O'Neill, Rachel « Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, post feminism and sexual politics. *Men and Masculinities* », 18 (1), 2015, pp. 100-120. ISSN 1097-184XDOI: 10.1177/1097184X14553056

¹⁹ R.W. Connell, J.W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity, Rethinking the Concept”, *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19 No. 6, December 2005, pp. 829-859. Cf also R.W. Connell. *Masculinities*, 1995 where he writes: “men were suffering further emotional damage due to feminist accusations about sexism. Men should celebrate their differences from women, rather than feeling guilty about them.”

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