

## Search for Identity in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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### Abstract

Searching for the identity refers to the collection of event and orientation various goals at explaining, establishing, and defending a state of political, economical, cultural, and social rights for women. Feminism has had a massive influence on American writers. Women's expression of their freedom and position with men has been echoing for centuries in America. Edward Albee, the twentieth-century American playwright dramatizes the twentieth century American womanhood on his writings in various stages. In his play, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Albee portrays female characters as homemakers and their counterparts as fighters, similarly the Victorian ideology of women: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth:/Man for the sword and for the needle she" Martha is shut up within the web of the American Dream ignoring her duties and responsibilities of woman assigned by Nature. Throughout the play, she readily hold inequality between sexes and conforms herself to male expectations, first, to her father to fulfill the American Dream and then to her husband to keep body and soul together. The present article is a discussion of Anti-feminist acts in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. It is divided into three sections. The first section deliberates upon definitions, concepts and dimensions of anti-feminism. The second section reflects anti-feminist acts in Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, and the third section deals with the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Anti-feminism, sexuality, Edward Albee, Women.

### Introduction

Anti feminism is opposition to someone to all forms of feminists. In the late 19th and 20th century anti feminists opposed against various proposals for women and their rights. The main thing to discuss about this anti feminism is difference between men and women in various

aspects of their life. Feminist Dictionary defines anti feminism as "[t]he conviction that women are not entitled to the same moral and legal rights as men, or to the same social status and opportunities. 'All anti feminist thinkers hold in common that there are unconditioned and unchangeable psychological differences

between women and men, it involves ‘the idea that women ought to sacrifice the development of their own personalities for the sake of men and children’.” (Feminist Dictionary 54). So the anti feminist is, a person who “[is] against to women or to feminism or feminists.

Audrey Bilger thinks that anti feminist persons against feminism; therefore, their opinions are projected against equality of women at work, home, society and culture. In her words, “Anti feminism may be simply defined as the opposite of feminism. Similar to feminism, anti-feminism focuses on the role of woman at various work, at home, in society, and in the culture. Just like feminism, anti feminism promotes a complex political, social, and cultural agenda. Anti feminists often take their cues from feminists, speaking out against current feminist platforms and against feminists themselves”(27).

The explanation of anti-feminism naturally joint on how we understand feminism, and a specific anti-feminist rush generally arises in response to a specific feminist campaign, such as for the right to vote or legalization of abortion. It action mainly not depends on the movement of women’s but against its rights and roles. It tries to check the development of new reformist attitudes towards the boundaries between the male and female, demand that there are major differences in sexual characteristics and roles which women should agree. The anti feminist writers thus oppose the idea of equal rights for women by making favouritism between the category. All are thinking that women are emotional, mild, graceful, bowed, and passive but have a rebound men lack. They make uncomplimentary comments against women to maintain their predominant status. Women were consider themselves as competitive to men; hence, they contend their equality in every walk of life.

Just like the American playwrights of the sixties Edward Albee’s name place out brightly, a shine of demand. He was one of the American dramatists who have achieved a developing stature since the Second World War. The internationally best-known American

playwright of the sixties, Edward Albee came to the fore since mid-century and reached a wide-spread audience even more quickly than did O’Neil. Although none of Albee’s more recent works succeeded as fully as did *The Zoo Story* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he remains one of the most important playwrights in contemporary America. He has explored a great variety of subjects, and he has been strikingly inventive in his experiments with form. His main concerns, however, have not changed. Satisfaction about human suffering, the destructive passion to dominate, loneliness, and the difficulties of communication - these are the themes he continues to dramatize. The picture he paints of marriage, with hypocrisy only thinly concealing the war between the sexes, and society, with its dismal lack of understanding among people, owes much to such predecessors as August Strindberg and Tennessee Williams. Albee’s distinctive contributions are abrasive dialogue, bitterly witty comedy, and the remarkably skilful use of one of drama’s most fundamental elements, the battle of wits.

Searching for identity refers to the collection of event and locating various goals at explaining, establishing, and defending a state of political, economical, cultural, and social rights for women. Feminism has had a massive influence on American writers. Women’s expression of their freedom and position with men has been echoing for centuries in America. Edward Albee, the twentieth-century American playwright dramatizes the twentieth century American womanhood on his writings in various stage. In his play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee portrays female characters as homemakers and their counterparts as fighters, similarly the Victorian ideology of women: “Man for the field and woman for the hearth:/Man for the sword and for the needle she”:(Tennyson, 261).

AMERICAN playwrights of the 20th century were a masculine bunch. Their stages were full of domineering fathers, discomfited sons, fast-talking salesmen and broken dreams. The women tended to be decorative—shrewish mothers, put-upon wives or melancholic sisters. On a rare occasion when one claimed centre

stage, such as Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire", she was a tragic figure, too fragile, too hysterical for the brutality of this world. As Williams wrote of Blanche in his stage directions, "There is something about her uncertain manner...that suggests a moth." So Martha, the caustic, inebriated heroine of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" was a revelation.

Who is Martha and what is her position in the play? John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist and drama critic makes a statement which is useful as a starting point in an attempt to understand Martha's character: he says that every member of a university or college faculty knows this woman as assertive, rowdy, and rough-talking (Stenz 39). She is not a pleasant person, but Albee portrays her with a sympathetic detail. Her mother died when she was still quite young and her father, the director of the college remarried and sent her off to a convent school. In effect, she was a rejected child (39-40).

Even though she was well educated, Martha's intelligence and imagination remained purposeless. University and society organization kept women out of everything. Thus, her great energy libertine in vein; she tried to find a sort of a substitute living. She hope to find a husband who would take over his own department and her father's college. So, she sought her identity and self-esteem in the person she married and in the career she planned for him. Martha has been punishing George for twenty odd years; yet, this plan failed: "You didn't do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk" (I. 7). George stubbornly remained himself and refused to become the fulfillment of her ambitions (Stenz 39-41). Furthermore, George's denial was not the only plan that failed in Martha's life. They were unable to have a child together. So, all that Martha really does is go purchasing. She is "a housewife; she buys things" (I. 6); however, there is little evidence that she ever took pride in homemaking. Her behavior of regular quality makes plain that she is not interested in her husband's personal needs. As a counterpart to George, she is an unpleasant parody of the

independent and aggressive American female. Without further interest to improve the quality of her life, she leads an self-pity and disillusionment life. She usually spends her days with filled in glass of gin around the house and with the drunkenness throughout. Martha is a woman who lived at home and daydreamed about her future instead of creating it herself, says Stenz (41).

The description of Martha as an wretched woman who has wasted her life without doing anything. In a reflection of this cultural climate, she is a type of "a faculty wife" (II. 114), whose behavior stems from frustration. Albee pretense what happens when kin group, education, and society discourage a potentially powerful human being from having personal goals. He attacks the cruel and desperate consequences of an education for agreement, which does not take into consideration the needs of the individual (Stenz 42, 52). Thus, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a sharp reappraisal of a society haunted with the atmosphere of success or the appearance of it. Thomas E. Porter observes that the ultimate practice which is being attacked in this play is the concept that redemption comes from some agent outside the individual. Truth is that the ultimate happiness of every human being does not rest in his social or academic rank or in his pay-envelope (Stenz 44)

Albee undertaking economic independence of men while women remain economically abject to men. For instance, both Martha and Honey's fathers get married merely for the purpose of grabbing money in their hands. Martha's father decides to get married only for a strong economic hold in the society: "Martha's got money because Martha's father's second wife . . . not Martha's mother, but after Martha's mother perish . . . was a very old lady with bulge who was very rich" (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*:122). Thaddeus Wakefield writes, "Daddy makes money, and Martha values him for that. Martha has internalized the market economy values of a society in analyzing her father; he is 'valuable' because the invest are up, not because of his integral

personality and individuality” (19-20). But Martha’s father does not show faith in her daughter as he considers her a feeble sex, hence; she did not hold economic powers. Similarly, Honey’s father raises money by sermon the virtues of religion among the public as he is a priest. In the play, Nick also asserts it when he says to George, “My father-in-law . . . was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich” (120). Thaddeus Wake field points out negation between Martha’s father and Honey’s father when he explains, “Honey’s father made his money from religion, while Martha’s father made it from marrying a rich old woman who died and left everything to him in her will” (21). Thus, male characters hold Profitable independence; on the reverse, women are economically dependent on men.

One of the concerns for women’s exemption is the function of mothering for fulfillment of womanhood. The feminist intellect advocate women’s freedom to exercising of their choice for mothering. On the reverse, mothering is another interest for Albee dramatizes anti feminism. He reveals women’s reproductive right as fiction. He makes humour of women’s motherly instinct and function of mothering. Martha and Honey have no exemption to exercise their reproductive rights in the real life. Martha wants to be mother of a son. She bears an unreal child who is murdered in fantasy. On the other hand, Honey’s unvarying appeal and strong desire to give birth to a child is rejected and her dream of mothering is destroyed because she is forced to abort her “hysterical pregnancy”. In this way, woman’s reproductive right is rejected by the paternal society. Further, George makes wittiness of Honey’s “hysterical pregnancy” and he considers it as “up and down”. Albee, thus ridicules women’s reproductive rights on the stage by showing an anti-nature situation where female characters are forced to shirk their responsibilities for bearing and rearing of children. In the play, Albee’s Anti feminism rests on mothering as fantasy rather than a reality:

HONEY. [almost tearfully]. I want a child.

NICK. Honey. . . .

HONEY. [More forcefully]. I want a child!

GEORGE. On principle?

HONEY. [in tears]. I want a child. I want a baby. (3.236)

In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1960), Betty Friedan opines that mothering is the central goal of American women for their maternal happiness and fulfilment of modern womanhood. On the reverse, in the play, Martha and Honey have no freedom for motherly happiness as well as fulfilment of modern womanhood. On the one hand, Martha has to give birth to an fanciful child and remain childless throughout her life. Her imaginary child is smothered by her husband, hence her right to be a mother is spoiled by him. On the other hand, Honey’s “hysterical pregnancy” (104) becomes meaningless when she is forced to take pills and strangle about the child in the womb whom she urgently wants to give birth.

Albee turn down women’s equal right for education with men. For example, Martha and Honey’s education cannot be unnoticed by the feminist scholars because their education is different from their male counterparts. There were very few colleges till 1960s, which made facility and adopted co-educational system of study for boys and girls, otherwise; girls were sent to the separate colleges for their study and the syllabus for their education was also different from the syllabus designed for the education of boys. In the *Education of Women in the United States*, McClell and points out that the actual educational experiences of the girls at school were simply different from the boys. In her essay, Jennifer C.

Madigan finds discrimination between girls and boys’ education. Madigan writes, “In reviewing the historical picture of women’s educational experiences in the United States, it appears that expectations for girls in school have been different than expectations for boys” (12). Thus, Martha and Honey’s education focuses more on home making, cleaning, scrubbing, bearing and rearing of children in imagination, ignoring other arena of life like economic independence, and earning their livelihood independently.

Thus, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee defends anti feminist acts. In the play, he deconstructs the family structure and shows that women are given equal choice with men to exercise their power but his dramatization of women's issues for equality does not prove to be from a feminist standpoint, as women are neither fit for the old paradigms of femininity nor do they represent the ideology of 'ideal womanhood'. Women are confined within the four walls of the house where they indulge themselves in making coffee, cooking food, and other typical familial duties. They are not given freedom to make their own Self-reliant decisions in marriage, and mothering. They do not get chance for equal right for education with men and choose their professed career.

Besides this, women suffer from the domestic violence. Men characters treat female characters with contempt. They use and abuse them for their own benefit. They satisfy their sexual desire and reduce them to an object. Martha systematically provide herself in the playful imitation of the feminist activists and makes a satirical caricature of the ideology of 'ideal woman'. In the end of the play she succumbs to George. Thus, anti feminist acts are projected against women's freedom; therefore, playwright's attitude towards women is anti feminist.

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