

# Comic Games of Parody and Grotesque Realism in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: a Bakhtian Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The intensive review of literature of past and present clearly establishes the fact that no study is available on Edward Albee from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin. Albee is an American playwright belonging to the tradition of The Theatre of the Absurd. Bakhtin propounded the concept of "carnival" and treated it as the revolutionary current of modernity. His study of literature from Rabelais to Dostoevsky gave an insight into the comic tools employed by Dostoevsky. Bakhtin is the first Russian critic who has shown that in the course of cultural history transformation of fashion, tastes and dramatic techniques help to dramatize the social reality. Bakhtin propounded the concepts of dialogism and "heteroglossia" to give an epic dimension to drama and novel. In this paper rave culture of Bakhtin is excavated focusing on the textual analysis of the plays of Albee. Rave serves as a temporary liberation from the seriousness and anxieties of life and all seriousness is brought down to earth by Edward Albee in his plays. For Bakhtin, literature is not merely an ideational phenomena but it is an epistemological instrument concerning intellectual, imaginative and emotional attitudes. Edward Albee examined the themes of breakdown of marriage, love and sex in his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) using grotesque realism and the farcical elements of the comedy. Martha, George, Nick and Honey are the major characters that are living with a void but Albee make them to play fun and games to laugh away the painful memories of the past[1][2].*

**Index Terms:** *Grotesque Realism, Perspective, Carnival, Alienation, Epistemological, Farcical, Rave Culture, Ideational Phenomena*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee is a dramatist of despair and crisis of life. He brought revolution in the American theatre by introducing the examined the themes of breakdown of marriage, love and sex in his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) using the tools of grotesque realism and the farcical elements of the comedy.

Martha, George, Nick and Honey are the major protagonists who are living with a void but Albee make them to play fun and games to laugh away the painful memories of the past. He is concerned with moral and social problems of the Americans and had passion to depict the challenges confronted by the people of America. He keenly observed the techniques employed by Beckett and Ionesco but he turned to Bakhtin to depict the crisis of the age[10] observes that the hero of Albee "is a self-created victim adrift in a society which has carefully constructed its own absurdity from the bricks and mortar of

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spiritual despair and material cupidity" (111).  
Edward Albee's play depicts George and Martha scrapping

the traditional values of the American Dream through truth and illusion. Edward Albee's grotesque comedy destroys the idea of the "American Dream." Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* deals with the conflict between truth and illusion. In all the scenes of the drama, Albee's main focus is to puncture the morality of the American society and to break down the illusions of the characters.

Edward Albee borrowed from Bakhtin the tools of sarcasm and cynicism, grotesque realism and burlesque to expose and ridicule the contemporary bankrupt American society. He was greatly influenced by the stylistic techniques used by Ionesco, Genet and Beckett. The main focus of Albee is to explore the inner turmoil of his protagonists in his plays. Both George and Martha are the victims of absurdity and anxiety but Albee uses the tools of the carnivalesque feast to ridicule their disintegration of self. Paolucci observes that Albee made many innovations in the dramatic domain as he exploited all the sources of the traditional and contemporary theatre. Albee makes many experiments in "parody, humor, allegory and dramatizes the scenes of fantasy to provoke laughter" (Paolucci 45)[11].

The American theatre of the post World War II era voices an excruciating mood of nihilistic despair as the modern man protests against a life that has been drained off ultimate meaning. The goal of Albee is to expose the deepest layers of human conflicts. Albee uses repartee in the best possible way and the chief merit of the drama is its fierce dialogue. George and Martha are misfits in America; they are the victims of anxiety disorders and are aggressive and neurotic. For Martha aggression is the most powerful tool to strike through masks and to make contact with George. Aggression is the perfect way to strip off illusions and to break the web of lies and frauds. Albee's protagonists are reduced to interrogation marks in a world in which everything is problematic and uncertain. Filled with moral despair, they live in an elusive world to escape from the harsh realities of life. George feels homeless and redundant in an inscrutable universe. He distrusts truth, justice and love and negates all moral and religious values which have been sustaining the human civilization. No wonder, the plot structure of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* depicts the tragic process of the deflation of self. Albee shatters all

and illusions in this drama. The play portrays the desperation and anguish of a life of failure, vacuity, self-indictment, torture and violence through the medium of wit and humor of carnivalesque. Albee examines and probes the inner world of the protagonists depicting the conflicts between sexuality and spirit, good and evil, matter and mind, the world and the unconsciousness. According to Carl Jung, neurosis is essentially a matter of schism



between individual's conscious and unconscious desires—"a dissociation of personality due to the existence of complexes" (Jung 188) [9]. For Alfred Adler, the social set up is the basis of the neurotic conflict. While Freud sees in a neurotic very little of social inclination, he is bent on establishing his supremacy in society-an anxiety that springs from a sense of inferiority. Adler contends that "every neurosis can be understood as an attempt to free oneself from a feeling of inferiority in order to gain a feeling of superiority" (Adler 23)[6]. Neo Freudians like Eric Fromm and Karen Horney have emphasized "anxiety", "adult experience", "cultural influence on the individual" as the dominant factors of neurosis. The neurotic protagonists like Jerry or George long to enter into "phantasy of life". They seek mechanisms of escape like sado-masochism, destructiveness and conformity. George and Martha manufacture illusions and withdraw into their self created cocoon believing that they can escape from the harsh realities of the outside world. Albee uses the tools of black comedy to expose and ridicule them; the fun and games of Martha and George provoke laughter in the play.

Richard Schechner of the editor of the *Tulane Drama Review* greeted the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as "a persistent escape into morbid fantasy". W.D Maxwell found it "a filthy play". The staging of the play was a grand success as the audience was spellbound. Saul Colin admitted to having "never spent such an emotionally and physically upsetting evening at a theatre". Some critics leveled charges of misogyny, homo-sexuality, and lack of originality.

Despite the scathing criticism, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was a box office hit and ran for two years. Albee dramatizes themes of sex, violence, perversion, moral and spiritual damnation. George is dramatized as a lonely individual, craving for the love and affection of a son but whose false illusions result into his being the victim of comedy of grotesque. Albee dramatizes him when he finds himself in a crisis. He has two possible ways of acting either to face reality or to retreat into illusion. His passionate tendency to cling to neurotic illusions dehumanizes his personality and debilitates his sensibility. *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a grotesque comedy and the main focus of Albee is to puncture all illusions of George and Martha. The textual analysis of the plot of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* exposes George and Martha who are living in their own self-created illusive world. Albee has brought many issues into the limelight. Many critics are of the opinion that the play is a psychological "case study" of married couples who are leading a meaningless life. The plot of the novel depicts the traumatic life of two couples- George and Martha and Nick and Honey. George married Martha twenty three years ago and Nick is a Biology Professor who married Honey recently. The life of the old couple is contrasted with the young couple and in a way George and Martha see in the new couple their past life. Albee uses the elements of wit, irony and paradox to ridicule the corrupted American family institution. Albee projects his main protagonist who struggle to live in the false illusive world to escape from the terrors of life. Alan Schneider directed the play for the first time and he found out that "What Albee wanted was the image of "a womb or a cave"(Schneider 39). The plot

centers on the "games of deceit and betrayal" which George and Martha play to escape from the neurotic tensions of their life."What a dump" is the first disgusting remark of Martha that sets the tone of the drama (7). After Nick and Honey arrive, George and Martha begin ridiculing their twenty years of marriage, violently and brutally. Both feel that the marriage was a failure. George and Martha indulge in typical games to pass time and to entertain each other. Berne and Harris (1973) defined the comic fun and games of George and Martha. The players do not join voluntarily, but are lured into the game. Each game has certain set rules and nobody dares to violate these rules[12]explores the nature and significance of the witty games played by George and Martha. He describes the play as an "all night drinking party during which two couples ruthlessly and sadistically rip each other to shreds". Malkin wrote

*Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From* [5] and wrote that the games "demand little action, only an abundance of verbal energy" and to win or to lose a game depends upon one's level of "verbal mastery" . In the opinion of [6] George and Martha are "two connoisseurs of verbal dueling" [12], and in Ruby Cohen's words they are experts in "sado-masochistic language". George and Martha treat language "as a power tool, to be controlled and possessed" (171). [5] has commented thus: " In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha use the cynical and bitter language to threaten and intimidate the audience. It is an unconventional language; the product of their sterile life and absurd existence. They construct an 'imaginary son' to confront the metaphysical despair"[7]. Cohn contends that the games "Humiliate the Host", "Get the Guests", "Hump the hostess", and "Bringing up Baby" "suggest a miniature society" (96). Maria Stenz observes that "Martha is an alienated woman who lived at home and 'daydreamed about her future instead of creating it herself" ([7]. The atmosphere of the drama recalls Congreve's famous play *The Way of the World* in which the sexual intrigues form the main fabric of the plot. George and Martha play many games to amuse themselves. The humorous game of the carnival feast "Humiliate the Host" and George takes the charge to take revenge from Martha. George calls Martha a "book dropper! Child mentioner!" (140). George is in high spirits as he plans to retaliate with full energy: "We've played Humiliate the Host ... we've gone through that one ... what shall we do now?" (138); "there are other games. How about ... how about ... Hump the Hostess?" (139).

Martha calls him "a portrait of a man drowning". Martha is under the attack of George. He manipulates another game to let her down. He proposes: "We'll play a round of Get the Guests. How about that? How about a little game of get the guests?" (140). George knows how to control Martha, Nick and Honey. The tone of Martha is quite cynical and ridiculing: "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" (67).



17. Albee, Edward Albee. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Turtleback Books, 1988.

George was the choice of her father who wanted George to become the President of the college but George proved a dullard as Martha pulls him up: "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" (88). Martha delights in sadistic pleasure in bullying George. When the ladies go upstairs, George and Nick confide in one another. George's failure to achieve distinction in the History department and his failure as a writer are the basis for "Humiliate the Host" (38). Nick's opportunistic marriage with Honey for money and her hysterical pregnancy allows George to retaliate in "Get the Guests" (93).. Each game in the drama unravels the psychic pressures of the individuals and their inner void. The games create a miniature culture with rules and regulations and a fluid value system. The breach of confidence is very common; each character assails the other to derive sadistic pleasure. Martha is at her best in showing her vulgarity and in desperation, George cries out:

THE GAME IS OVER!" (136). Martha refuses to stop and goes on insulting George who with new energy declares to take revenge from Martha: "This is my game! You played yours... you people. This is my game! (142).

To conclude, Edward Albee used the tools of Bakhtin to bring a fresh flavor in the theatre of absurd and depicts the moral and spiritual issues. Albee's play was a grand success on the Broadway because it was thrilling, entertaining and humorous, an indictment of the sterility and vacuity and despair of the Americans.

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