

Materialist Society in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

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Abstract

After the Second World War, The American materialistic society was one of the most themes criticized in most of Albee's early plays. He paid a great attention to the negative impact of "American Dream" project and the negative impact of this project on the behavior of American individual. Albee explains that the "American Dream" project means the absence of the highest values and principles of humanity and this project will cause a gap between family members and between the family and society. Through Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This paper will attempt to highlight on how the American individual directly affected by the materialism community which has become used to administer the American daily life, also highlight on the social hypocrisy that the high American class lived and explain how the American culture has lost the real principles to build an ideal society in which humans can live in harmony.

Keywords: Albee, materialism, real, and fiction, American dream, marriage and love

1. Introduction

The individual existence is based on family and his society because the family and society provides the safety to its individuals. Generally, a human has a subjective and objective existence in the family and society. A human being is a dynamic member of society, so the society plays an essential and significant role in organizing the domestic human life. Actually, an American individual is directly affected by two things: disillusionment of the "American Dream" and the Materialism Community which has become depraved with the disintegration of the set of standards that used to administer the human society in times of pre-industrial development. Contemporary hypothesizing has established a lot of features about the nature of family life, with many discussions about the social change that affects personal relationships (Eby, 2007).

In this concept, Albee wrote about the materialism that was rooted in consumerism in his community, which regarded the character's income as a criterion to live a comfortable life. The period after the Second World War, wealth plays a major role in the achievement of happiness; the characters believe that the pleasure is related to wealth, unconsciously that means they will replace the principles of morality with a hollow life which is based on illusion. In his book *From Tension to Tonic: The plays of Edward Albee*, Paolucci indicates "Albee's moral and spiritual exhaustion in the society as society's unawareness of the best values" (55)

Albee illustrates that the present values of humanity if there are any left, are "incoherent and inhuman" (McCarthy, 1987). He believes that, as an outcome of materialism, all social relationships are already declining and distorted. In particular, Albee tackles family relationships to reveal how persons cannot communicate with others in the same milieu. Roudane (1987) states that Albee legitimizes and frees his characters of leading essentially meaningless lives (195-196). In general, loneliness and isolation are the main features to explain modern hyper-consumerist individuals in America, since materialism has acquired a dominant position in human relations.

As Albee's point of view, the American person becomes a consumer culture, in other words, literary culture has become a minor factor in the life of the American individual, industrial production and marketing turned out to be the standard of the American good life; as a reaction, the American citizen lost his emotional sense and behaved as a machine in his daily life, Their interest is only in amassing money. Moreover, their believing that through the economic structure they can achieve their ideal and realize their values, vision and a virtuous life. Donnelly (1970), exposes that through the combination of being inner-directed and tradition-directed characters

can balance their behavior perfectly (111-113). The depression and soreness which are brought by these two world wars increase people's agony and frustration, leading to destabilizing the emotional state of beings in modern American person. Generally, the depressed life after WWII strongly affects all parts of American society.

2. About the Play

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Is Albee's most prominent and successful play, written in 1962. It has four characters, Martha, the dominating character; she is about fifty-two years old and married to George, her second husband, who works as a professor in the department of history. Martha has gained her social position through her father, the president of the college in which George works. Martha is an alienated and hysterical woman. She seems a somewhat hateful woman with intensely troubled behavior. She goes in search of love and care, which finally leads her to marry the family gardener. However, this relationship does not last because the boy does not belong to her social class. She decides to marry George to satisfy her father's desire for a new ideal husband. George is forty-six, the second husband of Martha. He is presented as a passive and a self-satisfied character that is totally controlled by the demanding woman who brings depression to his life.

The materialist man appears clear, through the character of Nick, a nice looking boy with an assertive personality searching for his success through the illegal route. He was an intelligent young man of thirty, a professor in the biology department. As an ambitious man, he marries Honey, whom he has known since childhood, just for her money. He has done well enough to reach the position of the head of the biology department and is considered a suitable replacement for Martha's father as head of the college in the future. Nick is ready to exploit any opportunity to achieve his dream, including establishing an illegal relationship with Martha. Honey is twenty-six years old, a slim girl who has inherited great wealth. Through the play, she appears as an innocent character and has a problem with tense moods, because of symptoms of her pregnancy, but she is a liar and cheats Nick in making him believe that she is still carrying a child.

3. Discussion

Through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee tried to shed light on the American materialistic community through the relationships between the older characters, and a conversation between them reveals their real way of living. The play starts when George and Martha arrive back home from a faculty party at the university where George works. Martha informs her husband that the young couple Nick and Honey are coming for after-party drinks. George is not pleased with the idea. It is two o'clock in the morning. Martha warns him not to be angry with a sulking face. George and Martha spend most of their time savagely attacking each other, he always reminds Martha of her age and her alcoholism. It seems that no one is particularly comfortable in life. The conversation between Martha and George before the guests' arrival was just mutual insults, giving the impression to the reader or the audience that there is an emotional detachment between them.

When Nick and Honey arrive, Martha appears in a different guise: she is very polite, asking them to come in. Martha describes Nick as "about thirty, blond... and good looking" (14). The young couple thinks it is too late, so they should leave, but Martha invites them to join them. Nick attempts to share some conversation with George about a painting, but he teases him, thinking that his wife invites him because she admires his personality. George again asks Martha to control herself in front of the guests and behave like a model woman.

Clearly, George and Martha are not living as a happy couple. Through her marriage to George, Martha aims to achieve her ambitions: initially, she wants him to be the head of the history department, then a successor to her father in the college presidency in the future. It should be noted here, that Martha's desire to give George a special functional position does not mean the existence of affection towards him; it was just the desire to meet her need to appear as a wife of an important man. With a weak personality, George fails to achieve her dream and brings frustration to her life. They have failed to have a child, "the product of a society which encourages a woman to believe that marriage and motherhood are the only solutions to the problems of living" (Stenz, 1978)

Return to Martha's childhood and her youth, we find that her mother died at an early age, then she involved in a romantic relationship with the gardener who works for her father and marries him, but, because of great pressure from her father, she is forced to end the marriage. Martha spent a long period of her life simply preserving her social status as the daughter of the college president. Then she married a young professor from the department of history. This husband failed to achieve her ambitions, and she did not give birth to children for him. Martha's behavior becomes inappropriate for her social status, being the daughter of the college president. She believes that George is not a man who can get her father's approval, so she names him "flop man" (56) Martha criticizes saying she has money to buy things he cannot afford to buy with his little salary.

The illusory child is discussed in the last conversation between George and Nick when Nick asks George if they

really have a child. George replies “That’s for me to know and you to find out” (30) George’s answer reveals his shame in telling him that they don’t have a child. The illusory child is the main theme that is presented throughout the play: George and Martha invented the child and vowed never to discuss the issue in public. The reality of the child is unknown until the end of the third act when George knows that Martha has spoken with Honey about their fantasy child. For this reason, George decides to avenge her. Therefore, he asserts that it is a suitable time to play the last game, “bringing up baby”, to embarrass Martha. He asks her to begin the game by talking about their son clearly. He knows very well that Martha is the only one who is responsible for the imaginary child. Due to his fear that their illusionary life will one day be destroyed, he decides to shock Martha by telling both Nick and Honey about the fact of their son. At the same time, he wants to put an end to the evil game that they have lived with for twenty-one years.

George: ...And when you want to change something ... You Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! (178)

Martha: No! No! You cannot do that! You can’t decide that for yourself! I will not let you do that! (232)

As some critics claim, what Albee wants to clarify is that they create this son as a support in their miserable life. As a couple, they live in one place, but each one has a different world, and if they share any conversation, they start to fight directly. Thus, the continuing relationship between George and Martha is based on the illusion of the child who has lived throughout the period of their marriage. It is just like the illusion of the American Dream which is experienced by the American individual. The continuing relationship between George and Martha is based on the illusion of the child who has lived throughout the period of their marriage. It is just like the illusion of the American Dream which is experienced by the American individual.” (40). Finally, the guests silently leave. George and Martha stay alone on the stage and, with peaceful words, Albee ends the play.

The fantasy child of George and Martha was to compensate for the lost passion between them, they invented him as an association connecting them emotionally, even in a fantasy world only. As some critics claim, what Albee wants to clarify is that they created this son as a support in their miserable life. As a couple, they live in one place, but each one has a different world, and if they share any conversation, they start to fight directly. Thus, the continuing relationship between George and Martha is based on the illusion of the child who has lived throughout the period of their marriage. It is just like the illusion of the “American Dream” which is experienced by the American individual. Gassner states that “with the fantasy child, Martha and George are escaping from reality and loneliness. So, their imaginary son is used to support these individuals in their isolation” (40)

With regular drinking that night, the four characters begin to expose the reality of their lives. They begin revealing the factual aspects of the lives of the four characters and illuminating their inner thinking. Martha says that because she an only daughter of the college president, some men try to become close to her for their own benefit. The child fantasy of George and Martha is to compensate for the lost passion between them, because the emotional detachment pushes them to find the child fantasy as an association connecting them emotionally, even in a fantasy world only. George demonstrates, that day after day the new generations of America become more concerned with money than with love. This means love has already been deserted by the requirements of the “American Dream”, which becomes a common theme through Albee’s plays because of his belief that this dream is the main cause of the social disintegration in the modern age. So, marriage to a wealthy woman is the quickest way for a man to achieve his dream (Johnson et al., 2003).

Through their conversation, Nick admits to George that he married Honey because of her pregnancy, but he soon discovered that she had a false pregnancy. Nick: I married her because she was pregnant. (60) He adds that he allows her to continue in her deception that she is pregnant in order to get her money. When George perceives that money lures Nick into his involuntary marriage, he comments, “I’m fascinated by the methodology... by the pragmatic accommodation by which you wave off the future boys going to take over” (68). Nick believes that he can get his aim by deceiving others: despite the false pregnancy, he pretends to trust Honey to achieve her fortune. On the other hand, George’s plan is, through Martha’s father who he can achieve his desire for the social position. The two couples depict the reality of their lives where love and passion are replaced with the material things. Therefore, marriage in America becomes the shortest way to achieve the individual ambitions (Sasani, 2015).

Through this prominent play, Albee sees that the individuals begin to look at marriage as an economic project in which sex and wealth are available, but they ignore that in the future, human feelings will totally die. Many writers including Edward Albee consider that the American dream is a project which becomes contradictory with all aspects of humanity principles that society must be built upon. Nick and Honey reflect another failure of marriage: in fact, both present a mirror of the materialistic American society that is empty of human values. Nick marries Honey for her wealth. In addition, Honey builds her marriage on the basis of a lie that she is pregnant.

Thus, the two couples reflect a clear image of marriage in America, where some people get married not because they love each other, but because of their desire to get social position or material wealth (Stein, 2013).

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee touches upon the phenomenon of asylum rights to live in a fantasy world and expresses his rejection of the path that is followed by American society. Bloom (1987), states that the play embodies “the fate of the American Dream, which has moved progressively further away from the supposed liberal idealism of those revolutionary principles” (142). Albee sees that the progress of American society in this direction will lead to the failure of the individual in the face of reality and make him choose the easy way: to live in the world of imagination and delusions. That’s what George and Martha did. They lived behind their child fantasy because of the fear and loss of the ability to face reality. This finally reflects negatively on their marital lives.

Albee comments on the “American Dream” that has become the ambition of any citizen in America. For him, it is an unsuccessful project, leading society and individuals to shift from reality to live in illusion. Also, George indicates that his role as a son-in-law of the college president destroys the emotional part of his masculinity, and his current position is due to Martha’s father, not due to his own skills. In fact, this is taken as the main reason for the reduction in feelings of the older couple and the detachment of their emotions.

4. Conclusion

From what has been mentioned above, we can elicit, the impact of materialism factor and the American dream of the American individual, which has become the main concern for him, especially after the Second World War, only then has the materialism has been overshadowed by the personality of the individual, and therefore his vision becomes materialistic view of all the things around him. It shows, the impact of materialism factor and the “American dream” of the American individual behavior, which has become the main concern for him, especially after the Second World War, where the materialism has been overshadowed by the personality of the individual, and his vision becomes materialistic view of all the things around him.

Also, in this play, Albee moves to present the state of the academic family in American society, noting the impact of the illusion of the “American Dream” and the materialism community of the American families. He explains that the American Dream means the absence of the highest values and principles of humanity; this dream will end in the emotional gap between family members and between the family and society. Albee does not give a solution to this problem at the end of this play. He just gives a chance to his characters living to have a new kind of love. He exposes that the marriages, based on materialism instead of love, will lead to losing the ethics and values in a healthy society.

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