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Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

An Exquisite Messaging of the Moral Collapse of American Society

Ashaq Hussain Pararray, M.A., M.Phil., NET/SET



Interrogating the Degrading Moral Precepts

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American society was based on some pristine ideals. The ideas like perfect happiness, liberty and individualism, etc, were very dear to them initially. However, the subsequent developments show the gradual collapsing of these ideals, for which the Founding Fathers of America sacrificed their lives even. There have been attempts to expose this collapsing of the moral values by various fiction writers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee are famous especially for showing this stark reality of the American society. Edward Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* brilliantly exposes the rot that has encrusted the moral fabric of American society. The play was performed in 1962. It very artistically interrogates the degrading moral precepts of the intellectual class of American society.

The Play - Critical Insight into the American Life

The play is set on the campus of a small, New England varsity. Its main characters are George, the husband, and Martha, the wife. In the first act, they expose each other's hallowed self-respect and intellect. They use Honey and Nick (their guests) as an audience to witness humiliation. In the second act, George and Martha even attack Honey and Nick, forcing them to reveal their true selves. Finally, in the last act, everyone's secrets have been disclosed and exorcised.

The play pricks the consciousness of American audience in general, and thereof any society that wants to hurriedly emulate American society in particular. The play provides a critical insight into American life that has imbibed the Darwinian spirit of competition. Like a true cultural critic, Albee is holding the mirror unto the American society to gloss over its sham pretenses. Mere attainment of material pleasures at the cost of emotional peace will be quite detrimental. It will breed violence, corruption and injustice only.

Exposing Corrupt Cultural Values



Courtesy: <http://smu.edu/newsinfo/releases/m2049.html>

Albee is not a protest writer, rather he exposes the extreme corrupt cultural values. The play brilliantly exposes the hypocrisy of the intellectual class's private life. On prima facie, the difficulty that Martha and George had to face in their marital life is George's apparent lack of success at his job. Professional jealousy is brewing up. George is seemingly tense, owing to the success of Nick Caraway, the Biology professor. Through George, Albee interrogates the reason for this blind wish for success, and demonstrates how this ambitious desire can destroy one's individuality. Through Martha, Albee shows that women can be more caught up with the idea of success than men, which can't be viewed in any sense as chauvinistic approach, because Martha's life-style symbolizes extreme of independence. It is a bitter reality that has befogged the American society. Martha is disappointed with George, for he is not able to provide her the desired material pleasures and humiliates him even in front of his guests:

Martha: You've really screwed up, George.

George [spitting it out]: Oh, for God's sake Martha!

Martha: I mean it ... you really have.

George [barely contained anger now]: You can sit there in that chair of yours, you can sit there with the gin running of your mouth, and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart ALL NIGHT ...and that's perfectly all right... that's OK....

Martha: YOU CAN STAND IT!

George: I CANNOT STAND IT!

(Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? 92)

Happy Family

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The concept of a happy family is based on the premises that the children act as cementing elements in a family. For Martha and George, their lack of a child is the main reason that they are not able to understand each other. For Honey and Nick, the case is same. Even if communication takes place, it is at the superficial level. Heart to heart communication doesn't take place. The play forwards the thought that the society has become so much materialistic that there exists no emotional bond between the husband and wife, rather everything is a sort of transaction. A happy family symbolises a happy society, and vice-versa. Albee in a very frank and straight forward manner reveals that the American families are in shambles.

Privacy Issues

The play also deliberates upon the idea of privacy in marriage. Albee in a dialogic fashion is opening up George and Martha's marriage not only to Nick and Honey, but he is revealing their mode of interaction to an entire audience. It is not the failure of two families, but rather Albee gives it cosmic touch. There is an implicit message for the entire audience to be contended with what they have, rather than feeling envious.

On the one hand, Martha and George fight about their son's eye color, while in reality, the son doesn't exist. On the other hand, Honey and Nick are not completely innocent. Nick can be seen as a younger version of George. Nick's story about Honey also reveals how sexuality can be used as a means of power by women. It is no longer a means of reproduction. Bodies are used as agencies of power, or in otherword it is commodification of human bodies. Transaction takes place between bodies. Imperfect bodies mean imperfect intellectuals. Defective bodies find it tuff to survive in the Darwinian jungle that the America of 1950s has turned out to be. When Honey appeared pregnant, Nick married her. And, when she couldn't conceive later on, their marriage turns out to be a failure. Both George and Nick recognize that part of having power at the University is sleeping with the women. Martha too thinks that much of her power could come from seduction. That is why, she tries to seduce Nick in front of George. George is a mere spectator.

Flawed Life All Around

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Nick, who is dedicated to eradicate the imperfections in human genes, however, his own life is revealed as flawed. Albee seems to be pointing out that one of the major problems in his society is that people have imbibed Darwinian spirit of 'struggle for existence'. George compares his life to Nick's, and thus feels inferiority complex. Seemingly Nick and Honey is an ideal couple, but on close scrutiny even their marriage is a failure.

Edward Albee implicitly castigates the corrupt, dehumanized society which lacks moral conviction. The American seems to be in a phase of moral crisis. The spectators plus readers are given a message that despite the characters' material prosperity, their society is in a desperate need for change because of the absence of love, understanding and compassion. Albee suggests that the vitality of the civilized society depends on the ability of the family and the individual; otherwise moral decay is inevitable. Albee is a visionary artist. His beliefs and feelings are of a humanist who probes deep into the psychological make-up of his characters. He is not a propagandist, but he uses his art as a means through which he conducts an exploration of the vitality of his vision of mankind. Self-introspection is what the characters need that will truly purge them of mental stress. Albee warns the spectators that the blind pursuit of material pleasures will lead to chaos and confusion.

Work Cited

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