

Different Forms of Violence in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Abstract

*Violence is one of the most overworked terms within academia as it drove researchers in various disciplines to explore its multidisciplinary nature and effects. Literature is no exception. Out of the master forms of violence, the present paper analyzes the different forms of domestic violence in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* And *A Delicate Balance*. The major forms of domestic violence analyzed herein are psychological violence, physical violence, verbal violence and sexual violence. It attempts to investigate the different violent characters in such plays. Moreover, it sheds light on different networks among characters suffering from violence. These highlighted family relationships include husband-wife and father-daughter, relationships.*

Keywords: domestic violence, Albee, psychological violence, verbal violence, networks, suffering.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is an abusive behavior at home. It happens when a member of a family attempts to dominate another in the same family. Abusers may use different forms of violence against their victims. Marital violence is one of the major types of domestic violence because it mainly depends on marital disorders between husband and wife. Domestic violence may be against men or women and it may occur in the same-sex relationships. The relationship among peers and friends may be affected by domestic violence. This study is interested in tracing the theme of domestic violence in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The study concentrates on four major forms of domestic violence: psychological, physical, verbal and sexual. It is clear that domestic violence leads to the imbalance of relationships among family members especially the husband-wife relationship.

The title of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has a distinguished reference. It refers to the song "who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" from Walt Disney's *Three Little Pigs* (1933), using the name of the famous English author Virginia Woolf. Martha and George (the husband and his wife) sing this song throughout the play. Virginia Woolf always seeks the truth. So, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a way of asking, "who's afraid of the truth?" referring to one of the main themes of the play: reality versus illusion. Concerning the importance of returning to reality in the play, Stephens (1972: 116) argues that violence indicates the degree to which the illusion has become "reality" in the minds of the characters. The characters respond to their illusions more violently than they do to "real" situations. Edward Albee uses his art to illustrate themes. He also shows that people not only make up images of themselves for their friends and neighbors, but that they create illusions for their husbands and wives as well. Both couples in the play make up images about their lives together in a somewhat unconscious attempt to facilitate the pains that they have had to face along the way. The characters of the play wear masks which are torn off, exposing Martha, George, Nick, and Honey to themselves and to each other. This exposure probably frees them as well.

2. Edward Albee

Edward Albee (March 12, 1928- September 16, 2016) holds an eminent position in the history of American drama. He is one of America's greatest modern playwrights. He is seen as a pioneer of a new theatrical movement in America. His success lies in his ability to combine the realistic with the surreal or the unrealistic. His style changes from a period to another, turning from a naturalistic style to an absurd one and back again. In an interview with Bruce Mann (2003), Albee presents a noteworthy point of view about playwrights saying: "anybody who is a creative writer—most of us don't admit it—but everybody who is a writer is trying to change society and the world to our point of view or to show people where they have failed, according to our standards and our lives" (133).

Edward Albee lived a luxurious life in his family house, but his childhood was unhappy. His adoptive parents paid no attention to his upbringing because his father was far from him most of the time and his mother was a society woman. Albee avoided the way his parents drew for him and concentrated on the study of arts and literature. Kittredge (2006: 16) states that Albee's adoptive mother was psychologically abusive, regularly ridiculing Albee for a group of perceived personality flaws, from his artistic aspirations, to his lack of innate athleticism. She would also regularly demean him in front of his playmates. Such abuse grew so intolerable that he made a number of attempts to run away.

Edward Albee is a provocative playwright. All his plays confuse critics, readers and audience. They still receive different criticism and interpretations. Albee shows a strong interest in the meticulous use of language in transferring ideas from the writer to the reader, and turning the ideas into actions. Most of his plays are full of different forms of violence. Hammouda (1977) asserts the significance of Albee's works:

One has to admit that Edward Albee's major contribution to the modern American theatre lies basically in his use of language. Critics might differ about the originality of his themes and the novelty of his dramatic techniques, but they all agree as to the value of the uses he put language to. It is here that the playwright manages to achieve a brilliant marriage between his theme and his technique, or, to put it bluntly, between his content and form. (83)

Albee's personal life clearly affects his plays, rendering most of them autobiographies. Albee is affected by the figure of his ineffectual father when creating the character of Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* (1966). He is also affected by his loving grandmother represented by Grandma in *The Sandbox* (1960) and *The American Dream* (1961). Moreover, his domineering and distant mother is represented by Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Agnes in *A Delicate Balance*, the wife in *All Over* (1971) and the women in *Three Tall Women* (1994). Abdullah refers to Albee's plays:

Albee's plays are mostly set in the conversational drawing room; they have plots that can be easily followed, characters with whom we can identify, and themes that are intended to convey a message. Naturalist, he cannot be labeled, for despite the physical violence of the conflict in his early plays the conflict tends to become more psychological and less outward in the greater bulk of his work. (215)

3. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: An Overview*

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Is Albee's first full length play. It is his first play to reach Broadway. The play is a representation of both the present and the past of two couples. It gives a picture of three generations attempting to connect them with each other. Martha's father represents the past generation; George and Martha represent the present generation; and Nick and Honey represent the future generation. The play is considered a confrontation between reality and illusion. This is because the characters of the play prefer to live in illusion rather than reality.

4. Forms of Violence in *Who's Afraid of Virginia?*

• Psychological Violence

Psychological violence affects inner thoughts and feelings. Most of psychological violence victims, within intimate relationships, often experience changes in their psyches and actions. Psychological violence can destroy intimate relationships, friendships and even one's understanding of one's psyche. The following section investigates some features of psychological violence in the play. Psychological violence is obvious in the relationship between husband and wife, George and Martha, because all the events of the play are treated through such a relationship. Sometimes, George and Martha, agree with each other and talk to each other like babies. But from time to time, they attack each other either physically or verbally in a violent way, which highlights the instability of their emotions and their mental disturbance. They probably suffer from psychological violence because they do not have children. Martha in particular imagines that she has an illusory son and starts to talk about him in front of her guests. Both George and Martha suffer from regression to the new generation.

Features of humiliation, suppression, insult and hatred are significant in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George has some ideas which may lead to psychological violence. For example, he refuses to light Martha's cigarette because he considers this as a weakness in his character. He does not accept the belief of returning to the age of suppression and oppression. He passes by suppression and humiliation experiences by his wife. He feels humiliated when Martha illustrates the favor her father did him. This conveys the sense of hatred and deviation in George's relation to Martha.

Psychological violence, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is also lucid through George and Martha's attitude towards their visitors: Nick and Honey. Basically, there is a hidden conflict between the two couples. As a reaction to George and Martha's behavior, Honey becomes sick and Nick threatens to take an action. Martha attempts to reach a kind of self-fulfillment. She tries to satisfy her ego. She wants to have power and control over others, even her husband. Hafez (2004: 27-28) affirms that: Martha knows how to dominate the scene by forcing the two men into competition. George is a man who can be humiliated Nick, in contrast, is a man whose psyche is ruled by unconscious narcissism. George knows that he and Nick are the same, only Nick has not realized it yet. George tries to warn him, but Nick clings to his desire to identify the weak spots in George in order to reinforce his conceit.

Martha aims to make George feel unsure of himself. She achieves this by telling Nick about George's failed attempt at writing a novel. He becomes nervous and that is exactly the state in which Martha wishes to have him. Nick and Honey are invited by Martha to visit them. Features of anxiety and fear are apparent in the character of Honey as a reaction to George and Martha's deeds. Rufolo (1984) elucidates that "the action of the play reveals that Honey's illnesses are physical manifestations of a psychological anxiety that is linked to a fear of pregnancy; Nick joyfully accepts his wife's behavior" (110). The prevailing image on which the dramatic action centers is that of George's and Martha's creation

• Physical Violence

Physical violence is another form of violence. In this form, the aggressor resorts to violence to intimidate or restrain a victim. It can be defined as an intentional and unwanted contact between aggressor and a victim. This form may include some features or acts such as threatening, hitting, kicking, choking, pulling, pushing, grabbing clothes, or using a weapon. Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* embodies physical violence between husband, George, and wife, Martha. One of the situations that reveal physical violence in the play is when Martha narrates an embarrassing story of how she once knocked George down. George fetches a shotgun and shoots Martha. It is a joke gun and a parasol comes out of the barrel. Having enjoyed the joke, Martha tries to kiss George, but he hurts her by breaking away. So, using a weapon, even if it is a joke gun, is a clear feature of physical violence. The acts and the conversations of characters reveal the use of physical violence. Albee describes George's physical violence using a shot gun:

(George takes from behind his back a short-barreled shotgun, and calmly aims it at the back of Martha's head. Honey screams... rises. Nick rises, and, simultaneously, Martha turns her head to face George. George pulls the trigger... pop! From the barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol. Honey screams again, this time less, and mostly from relief and confusion.) George tells her: "You're dead! Pow! You're dead!" (41)

Physical violence, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, develops when George takes a violent action against Martha. He asks Martha to stop talking about him and his personal affairs. But she continues her talk and refuses to stop talking. The situation infuriates George. The feature of crashing things around is clearly used here. Albee describes the situation, "Crash! Immediately after Flop! George breaks a bottle against the portable bar and stands there, still with his back to them all, holding the remains of the bottle by the neck. There is a silence, with everyone frozen" (56)

Other features of physical violence like threatening, grabbing and choking are used herein. When Martha refuses to stop talking about George, he begins to threaten to kill her. Then, he grabs her by the throat and tries to strangle her. Nick attempts to separate them.

George (on her): I'll kill you!

(Grabs her by the throat. They struggle.)

Nick: Hey! (comes between them)

Honey (wildly): VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE!

(George, Martha, and Nick struggle...yells, etc)

(George's hands are on Martha's throat. Nick grabs him, tears him from Martha, throws him on the floor. George, on the floor, Nick over him; Martha to one side, her hand on her throat.) (83- 84)

Features of attacking and pulling are used in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. George attacks his wife, Martha, for talking about his unpublished book, an autobiography about a boy who killed his parents, and the situation of her father towards her husband. George begins to attack his wife physically and Nick pulls him off her.

In addition to the attack, the hitting is used in exchanging strikes between George and Martha. George asks Martha to stop talking about him. Both George and Martha attack each other suddenly. For example, Martha starts to attack George, but he counters her surprising attack, striking back hard. Again, she wants to give him an equal hard strike. Nick throws George on the floor and Martha calls him “murderer”.

George and Martha quarrel all the time like opponents. Everyone tries to control the other. Shaking and pushing are used when Martha screams, “I’ll show you who’s sick.” And George shakes her saying “stop it” and pushes her back in her chair (92). Moreover, grabbing is obvious when Martha gives a cry of alarm, and George grabs her hair pulling her head back, “Now, you listen to me, Martha; you have had quite an evening... quite a night for yourself, and you can’t just cut it off whenever you’ve got enough blood in your mouth” (122).

• Verbal Violence

use of language to weaken people’s dignity through insults or humiliation. Some features of verbal violence are insults, threatening, blame, mockery, accusation, and criticism. In Albee’s plays, verbal violence is a striking tool used by the characters to control each other. The used language in Albee’s plays is considered a powerful weapon among the characters of the plays. Schnebly (1993: 159) states that in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *A Delicate Balance*, and *The Zoo Story*, language works as powerful tool of control against outside aggression, but the aggression is not brought by some unnamed group or organization; it comes from strangers, lifelong friends, or guest, the verbal assaults in these plays are indicative of a communication system that is failing.”

In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, verbal violence between George and Martha is salient. The dialogue, either public or private, between the two characters proves the collision between them, which may cause domestic violence. This play is mainly dependent on verbal attacks and counterattacks between George and Martha. The intrusion of Martha’s father in the dialogue between George and Martha may lead to a kind of verbal violence. This is because Martha tries to degrade her husband, George, clarifying her father’s kindness towards George. This may arouse George and make him talk violently and harshly to his wife and to the guests, Nick and Honey. George attacks Martha verbally, illustrating that Martha wants to control her husband’s actions through giving him orders and responsibilities.

In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, mockery is used to convey verbal violence. Abboston (1997: 137) clarifies that verbal violence affects the development of the husband-wife relationship. For example, Nick tries to keep up as George ridicules his own lack of progress, compares their wives, voices his suspicions of scholars, asks if Nick has kids (which Nick does not), and mocks his father-in-law. Man bridge (2010) assures that “in Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the humor also destroys. There is little room in this play-world for language as a productive tool used to cultivate closeness; rather, it is used as a weapon. This verbal violence imbues the play with a ‘coldness,’ which is further underscored by its immaculate linguistic precision and its disembodied imaginative play” (217).

Language expresses the violent emotions of characters who quarrel verbally exchanging blows and attacks. Martha makes remarks about George’s failure as a man and as a teacher because he is not able to become the head of the history department, and one day become the president of the college. Martha is used to giving imperatives to her husband. She is a domineering woman who uses intense language when talking to her husband, whose response to her is a strong one. This is illustrated when Martha asks George for a kiss. He refuses saying that her father would not accept that. He means that her father, who is an example to be followed for her, is the one who will prevent her from pleasure. Moreover, Martha uses verbal abuse when talking to her guests asking them to ‘shut up’ and ‘listen’ using imperatives and directives. That happens when she wants to talk about her father without any interruption by anyone. Verbal violence is also clear when George attempts to prevent Martha from drinking more; she insults and scolds him threatening him with divorce. She expresses her real emotions towards George telling him that he is not a significant person for her. She considers him just a man to live with because he does not affect her life.

Throughout *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, verbal violence is used. Martha uses a cruel language when talking to George, giving him imperatives, “Late! Are you kidding? Throw your stuff down anywhere and c’mon in.” Then George refers to his wife’s cruel language, “Martha’s a devil with language; she really is” (20). Martha talks to her husband: “I’m trying to shame you into a sense of humour, angel, that’s all” (22).

Accusation and insult are patent when George describes his wife, Martha, as: “a deeply wicked person.” He accuses her of lying: ‘Martha’s lying. I want you to know that, right now. Martha’s lying’ (49). George also accuses Martha of ignorance and she abuses him telling him that he is a liar. Then, insult is used by George to Martha when insulting Martha’s father describing him as ‘a white mouse’: “He does not! Your father has tiny red eyes ... like a white mouse. In fact, he is a white mouse.” Martha responds to her husband, George, with a verbal abuse, telling him that he is a ‘coward’ because he cannot say a thing like that in front of her father: “You wouldn’t dare say a thing like that if he was here! You’re a coward!” (15). Martha abuses George: “you son of a bitch” (79). Martha continues in her abuse: “The hell I won’t. Keep away from me, you bastard!” (83). Martha criticizes her husband: “You talk like you were writing one of your stupid papers” (94). George insults and criticizes Martha directly: “You’re a monster... You’re a spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden” (94).

Likewise, threatening, insult and mockery are used in the conversation between George and Martha. George threatens Martha: “That’s a threat, Martha, Be careful, Martha... I’ll rip you to pieces”. Thus, Martha insults George telling him that he is not a man enough. Martha abuses her husband verbally: “You’re a riot George” (102). Then, there is an exchange of insults between Nick and George when Nick insults George: “I have no respect for you.” George responds: “And none for yourself, either” (103). Besides. Mockery is used when George and Martha are mocking Nick.

George: No, Martha, no; that would be too much, he’s your houseboy, baby, not mine.

Nick: I’m nobody’s houseboy....

George and Martha: ... Now! (sing) I’m nobody’s houseboy now.

...(both laugh.)

Nick: Vicious. (116)

• Sexual Violence

Sexual violence can be defined as coercing a person to engage in a sexual activity against her/his will. It may occur to anybody at any age; it is an act of violence that can be perpetrated by parents, caregivers, strangers, as well as intimate partners. In addition, it is an aggressive act that frequently aims to express power and dominance over the victim. In domestic sexual violence, people may coerce their spouses into undesired sexual act. Sexual harassment and rape are kinds of sexual violence.

In Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, seduction and harassment are plain features of sexual violence. Martha attempts to seduce Nike touching him motivate her husband George and make him angry. She satisfies her sexual desire by attracting Nick towards her and kissing him two times. This way, she harasses him sexually attempting to get him into a sexual relationship with her: “Now, for being such a good boy, you can give me a kiss. C’mon” (97). Martha goes upstairs to change her clothes so as to be more comfortable. George is aware that if Martha is changing her clothes, she is changing for the hunt and consequently he realizes that it is the first step towards the seduction. Nick becomes the man to be hunted by Martha. Sexual harassment is lucid throughout Nick-Martha relationship. Nick is reluctant to commit such an act because he is afraid to be seen by George: “but what if he should come back in?” But Martha convinces him: “(all the while her hand is moving up and down his leg) George? Don’t worry about him, who could object to a friendly little kiss? It’s all in the faculty” (98). Albee describes the situation of sexual harassment and betrayal between Martha and Nick:

Nick, who has already had his hand on Martha’s breast, now puts his hand inside her dress. Then, Martha (slowing him down) says: ‘Hey...hey. Take it easy, boy. Down, baby, don’t rush it, hunh?’” (99).

5.Character in Depth

Albee’s plays always are full of characters that change the way of events and affect the fate of others. The unseen characters play important role in motivating other characters’ feelings towards or against someone or something. They may affect the relationships among the other seen characters. For example, the unseen character of Martha’s father has caused the destruction of Martha-George relationship. This also leads to George’s hatred for his wife and his father-in-law. Albee’s characters, under the pressures of the modern human condition, prefer to withdraw and escape from the real world they live in. The theme of separation is used to express the nature of characterization. George and Martha, for instance, are separated physically and sexually, attempting only to hurt each other.

In the selected play, characters represent three generations. The first generation is introduced through the unseen character of Martha's father who represented the past generation. This is illustrated through Martha's talking about her father and his favor. The second generation is brought out through the characters of Martha and George who represent the present generation. They represent real-life situations in which they live during their family life. The third generation is demonstrated through the characters of Nick and Honey who represent the future generation. They are new friends of George and Martha and they are young. So, they attempt to get experience from George and Martha.

George is a 46-year-old member of the history department at university. He is the husband of Martha, with whom he lives an unstable life. They exchange verbal abuses all the time. They also mock each other before their guests. Sometimes, George and Martha practice physical violence. When alone, George ignores Martha as much as possible. He is always humiliated by Martha for being helped by her father. She is parading his failure for all to see. When they marry, Martha hopes that George will replace her father as the head of the department.

Martha is a strong, domineering woman. She represents illusion as she wishes to live in it all the time. She lives in a kind of imagination concerning her illusory son. She expects that her illusory son may grow and become like Nick in his Youth and strength. She admires male physical beauty. She wants to find that in her illusory son. But her husband tries to frustrate all her hopes, shocking her with the bitter reality they live in. He proves to their guests that they have no son. Martha also believes that her father did her husband a favor. Thereby, Martha and George are in conflict all the time because of the fatal conflict between illusion and reality.

Martha has some hidden desires to satisfy in her life with George. She has felt suppressed in her father's house. She has had no opportunity to express her real feelings. Thus, she prefers to live in the world of illusion. She wanted to declare her womanhood in her past life, but her father refused any relationship with the other sex. Her father has put an end to her feelings by marrying her to George. So, she spends most of her life attempting to achieve her society's requirements. After her marriage, she seeks to get rid of such kind of suppression by controlling her life in her own way. Again, she declares her womanhood through making a relationship with Nick in her house to compensate for what she has already lost either with her father or with her husband.

Martha has a strong sexual desire towards the other sex. While sitting with her visitors, she switches attention to Nick who represents the young male in this play attempting to seduce him. She tries to regain her youth and remembers her first sexual relationship with the gardener at the boarding school. Her relationship with the gardener has failed because of her father's control upon her. Her father has rescued her because he believes that she is rash and hasty.

Martha is affected by the ideas and concepts of her father because of her life with him. The ideas and concepts of her father have occupied a great part of her family life. Therefore, when she marries George, she seeks to control her husband and dominate her house like her father. In other words, she looks for applying all that she has learned from her father to her husband. George is clearly affected by his long years of frustration and unfulfillment. Martha continually insults him and frustrates him, revealing her hostility towards him. Hull (1975) refers to the characters of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*:

As Martha and Honey contrast, significantly, especially in their attitudes toward motherhood, George and Nick are also quite different. Nick does have ambitions to take over the college. George sees Nick as a threat because Nick wants to control, not just the college, but education. While George does not want to dominate, he does not want to be dominated... Nick regards Honey's "dowry" as compensation for the lack of "any... particular passion" in their marriage (149).

6. Conclusion

The dramatic analysis of the selected play brings to the fore four basic forms of violence: psychological, physical, verbal and sexual. These forms are ordered according to the indicators and mechanisms characteristic of each form. Based on the preceding forms of violence, the most prevalent form of violence in the play is physical violence. Physical violence is used through different actions, especially those conducted by George against his wife, Martha, like using weapons, physical attack, pulling, hitting, blowing, pushing, crashing, grabbing, shooting and choking. Moreover, fear is common in the selected play. Honey is afraid of violence exposed in front of her and she is also afraid of her pregnancy. At the end, Albee is keen to represent the phenomenon of domestic violence which causes pain and different kinds of suffering and dissatisfaction.

الملخص باللغة العربية

يعتبر العنف الأسرى من أهم القضايا المعروضة في الأعمال الأدبية المختلفة ومن أشهرها الدراما، وقد استخدمت هذه الدراسة مسرحية (من يخاف من فيرجينيا وولف؟) لتعرض طيفا متداخلا من السلوكيات المسيئة والتعسفية داخل الأسرة والتي تحدث بدورها أذى نفسيا وجسديا ولفظيا وجنسيا. وتعرض الدراسة تحليلا لبعض شخصيات المسرحية من خلال عرض أهم أشكال العنف الأسرى المتناولة في المسرحية وهي العنف النفسي، والعنف الجسدي، والعنف اللفظي، والعنف الجنسي. وتؤكد الدراسة على إن العنف الأسرى هو نمط سلوكي يتضمن علاقة غير سوية بين الطرفين، ويزداد سوءا مع قرب العلاقة حيث يسبب أضرارا نفسية وجسدية وعاطفية واجتماعية تجعل الحياة مؤلمة. وتأتي أهمية هذه الدراسة في كونها تعرض مثل هذه الانتهاكات في حقوق الإنسان والتي قد تؤثر سلبا على التنمية المالية، والاقتصادية والاجتماعية في الأسرة التي تعتبر نموذجا مصغرا للمجتمع الأكبر.

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