



Research Paper

Blood in Mouth: A Study of Artaudian Influence on Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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ABSTRACT: In 1962, when *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* made its debut at Billy Rose Theatre, it received an array of hostile remarks from critics and audience alike. However, no one could resist its unconventional presentation of a dying marriage and eventually the play became a huge Broadway success. It cemented Edward Albee's position as an iconoclastic playwright of American theatre. The play mirrors the contemporary American society, which was then living in the false shadow of much touted 'American Dream'. Action of the play moves through the violent contentious battle between the protagonists and culminates into exorcism. The cruel language, functions as a source to keep audience glued to the events of the play. Albee's effort to arrest sensibility of the audience through a heightened physical language which is lacerated with cruelty, cries, grunts, groans, gestures, and accompanied with light and sound effects, props and music, sets parallels between him and Antonin Artaud. Examining *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* through the theoretical prism of Antonin Artaud's theory of "Theatre of Cruelty" provides a broad spectrum to understand the manner in which cruelty functions in the play to make it a thought-provoking masterpiece of theatre.

KEYWORDS- Antonin Artaud, Concrete Language, Edward Albee, Theatre of Cruelty, Violence.

Received 15 Jun, 2018; Accepted 30 Jun 2018 © The Author (S) 2018. Published With Open Access At www.QUESTjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee was one of the most honoured playwright of America. He always took pain to address the sweltering issues of the American society and has tried to wake up the audience against the misapprehension "that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen" (Albee, *The American Dream* 4). As an experimental dramatist his aim has always been to make audience, "partake in the complex spectatorial process, one that may prove entertaining, astonishing, tedious, depressing, life-affirming and anxiety-inducing" (Roudane 11). Albee delineates his views in the following manner

I don't like the audience as voyeur, the audience as passive spectator. I want the audience as participant. In that sense, I agree with Artaud: that sometimes we should literally draw blood. I am fond of doing that because voyeurism in the theatre lets people off the hook (Roudane 41).

Albee's reference to the French theorist Antonin Artaud establishes a connection of thoughts between them. Antonin Artaud was a French dramatic theorist, whose revolutionary ideas are contained in the book *The Theatre and Its Double* (1931). He expounded the theory of Theatre of Cruelty, through which he advocated that cruelty should be an essential element of theatre. According to him a dramatic experience should completely ensnare the senses of audience, forcing them into the process of purgation. He also questioned the function of language in theatre and suggested to form a concrete language that should "disturb the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt" (Artaud 28).

This paper aims to explore Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* through the prism of theory of Theatre of Cruelty. The play presents story of an emotionally drowning couple, George and Martha, whose life is structured around a life-saving illusion. The invited guests Nick and Honey witness their brutal verbal combat of blaming and demeaning each other. The action of play takes place in the liquor ridden night that finally culminates in the dawn of exorcism.

The paper is structured in three parts, first part deals with the Artaudian views about importance of participation of audience in the theatre, and Albee's dramatic techniques to ensure audience engagement in the theatrical performance. Second part investigates Albee's methods, exemplifying Artaudian concept of concrete

language for theatre. Third part of the paper explores various forms of cruelty that Albee has incorporated in the play through linguistic manoeuvring of characters.

II. ENGAGEMENT OF THE AUDIENCE.

According to modern theorist Patti Gillespie, theatre is a place where “performances by living actors take place in the presence of living audiences” (qtd. in Damen). The phrase ‘living audience’ here implies to the audience, who become active participants in the theatrical performance. A similar notion has been articulated by Antonin Artaud who advocates that theatre should be mesmerising and hypnotic like a snake charmer’s act, in which the snake charmer does not utter a single word still keeps the snake charmed by the back and forth movement of the musical instrument. He gives utmost importance to the connection of “the spectators with the spectacle” (Artaud 93).

According to Roudane in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee has tried to “break down, or at least minimize, the barrier between itself and the actors, thus creating a more intimate, and dangerous, theatre experience. The emotional effect is to involve the audience directly, as participants in the action” (Roudane 41). Albee employs various techniques to engage spectator’s senses in the action of the plays.

2.1 Incomprehensible title of the play

The inclusion of an obscure title like *Who's is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an innovative method, which Albee uses to grab the attention of audience, and channelize their sensibility towards the events of the play. The title provides a “sophisticated drollery in a tense and sombre situation [and] lends a special kind of piquancy” (Fischer 196) to the play. The title is repeatedly harmonized in the play, in various moods and tones signalling a hidden secret of George and Martha’s life. On Martha’s confession that, she is afraid of Virginia Woolf the secret of the imaginary son is finally revealed. Whenever the title is sung on the stage, to the tune of “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf? it arouses audience curiosity about the possible mystery associated with it. Undoubtedly, the title makes the audience “respond when they see George and Martha after hours of nightmarish warfare move close together...When they hear George's question, "Who's afraid ...?" and hear Martha's answer, "I ... am ... George ... I.. am” (Fischer 198).

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? comprises of three acts, Act I Fun and Games, Act II Walpurgisnacht, and Act III Exorcism. The unconventional way of naming the acts is directly connected with Albee’s attempt to hit the nerves of the audience. Albee never allows the audience to be the passive watchers of the play. The atmosphere of the stage is charged with intensity, tension and an unresolved mystery. The play fascinates with its openness and its refusal to provide any clarification for the randomly uttered words by its protagonists. The riddled words such as ‘gangle’ or ‘gaggle’ significantly draw the attention of the audience. In addition, the action is directed towards “peel[ing] labels” (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 124). It scrapes away illusions and brings audience closer to the core truths.

2.2 Watchers on stage

Another method that Albee successfully employs to engage the audience is by presenting audience, a pair of characters who represent them on stage and interact with other characters closely. Nick and Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are “onstage audience” (Krohn and Wasserman 9) and serve as “a barometre ” (Krohn and Wasserman 9) for the actions happening on the stage. Through the eyes of Nick and Honey, the entire audience observes the crude realities of George and Martha’s life. The play deals with the deteriorating familial relationship. Albee not only opens up filthiness of George and Martha's marriage to Nick and Honey but also, shows the reality of falling American society. The American audience who were habitual of watching a perfect happy family on stage were shocked to see George and Martha. Nick and Honey appear to be an everyday sort of couple and their astonishment at George and Martha's cruel behaviour echoes the audience's bewilderment. As Anne Paolucci says, “The younger couple mirror our own embarrassment and our public selves; Martha and George our private anguish. The possibilities for identification are infinite; each moment is a step toward recognition” (46). Nick and Honey are detached onlookers who do not have any personal interest in George and Martha’s life. They see their battle with an impartial view. They establish a special bond with the audience. Audience sitting in the theatre are like “watchers watching the watchers watch” (Blau 7). In this manner, Albee ensures that the “all the action [takes] place in the spectators” (Flatley *New York times*).

2.3 Inexplicable games

Another interesting method that Albee's employs in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to assure audience’s involvement in the play is by making George and Martha go through standard rituals and pastimes to intimate revelations through the medium of games. The seemingly childish games are imbued with savagery and loathe against each other. They are overloaded with harsh, wicked and cruel references. The ambiguous and mystified games, “Humiliate the Host”, “Get the Guest”, “Hump the Hostess”, and “Bringing up Baby”, are

continued till Act II, "leaving the audience to decipher the motivations behind their bizarre language and sexual antics" (Jenkins31).

III. THE CONCRETE LANGUAGE OF THEATRE

One of the most important features of the theory of Theatre of Cruelty is Artaud's objection to dependency on written and spoken text. He considers speech to be a nontheatrical element. However, he has further explained that he did not mean the complete abolishment of language from stage instead he suggested to change its function, giving importance to the words that they have in dreams. In other words, he means to enlarge "the theatre's vocabulary" (Bermel 15), by enhancing the power of words in the theatrical space. Thus, he wished to create a concrete language for the stage that is "intended for the senses and [is] independent of speech" (Artaud, 67).

Formation of concrete language means to enhance the effect of language by adding physicality to it. Such an expressive language is a combination of words with sonorous effects, body movements and visual effects. Words should have suggestive sounds which are sensuous and explosive. The words should then be charged with appropriate pitch, intonation, and pace putting stress on vocal chords. Text must be shouted, whispered, wheezed, howled and groaned, in abstract meanings of the words and sentences. Codified body language, gestures and facial expressions should be able to convey that the ordinary words might not be capable of.

3.1 Physicality of language

In the stage directions of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, we find Albee resonating the Artaud's view of creating a physical language for theatre. He has been remarkable in employing various nuances of language. He discovers myriad ways to make words to express more than their denotative meaning. Praising Albee, Matthew Roundane states that, "Among critics and audiences alike, Albee quickly established himself as a master of language, a stylist who was precise and probing" (37). He uses italics for more nuanced deliveries of lines that embody heightened emotional tensions. Thrusting on facial expressions and gestures, he guides the actors to create expressions and gestures of "some terror" (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 88), "hysteria", "outlandish horror" (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 89). George and Martha's interaction with each other is marked with rising discontent and anger.

MARTHA. (*Anger taking over*): I'm on to myself.

GEORGE. (*As if she were some sort of bug*): No ... no ... you're sick.

MARTHA. (*Rises—screams*): I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S SICK!

GEORGE. All right, Martha ... you're going too far.

MARTHA. (*Screams again*): I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S SICK. I'LL SHOW YOU.

GEORGE. (*He shakes her*): Stop it! (*Pushes her back in her chair*) Now, stop it! (2.196)

Their expressions and voice changed drastically to mark the initiation of exorcism by the end of the play.

Good ... good ... you go right ahead. (*Very softly, so Martha could not possibly hear*) Martha? Martha? I have some ... terrible news for you. (*There is a strange half-smile on his lips*) It's about our ... son. He's dead. Can you hear me, Martha? Our boy is dead. (*He begins to laugh, very softly ... it is mixed with crying*). (3. 229)

3.2 Dialogues

Albee has been exceptional in his ability to capture the American idiom and cliché and to write pungent dialogue and repartee which pierces and punishes as it entertains. Dialogues are pungent, sharp, and powerful that hit hard on the nerves of spectators. Albee's dialogues are meant to deliver more than their denotative meaning. The audience quickly grasps the hidden message that "we live in the age of deformity" (Albee, *The American Dream* 119). The helplessness of human being living in the modern age, laden with the burden of materialistic success, and emotional discontent is effulgently transformed into the web of words by Edward Albee. Martha when speaks about his and George's life in the following manner, it summarizes everything in a nutshell.

MARTHA. I cry all the time. And George cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put 'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (Begins to laugh) until they're all frozen (Laughs even more) and then ... we put them ... in our drinks. (2.163)

3.3 Mise-en-scene

For a complete concrete language of stage Artaud advocates reinterpretation and reorganization of mise-en-scene. Stage settings including sound effects, lights, scenery, props, costumes and other adornments should be utilized to mobilize the action on the stage. Albee has been extremely innovative and serious in using stage and other theatrical devices and ensure that dynamics of the play go with the settings of the stage. Rakesh Harold Solomon, in his book *Albee in Performance*, has given details of Albee's directorial thoughts about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Albee insisted the set of 1962 production of the play should exude the appearance of a 'womb or cave' (Solomon 120). Even for the 1990 production at Alley Theatre, which Albee himself directed, his set was hugely marked by the lighting that, "extend[ed] and accentuate[d] a dark circumference, creating an illusion quite similar to a cave" (Solomon 121).

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* lighting, costumes and props played a vital role in the development of action of the play. George fires the toy gun with a performative utterance of murder, symbolically kill Martha's cruelty towards him. The play ceases the tension of 1960 America, which is shown in the form of tense marital relationship between George and Martha. Gun is an important prop used by George to release the tension of war going on between them. Although it was a toy gun only but was effectively used by George to stir the terror.

Albee makes use of lights in his settings not merely as a structural device but also as a means to suggest an inner state of mind. Rather than illuminate a realistic scene, lighting is intended to overwhelm an audience with fluctuations of shade and colour. Light stands for dispelling of gloom, for radiance and brightness. The night was dark with liquor and hostility depicting the death of a relationship and the dawn suggested exorcism and beginning of the new life.

3.4 Music

Artaud insists on making music as an important part of the theatrical language. Music has been an important part of rituals, and Artaud's theatre of cruelty is formed of magic, rituals and myth. He considers ritualistic music "induces trance, as the dances of dervishes induce trance, and that addresses itself to the organism by precise instruments, by the same means as those of certain tribal music cures which we admire on records but are incapable of originating among ourselves" (Artaud 76). Heightened music with loud sonorous effect quickly acts on the viscera of the audience. For Artaud, "musical transcription [are] valuable as a means of transcribing voices" (Artaud 94).

Albee effectively uses the title of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a musical code to intensify the mystery of play. The title is heard during the action of the play each time with a different inflexion and sung several times on stage on the tune of children's rhyme "Mulberry Bush".

In the final act, 'Exorcism' Albee renders unique musical texture to the performance. He prepares his audience for a greater shock; the truth is not revealed but exploded through the news of the death of imaginary son. George confirms his son's enforced demise through recitation of the Mass of the Dead. The layered language is accentuated by rendering a polyphonic quality to it. Albee "like[s] the sound of two languages working together" (Kolin 58). George references *Dies irae*, which is part of Funeral Mass in which divine mercy is pleaded. George and Martha's combined recital of *Dies irae* in two languages, as Martha translates George's Latin version, provides a highly heightened contrapuntal touch to the prayer of clemency. It signifies emotional highpoint of the play where all the verbal assaults lead to the moment of exorcism. The reconciliation of George and Martha is indicated by Albee through the mentioned stage directions as '*hint of communion*' where George and Martha are instructed to exchange tender expressions.

IV. VARIOUS FORMS OF CRUELTY

The word 'cruelty' has an immediate unsettling effect on the listener. The phrase 'Theatre of Cruelty' does have the similar implication and the one who listens it immediately associates it with physical violence and bloodshed on stage. However, Artaud explains it as an aesthetic experience. He elaborates on his observation of cruelty in theatre as he says cruelty should, "not to be taken to mean blood, but a theatre, difficult and cruel for myself first of all" (Artaud 79). The cruelty that Artaud wishes to employ is not the brutal "hacking [of] each other's bodies" (Artaud 79). It is a means that forces us to see ourselves completely bare without any illusions. Thus, Artaud identifies the events on stage as a transformative exercise that compels the audience to confront their own pretensions of life.

Artaud considers cruelty as an, "inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue" (Artaud 80). Resonating the same notion, Albee considers cruelty as a "teaching emotion" (Albee, *The Zoo Story* 4) to amplify his audience response and jolt them out of their complacency. A basic cruelty underlies the very words of Albee's characters and this, in turn, brings us back to Artaud's demand for "extreme action, pushed beyond all limits" (Artaud 79).

One of the idiosyncratic traits of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is Albee's artistic use of words to create verbal butchery on stage. Language is used to infuse cruelty in to the action in order to remove demons

from the minds of characters and audience. Albee employs “a *dialogue* of cruelty to shock us into an awareness of ourselves, paring away our habits and defences” (Cohn 84). *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* present deteriorated familial relationships where characters assault each other physically, verbally, psychological, and are ready to tear apart each other breaking all delusions of an ideal mother, father, daughter, husband and wife.

4.1. Psychological cruelty through words

The action of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* extends from 2 o'clock in the night to dawn of a Sunday morning in the living room of George and Martha's home. In the harrowing night of the death of illusion and revelation of truth, George and Martha pour out their discontent in the most violent animalistic manner, where they hit each other through the weapon of verbal cruelty terrorizing each other mentally and psychologically. Name of the title and predominant tone of Act I, “Fun and Games” suggests entertainment however as the nights wears on and liquor does down Honey and Nick witness Martha and George wound each other with words and games that are deadly and “mercilessly comic” (Cohn 141). Though their “death-dipped gamesmanship [they expose] an anatomy of love” (Cohn 141), they spout cruelty more than kindness, especially in the first two acts of the play, they rip each other ruthlessly. They employ the strategy “of verbal thrust and parry, wound through revelation and insinuation, tease, taunt and hackaway each other, all red in face and winded” (Malkin 163). Martha mocks George's failures, past and present, as historian, writer, husband, and strips her husband's dignity in a profound cruel manner he calls him a ‘FLOP’. George combats Martha's cruelty spitting out his disgust and calling Martha a “harridan” who is “spoiled, self-indulgent, wilful, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden...” (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 157). Their verbal duelling is a kind of wrestling match where opponents are always ready to violently knock down each other. When Martha strikes out verbally the effect is deeply wounding, leaving “blood in [her] mouth” (208). Nick appropriately calls it “aimless butchery” (193).

4.2. Physical cruelty

The strange and ugly games played by George and Martha; “Humiliate the host”, “Get the Guests”, “Hump the Hostess”, “Bringing Up Baby”, require more of verbal energy than physical. However, verbal violence turns into physical violence at many times when George is provoked by Martha. George's first attack slowly shapes up and takes the form of a fierce rush and finally culminates by Honey's screams. In scene II of Act II George attacks Martha by grabbing her throat and strangling her until Nick can pull him off and throw him to the floor. Martha humiliates George through her immoral advances towards Nick and wounds him by exposing a secret about him. The secret concerns a novel that George has written, which is about “a boy who murders his mother and kills his father and pretends it's all an accident!” (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 137). Despite George's continuous warning, Martha keeps on telling,

GEORGE. You will not say this!

NICK. (*sensing the danger*) Hey.

MARTHA. The hell I won't. Keep away from me, you bastard!

(*Backs off a little...uses GEORGE'S voice again*)

No, Sir, this isn't a novel at all ...this is the truth...this really happened... TO ME.

GEORGE. (*On her*) I'LL KILL YOU! (*Grabs her by her throat. They struggle*)

NICK. Hey! (*Comes between them*)

HONEY. (*Wildly*) VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE! (*The other three struggle. 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*) (2. 137-138)

In another provoking scene, Martha argues about Nick being an actual stud or houseboy. The second attack also ends quickly. George grabs Martha, “pulling her hair back” (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 208) to slap her lightly with his free hand...again...again...again...again (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 208).

Discussion on sports lead Martha to mention a boxing match, that occurred during initial years of marriage. At that time, Martha's father was trying to improve the faculty's athletic prowess and he tried to engage George in a boxing match. When George declined, Martha jokingly put on gloves and surprised George by punching him square in the jaw and knocked him to the ground. George warns Martha to not to tell the story, but she ignores his warnings and he angrily leaves the room. She continues her tale. George returns with a surprise of his own. In retaliation for Martha's humiliating story, George sneaks up on her with a short-barrelled shotgun, aims at the back of Martha's head. Honey screams and Nick moves to stop him, Martha turns around and George pulls the trigger! “POW!!!” he yells, and the stage directions instruct that “a large red-and-yellow Chinese parasol” pops from the fake gun (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 62). Albee has used a toy gun and harmless Chinese parasol, as a prop to symbolically kill Martha's cruelty.

4.3. Cruelty for purification

The verbal assault continues through the games, and finally reaches its culmination in the third act, 'Exorcism'. The final battle of the play 'Bringing Up Baby' is fought, between George and Martha like two Gladiators are out for a kill. George initiates the game. He tells Martha, "You have had quite an evening...quite a night for yourself" (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 196). He makes her realize that time to take a decision has arrived, "We are going on, and I am going to have at you, and ...I want you to get yourself a little alert (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 208). He spurs her on like a coach before a major league match, goading her into anger, preparing her for the final round to be played "to the death" (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 197).

GEORGE. I want you on your feet and slugging, sweetheart, because I'm going to knock you around, and I want you up for it...now. We're going to play this one to the death.

MARTHA. (*She paces, actually looks like a bit fighter*) I'm ready for you. (208-9)

Martha and George's son, who was born and raised in verbal cruelty is killed with the same weapon of cruelty. George used the same means i.e. 'words' to perform his 'death'. Normally, mass follows death. Its purpose is to give meaning and symbolic finality to physical demise. Here, the mass through its potency as verbal reality accomplishes the death. An alternate verbal reality, fraught with symbolic and traditional values, is chosen by George as the weapon to combat and destroy the 'life'. Finally, at the play's conclusion, after a purgative night of linguistic jousting and mutually-inflicted emotional abuse, they symbolically kill the child as a way to abandon their illusions. With this Albee intends to end the life of illusion.

GEORGE. Martha ... (Long pause) ... our son is dead. (Silence)

He was ... killed ... late in the afternoon. ... (Silence)

(A tiny chuckle) on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a ...

MARTHA. (Rigid fury) YOU ... CAN'T ... DO ... THAT! (3. 231-232)

V. CONCLUSION

In cessation, Edward Albee and Artaud both consider theatre as a solution to social asphyxiation. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee has unmasked the pretensions of civilized American society. He has skilfully infused cruelty in the action of play through the tongue of the characters. The cruel language is accentuated with screams, shouts, variable intonation, gestures and facial expressions. The dynamic use of mise-en-scene, further makes it a concrete language of theatre. The brutality, unconventional games and mysterious title of the play certainly have a distressing effect on the viscera of the audience. Albee's protean dramatic art makes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* an exemplary play to construe Artaudian concept of Theatre of Cruelty.

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Nandini Saxena. "Blood in Mouth: A Study of Artaudian Influence on Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 06, no.5, 2018, pp. 34–39.