

## EDWARD ALBEE'S -“ WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF ? ” AS AN ABSURD PLAY

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### **Abstract :**

*The term absurd movement became famous in the second half of the twentieth century and got widespread influence particularly in the field of literature. In this regard even American literature also influenced with it. Hence this paper tries to focus such absurdist movement in America with the help of famous play of Edward Albee - Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?”*

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**Key Words : Edward Albee – “ Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ”**

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### **Introduction :**

#### **About the Play :**

“ Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ” is an absurd play written by an American writer 'Edward Albee'. In his play Edward Albee has followed the Absurdist movement of 1950's and 1960's authors such as -

Samuel Beckett (1906- 1989)

Eugene Ionesco (1909- 1994)

Jean Genet (1910- 1986)

Harold Pinter (1930- 2008)

This movement has been followed by Edward Albee (1928 - ... ) in the drama “ Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ” This play was produced in 1962.

It is a play of three acts, which has been extended over a period from 2 a.m. to dawn.

The first part of the play is known as '**Fun and Games**'. In this act we learn that it is 2 o'clock early in the morning and George and Martha have returned to their home in the college campus at New Carthage. They have come from the party arranged by Martha's father who is the president of the college in which George works. Both have drunk a lot and attack verbally at each other. Soon George learns that Martha has invited Nick, a Prof. of Biology and his wife, Honey, to their house. Later on Martha creates the illusion of son and also blames her husband. Here, the act 1<sup>st</sup> ends and act 2<sup>nd</sup> starts.

The second act is named as '**Walpurgisnacht**'. It is the German word, which means- 'the night on which witches ride on an appointed meeting place in order to hold revels with their master i.e. Devil'. In this act George and Nick share their confidential matters with each other. Martha and Nick humiliate George, then George humiliates the guests and at the end of this act Martha flirts with Nick.

Then third and final act is known as '**The Exorcism**', which means driving away ghosts. In this act Martha humiliates Nick and finally Martha afraid to accept the reality.

The title of the play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is also symbolic. It means "who is afraid of reality".

In this way though the play is belonged to absurd theatre, it is serious, and it will be true to say that-

**"The play symbolizes the world where love and life and passion and the creative act are machine made."**

Page 3 : Dr. Raghukul Tilak & Dr. Anupam Gupta.

- **The Theatre of the Absurd and its Characteristics :**

The term, Absurd was used for the first time in Albert Camus' book 'The Myth of Sisyphus'. This book was written in the 1942. According to the old Greek mythology the king of Corinth, Sisyphus, was punished in 'Hades' by having to roll a huge rock up a hill over and over again. He was the son of 'Aeolus' and the father of 'Glaucus'. Here, we learn that Sisyphus does this work again and again but we don't know the reason behind it. In this way it is totally meaningless so this situation is called as 'absurd'.

In the myth of Sisyphus, Camus has given his view about absurd as –

**“In the universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile ...this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity”.**

Page 1, ‘A Glossary of Literary Terms’.

Later on Albert Camus applied this absurd situation to human in his novel, ‘The Outsider’, which was written in 1943. When this term has applied to drama, it shows that there is no purpose in the universe as well as it also reflects the view that human life is meaningless and futile. It shows that when a man lives in this condition his/her life becomes absurd. In absurd plays human beings are portrayed as they are in isolation from other, this situation existed in Europe, during and after the Second World War.

It was Martin Esslin who first discussed the features of the absurd drama in his book- ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ (1961). The absurd play doesn’t have conventional plots, dialogues or characters. Even the dialogues are repeated. In the absurd drama there is no accepted forms and the characters, their speech and action convey no meaning and logic. So, in the true sense we can say that in the absurd drama there is true absurd condition of man, whose existence is purposeless. The main theme of such play is the failure of communication.

- **Main Characteristics of the Absurd Theatre :**
- In absurd drama life is essentially meaningless, hence it becomes miserable. There is no hope because of the inevitable futility of man’s efforts.
- In these dramas, reality is unbearable so, there are illusions.
- There is no conventional plot in these dramas.
- In these dramas dialogues are repeated.
- There are no purpose and specific reasons because it doesn’t solve any problem.
- Its main theme is failure of communication.
- In absurd drama there is mingling of comic and serious elements.
  
- **Absurdist Elements in the play of Edward Albee - “ Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ”**

**a) The Theme of Failure of Communication :**

The main characteristic of the absurd drama is failure of communication between characters. There is breakdown of communication between individuals. This theme is found in the Edward Albee's play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? " When we read a play we learn that there is no communication between the four characters. When the play begins we see that George and Martha always quarrel. They attack each other verbally. We also see that at the end of act two Martha flirts with Nick and also try to commit adultery with him. But both can't get success in it because Nick has drunk a lot. Then in the beginning of Act Three Martha humiliates Nick and also hates him as he doesn't fulfill her sexual desire.

The second example is Nick and his wife Honey. Nick and Honey also haven't true love. Before their marriage, both hadn't true love. Before their marriage both had relationship with each other. And later on Honey tells Nick that she becomes pregnant of his child so, they marry each other. This is just a story of their marriage but actually honey wants to marry Nick so she pretends that she is pregnant from him, though actually she is not. And Nick also hasn't true love for his wife because he marries her for the sake of money only.

**b) Need to Face Reality :**

One of the characteristics of the absurd drama is that reality is unbearable so there are illusions. We find this element in this drama.

From the beginning of the play we see, Martha drinks a lot. Her life is too hollow and empty because she is childless. She fears to face reality so she lives in the sweat world of illusion. She creates illusion that she has a child, aged 16 and his eyes are like her only. In the act one Martha tells Honey that they have a child and tomorrow is his birthday. Then George becomes angry on her as she opens the secret of their child and it causes a quarrel. But at finally George tells Martha that their son is died.

"George : Martha ... [Long pause]...our son is ...dead.[silence].

He was ... killed... late in the afternoon... [Silence]

[A ting chuckle] on a country road. With his learner's

permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a ..."

page 135, " Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? "

This reality is unbearable to Martha. But finally she has to accept it though she is afraid of it. The concluding lines of the play reveal the truth of the fact.

“George: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf...?”

Martha : I ... am... George ... I ... am...”

page 140, “ Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ”

### **c) Alienation and its Effect :**

It is another aspect of the absurdist play. The characters in the absurd theatre feel alienated from the society and are highly affected by it. When we think about the readers, it becomes difficult to identify themselves with the characters of the absurd drama. So, the readers laugh at them. According to Martin Esslin, the absurd drama speaks to a deeper level of the audience’s mind. This is true when we look at the characters of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” The characters feel alienated from each other as we see that they always quarrel with each other. Once, Martha starts talking about their son. She doesn’t care George’s warning and goes on talking about their son so, George becomes angry and grabs her by her throat. Nick throws George on the floor in order to reclude Martha. Thus, George is humiliated by his wife and Nick. Later on Martha and Nick humiliate George and again Nick is humiliated by Martha. In this way there are lots of scenes, which show alienation. In the drama the characters are highly affected by this alienation. They are childless and have no love for each other. They hate each other. Yet we laugh at them as their condition is absurd.

### **d) Mingling of Comic and Serious Elements :**

Like an absurdist play, “ Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ” has comic nature with serious aspects. So first of all we will discuss comic elements in the play.

The play is full of comic situations. For instance, the practical jokes created by George create comic situations. At one point, he aims a shot-gun at Martha’s head but when he pulls the trigger, a Chinese parasol (umbrella) blossoms from the barrel of the gun. This creates comedy. Later, in the play George brings a large bunch of snapdragons, which he has stolen from the house of Martha’s father. He also throws the flowers at Martha and Nick as if they are spears.

Then the names of various games create much amusement among the reader. The first game is called as **“Humiliate the Host”**. But George himself is the victim of the game. Martha and Nick humiliate him. He is so much hurt that he decides to take revenge upon his rivals. So, he suggests another game named **“Hump the Hostess”**. It means that the male guest may seduce the female host. It is amusing that he tries to humiliate his own wife, Martha. He does so because he is annoyed by her efforts to flirt with young Mick. The next game is called as **“Get the Guests”**.

In this game George and Martha humiliate the guests and particularly, Nick. The humiliation causes much comedy for the audience.

Next Georges’ comment about Martha’s father is also humorous as he calls him a large white mouse with red eyes. In this way, there are lots of comic scenes in the play, which create comedy.

As we have seen above comic scenes in the play there are some serious elements too. The ending of the play is pathetic and the first two acts too contain tragic elements. For e.g. the story of the boy who kills his parents narrated by George is serious and pathetic because later on we learn that the boy is not other but it is he himself who kills his own parents. Then, in the play, there are humiliations of George, Martha and Nick, which provide much comedy. But in this humiliation they actually hurt. This contributes the serious element in the play.

Then ending of the play is quite pathetic and even tragic. It is concerned with the game **“Bringing up the Baby”**. Marta and George are childless. They have to face this grim reality. So Martha has created illusions in her life. She imagines that they have a son. In the course of the story George and Martha humiliates each other. But Martha learns the truth finally and becomes pitiable as she has to face “Virginia Woolf” i.e. grim reality.

In this way in the play there are minglings of comic and serious elements, though it is an absurd play.

- **Comparison with Harold Pinter’s play – “ The Caretaker ”**

Harold Pinter’s –“The Caretaker” is also an absurd drama which had written in the 1960. The comparison between “The Caretaker” and “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ” show some common elements, which make theme absurd drama. Here are some common elements in both dramas.

The first and the most important element of the absurd drama is failure of communication which we find in both dramas. In Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? " the characters are not able to establish communication between each other. This same situation is there in The Caretaker. In the play The Caretaker one of the characters is Davies, who is almost alienated from others. He leaves his wife within a week after their marriage and never meets her again. He can't continue his work as a cleaner. The Scotchman quarrels with him, beats him and he has to leave the place. The Monk in the monastery insults him and sends him away. He can't communicate with Aston. His complaints to Mick that Aston does not tell him, where he goes and what he does he do. Like Davies, Aston too fails to communicate with others. He talks too much in the café and factory but after his electric shock treatment, he doesn't go there. He lives away from his mother. He works more and speaks less with Davies. He hardly speaks with his brothers, thus there is failure of communication.

The next common element in both dramas is the theme of alienation, which make them absurdist dramas. As we have seen that the characters in the "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? " suffered from alienation or loneliness. In the same way Davies is alienated from the society. He is all alone. He has no social status he has to leave his wife and café. He can't establish permanent friendship with Aston and Mick. He desires to move up to the upper social status but fails because of his follies. In the same way Aston too is an alienated fellow. He is almost all alone in the room. Mick is hardly seen in his bed. He is unable to go to the cafe and enjoy talk. In this way we find that there is theme of alienation in the play.

Then the next element of the absurd drama is mingling of comic and serious aspect which we find in both dramas. The Caretaker is the play with comic elements compressed with serious incidents. There is fine combination of the comic and the tragic elements. The behaviors, manners and language of Davies provide much comedy. However, his real condition is miserable. He is boastful, greedy, a liar, quarrelsome and ungrateful but he is also poor, homeless, lonely, old and jobless. He loses the golden opportunity to work as a caretaker. Similarly we enjoy Aston as he talks a lot but we feel sorry when due to this reason he has to go under a shock treatment. In this way, there are comic and serious aspects, which have mingled together.



In this way both plays have some common elements, which are discussed above. Hence, these dramas belonged to the absurd theatre.

• **Conclusion :**

As literature is the mirror of society, the term absurd movement of the 1960s, which came after the Second World War, affected the thinking of individual, society and literature. As a result of it one can find several changes or causes such as – breakdown of communication, hollow life, intolerable reality, illusions, fear, and defenselessness in later part to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this way at the conclusion point we can say that these elements of the absurdist drama, which we have discussed above, are found in the play of Edward Albee- “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? ” The study is done from the point of views of plot, characters, dialogues, situations, and illusions. Hence, the play belongs to the theatre of absurd.

These elements show serious as well as comic effects on the spectators and readers. Last the dramatic technique applied by Albee is appreciated as he used it very skillfully.

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