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**BATTLE BETWEEN SEXES: GENDER ROLES CHALLENGED IN EDWARD ALBEE'S
*WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF***

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ABSTRACT

The play by Edward Albee tries to explore the struggles that the characters uphold against their expected stereotyped gender roles and the age old battle between the opposite sexes. All the four characters in the play try to maintain a balance amidst this ongoing conflict within themselves and between each other by being rooted in reality. In the play, Martha wants to break free from the conventional role played by a woman in being disloyal and disrespectful to her husband George. Similarly, George plays the role of a submissive husband (a total reversal of a practical, macho man image) which is against the expected stereotypical role. The other couple- Nick and Honey also try to break free from the accepted norms of the society as Nick is a homosexual still he marries Honey for materialistic comforts and Honey fakes pregnancy even though she never wants to become a mother in reality. The play shows various ways with which these two couples strive to seek equilibrium in the midst of this ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Gender roles, Battles between sexes, Acceptable roles, Conventional roles and Conflicts.

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Edward Albee's one of the probable intentions in writing this play is an attack on the existing ideals and roles that were assigned to each gender during the 50's and 60's. The characters in the play are distinguished from each other on the basis of the kind of personality and behavior they reflect during the action of the play. All the four major characters in the play namely George, Martha, Nick and Honey, show a feeble contrast to some extent for the standard or acceptable gender norms at that point of time in the society. While the play was written a year before the publication of feminist Betty Friedan's ground-breaking *The Feminine Mystique*, the play explores the same issues Friedan railed against. Friedan writes about the "feminine mystique," where the highest value of women is embracing and maintaining their femininity, and "the problem that has no name," the unhappiness women faced in the 50's and 60's and their yearning for fulfilment beyond being a housewife and a mother. Friedan argues:

"They [women] learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for...All they

had to do was to devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.” (58)

“Self-esteem in woman, as well as in man, can only be based on real capacity, competence, and achievement; on deserved respect from others rather than unwarranted adulation. Despite the glorification of “Occupation: housewife,” if that occupation does not demand, or permit, realization of women’s full abilities, it cannot provide adequate self-esteem, much less pave the way to a higher level of self-realization...But women in America are not encouraged, or expected, to use their full capacities. In the name of femininity, they are encouraged to evade human growth.” (435-437)

Martha is shown as a rebellious woman who at various stages in the play flouts the enforced gender roles. The most shocking thing Martha does is pack away the booze: “My God, you can swill it down, can’t you” (Albee16). She drinks straight, tough-guy booze, like whiskey and bourbon. She no longer favors the tastes of her youth: “brandy Alexander s, crème de cacao frappes...seven-layer liqueur things...real lady-like little drinkies.” Martha once behaved as a woman should, but no longer does and this is off-putting and unsettling to George. The reason women should drink sweet-tasting but really lethal drinks is because they make women more willing to serve men sexually, as pointed out in the Paula Vogel’s feminist (and set-in-the-early 1960s) drama *How I Learned to Drive*: “In short avoid anything with sugar or anything with an umbrellas...don’t order anything with sexual positions in the name...I think you were conceived after one of those.” (Vogel 44)

Martha was sexually active and chose her own husband. It was a real slap-in-the-face to her intelligence and identity when her father had her marriage annulled because it was not proper for a woman to be sexual or to make her own decisions. George himself comments on how Martha’s sexual expression is improper with lines like “your skirt up over your head.” (Albee17) This very well shows her as a female of independent thinking who believes in living her life according to her own terms and conditions. She is just opposite of the ideal notion of a perfect lady by being plump and fat instead of having a lean and thin feminine physique like Honey. On the other hand the twenty-six year old “thin-hipped...simp” Honey is the incredibly stifling, unfulfilled result of what happens if a woman conforms to what 1962 society told her to be. In order to quickly show that Honey, the pre feminist-era ideal woman, is a farce, Albee makes her uninteresting, remarkably unintelligent and absolutely loathsome. She characteristically says boring, solicitous, giggly things like “Oh, isn’t this lovely” (Albee21) and “Well I certainly had fun...it was a *wonderful* party” (21), even “put some powder on my nose.” (28). She is inoffensive, always agreeable, and, as Friedan points out, devoted to her husband, the ideal of femininity: “Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands.” (Friedan 18) Still, because she is the perfect woman and Martha is decidedly rebellious of the stereotype, Honey is everything Martha is not. Albee has portrayed the character of Martha as a rebellious female who continues to ridicule her husband for one reason or the other due to her own suppressed desires. She wants to establish her own identity beyond the restricted domestic sphere of life. She is an ambitious female who is merely not contented in playing a typical submissive house wife or baby doll. That is why she adopts certain masculine traits in her character like drinking heavily strong drinks, and indulging in abuses and assaults like a male as an expression of her rebellion against the set conventions. And as she failed to fulfill her ambitions and desires being a woman she vents out this frustration on her husband George. She blames him for not progressing well in his professional career. According to her George is good for nothing. She openly challenges his masculinity by seducing Nick in front of him.

Since he doesn’t fit the manly-man image, George feels almost non-existent: “Don’t I sort of fade into the backgrounds...get lost in the cigarette smoke?” (Albee32) Though he agrees, other comments from Martha emasculate George further: “he’s not completely sure it’s his own kid.” (71) Here, Martha overpowers George to humiliate him and elevate herself, but there are fewer things more threatening to manhood in 1962 than by claiming someone’s (albeit imaginary) child is not their own; a man does not want to be a cuckold. Albee uses George’s emasculation once more to make a clear parallel to the lack of options for women in that period of America: “I *did* run the History Department, for four years, during the war, but that was because everybody

was away. Then ...everybody came back.” (38) George’s colleagues essentially see him as the then-current idea of a woman: useless, but able to fill in at a job of prestige in an absolute emergency. This is exactly like the woman-dominated home front workforce of World War II because the regular male workers were in the armed forces.

Nick is the ideal man and is thus everything George cannot be. Martha tells George he is “a blank, you’re a cipher...a zero” (17) because of his lack of manly attributes, such as a commanding nature, athletic ability, good looks and ability to control his emotions. She berates him for sulking early on: “are you sulking? Is that what you’re doing?” (12) Men should not sulk; they must be stoic. Years prior, George refused to box his taunting father-in-law and was made to feel like less of a man because of it (56). Enter Nick, the macho-man, everything George is not. Instantly, he is commanding: “I told you we shouldn’t have come.” (21); he is also stoic– he dryly responds “I am aware of that” (22) when Honey tells him he’s being “joshed.” Most of all, Nick is far more attractive and athletic than old, pudgy George, described often as “about thirty, blond, and...good-looking” (9) and once as “quarterback.” (151) He was even a middleweight boxing champion (51). Martha has physical competition issues, too, with the young, skinny Honey: “I’m six years younger than you are,” (15) George says to Martha, implying that she is old and useless because she’s no longer young and pretty. Martha then foreshadows George’s inability to measure up against Nick: “Well...you’re going bald.” (15) Thus, George is ugly, unmanly and no longer virile. He feels threatened: “I said I was impressed, Martha. I’m beside myself with jealousy.” (49)

Albee uses George and Martha to show the effects when a society crams definitive, non-pliable gender roles down the throats of women and men. Nick and Honey’s presence shows that even those that strive to be the ideal cannot sustain the image without serious consequences. All four characters are damaged irrevocably and act out via violence, alcoholism and infidelity as substitutes for happiness and ways to forge identity. Engaging in this behaviors makes them feel something, anything when their gender identity feels nonexistent. Being seductive makes Martha feel like a woman and being violent lets George play out his macho fantasies. Thus all the four characters in the play are shown living in an enigmatic situation where they want to play different roles contrary to the one assigned by the society. Every character is shown as struggling with self as well as the norms of society. They fail to conform according to the moulds for the expected gender roles of that particular time period. Even though Martha tries to rebel against the acceptable notion of a perfect female, still she is anchored to it.

Additionally, each of the four characters has ways in which he or she loses any sense of gender identity (they don’t feel like real women or real men) because of certain events. As Friedan repeatedly notes, the sole purpose for the 1962 woman was to be a good wife and produce babies: “All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.” (Friedan 16) Martha is unable to have children and is thus incapable of fulfilling her only supposed purpose in life. Finkelstein points out that:

Martha reveals to us the emptiness and loss she feels when, childless, she is an outcast at sex-segregated faculty parties and is tempted to mention their imaginary son...Martha feels that she doesn’t exist: she had no other dreams but to be a mother, and then she couldn’t do that. (Finkelstein 55)

For all intents and purpose, she feels she is not a woman and it eats her up. Conversely, we have Honey, who embodies all the attributes of the perfect early 60’s woman. She rebels against the path by refusing to have babies. Laura Julier points out this juxtaposition, that Martha cannot be a stereotypical woman and Honey to refuses to be the stereotypical woman.

George, like the enraged female workers of 1941-1945, was degraded when he was forced to return to his proper place.

Also, both George and Nick married their not out of love or because they were sexual conquerors, which would be preferable. Nick married Honey for money: “GEORGE: Sure, I’ll bet she has money, too!...NICK: Yes.” (Albee102) George married Martha in an ultimately futile attempt to rise in the

hierarchy of the college. Julier notes that the revelation that both men married their wives for money is ultimately an emasculating and embarrassing revelation because it shows they are reliant on women for their livelihood, a big no-no for a true macho man. (Julier 36)

Nick's relationship with Honey is tenuous at best. They first knew each other as children, playing doctor (104). "A scientist even then," (105) as George points out. Nick goes on to speak of their loveless marriage: "I wouldn't say there was any...particular *passion* between us, even at the beginning." Nick reveals that he had to marry Honey mostly because they thought she was pregnant. It's almost as if Nick, who was forced to marry Honey and doesn't particularly like her is harboring a latent homosexual nature. This is simply unacceptable in 1962, as Honey quietly notes: "Two grown men dancing...heavens!" (124)

In order to prove, or fake his manly, heterosexual nature, Nick engages in a quick, lurid sexual encounter with Martha (163). In fact, it is their problems with identity and self-expression within a sexist culture that lead the four characters to act out via near infidelity and heavy drinking. Alcohol is a social lubricant and a social liberator; alcohol gives Martha courage to say what she wants, it gives Honey a personality and proactivity, it gives George wit and Nick a dark side. Only through drinking and possibly by blaming it on the booze later, can these characters ever communicate and express themselves openly.

Though what the foursome do (making up a son, drinking, violence, "hysterical pregnancies," latent homosexuality) isn't necessarily the real-life result of gender roles, they are examples to get across Albee's point that gender roles destroy the ideas of "man," "woman," and make determining personal identity difficult for those who don't fit the mould. It's also highly prescient and pro feminist that Albee structures this analysis of gender roles within a marriage. Finkelstein theorizes that marriages cannot stand under such highly regulated gender role circumstances and that marriage is thus outmoded because women are given so few options in their lives. (Finkelstein 51)

As Finkelstein notes, all four characters are afraid of Virginia Woolf, because she is, in 1962, the only icon of female equality society had. (Finkelstein 64). The title of the play very well justifies the theme of conflict between the acceptable and desired sex/gender roles. The various characters in the story rebel against the acceptable notions of feminine and masculine roles assigned by the society. Martha tries to fit in her husband's shoes by humiliating him in front of guests for his impotency in the all the material aspects of life. She tries to seduce Nick in front of everyone just to break the glass ceiling of the word 'loyalty' and 'devotion' associated with the feminine aspect. George behaves passively and tolerates everything silently, which is again the indication of the reversal of roles. He is just the opposite of the 'macho' male figure, who keeps on tolerating the insults inflicted on him by his wife till the time she crosses all the limits of decency by seducing Nick in front of him. He breaks his silence finally by giving her a jolt which is the news of the death of their 'imaginary son' in front of everyone. Thus, he breaks the common bond of harmony and understanding between them which they have formed to protect their marriage from crumbling. Similarly, Nick though he almost fits in the mould of acceptable and assigned norms of society being a man with a fit physique and a practical mind to progress in the professional aspects of life. He breaks the tradition by his decision to marry Honey due to her fortune and not because of any love or attraction and his homosexual inclination which he keeps hidden and suppressed from the society. Honey is a typical female stereotype but she flouts the norms by not wanting to be a mother and bear children which is the basic role expected to be played by any woman. Overall, all the characters are engrossed to maintain a balance in order to survive in a stereotypical society which is cruel for those who try to flout any rules framed by it. Their dilemma is that they wish to break the rules but can't dare to stand without them either. All the characters in the play are busy in fighting their own battles with their stereotyped roles accepted by the society and with each other as belonging to different sex.

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