

# Subversion of Gender and Marriage in Edward Albee's - Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf

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## Abstract:

The article explores the concept of Dalit identity and subaltern voices in India, especially in U. R. Ananthamurthy's novel "Samskara," it focused on the hegemonic hierarchy caste system. The central concept is the cremation of Naranappa's body, with Praneshacharya as the protagonist representing a spiritual and traditional person. The novel Samskara also explores the conflict between Hinduism and modern religions in India, highlighting the need for a better understanding of Dharma and cultural aspects. Samskara, a 1960s religious novel, is a powerful film exploring a decaying Brahmin colony in Karnataka, reworking ancient Hindu themes and providing a glossary of Hindu myths and customs. Naranappa represents a modern person, while Chandri and Belli represent Dalits. The novel explores elements of casteism, patriarchy, superstitious beliefs, and greedy personalities. Chandri not only sacrifice her jewelry, but sacrifices her body to Praneshacharya for cremation of Naranappa's dead body. Belli also a low caste, they treated as sexual object. 'Sripati doesn't like to speak with Belli but he wants sleeps with her'. Who thinks that he would be polluted, if he speaks with her? He, however, does not think that touching of body, is not polluted?

**Keywords:** Subaltern Voices, Samskara, Dalit Identity, Modern, Cremation, Tradition, Epic, patriarchy, Superstitious Believes, Brahmin, Anti- Brahmin, Greedy, Protagonist, polluted, Explore, India, Caste.

In the Post-Modern age, the plays which were categorised under the "Theatre of Absurd" grew as an Avant- Garde movement in the field of English drama. This new kind of theatre reflected the contemporary post-modern society in all its insecurities, instabilities, faithlessness, absurdities, and subversions of the earlier strongly held traditional beliefs in all spheres of life- political, social, economic as well as personal. Modernism and Post- Modernism in literature are characterised by total anarchy and fragmentation of the world, society, and human mind itself. After the First World War and Second World War, human minds were disillusioned with the uncertainty of life and loss of faith in human love, unity, and systematic organization of things. This gloominess and catastrophic influence have not just impacted the society in general but also the individual or specific spheres of human life. One such influence was the weakening of the foundation of the institution of marriage, love, and gender roles. The two World Wars have brought a huge transformation in the situation and condition of European women in the society. During this time, they have got many opportunities to join the workforce in any field they wanted. Not only this, in contrast to their earlier life which was reserved to the domestic sphere only i.e. limited within the four walls of household, they were for the first time exposed to the outside world. They also gained more social and political freedom and power with the right to vote. Now their social roles were not just circumscribed to taking care of the household and

bringing up children rather they realized their new abilities and worth by gaining financial independence. Women who were earlier either denied or didn't get an opportunity to work have started to work. As the men of their households were busy fighting in the war, there was a need to financially support the entire household. Not only this, during this time women also got a chance to be commissioned at higher posts in various spheres of work. According to their social class, colour, and educational backgrounds, they were also getting enrolled for more manly professions like Military, Navy, Air force and other professions which required tough labour and great physical strength. The women of this time took over the position of man as the primary head and primary bread winner of the family during their absence and their participation in fighting the horrors of the war. Overall, we can say that the old culture was transitioning towards and was forging path for a newer and bolder culture. It was a transformative time where the female subjects had more agency and power not just within the society but also in their homes. However, as always there are two sides of a coin in the same manner there were certain negative tendencies also which arose along with these positive and radical changes in the society. There was a deterioration in the moral and psychological values in the form of violation of the pure bond of marriage because of the casual sex relations outside marriage, disloyalty, lack of mutual respect in the relationships and the absence of true and genuine emotions of love which were in turn corrupted by the material values of money and power:

Paradoxically, during wartime fear and surveillance of women's sexuality, female allure and glamour were used to sell everything from laundry detergent to soda pop to troop morale. The World War II years marked the heyday of the "pin up girl," and an unprecedented display of American women's bodies; movie stars such as Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth, and Lana Turner posed seductively for photographers and other artists, whose prints, posters, and calendars were reproduced in the millions and circulated widely. Ordinary American women copied these poses in photographs that they sent stateside to military camps and overseas to battlefronts. And many women took the next logical step by literally offering their bodies—out of patriotic duty, to cap a brief encounter, or to seal a romantic relationship. (McEuen, Melissa A.)

Thus, women were objectified and seen as a commodity during this time. All this corrupted the moral and ethical atmosphere of the society. Human beings were not hesitant to break the moral codes and conducts laid down by society for a systematic, moralistic and idealistic approach towards life. The change in gender dynamics or gender roles also disturbed the deep rooted traditional and patriarchal foundations of the social institution of marriage and love relationships. In Post-modern society marriage is not believed to be a fixed or concrete concept. It is rather a pluralistic concept based on diversity, variation, consumerism, imperfection, and instability. Thus, according to it there is nothing called as absolute or perfect family. During this time, women have developed a changed perception of marriage and romantic love. They were more sexually experienced before they settled down to marriage and have much higher expectations regarding sex, love and equality compared to the past when they married or cohabited. In the play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" Albee has very well portrayed this transformative and realistic image of modern age women through his two female characters namely- Martha and Honey. Also, there is a subversive approach towards the socially assigned gender roles of a male by presenting the male characters namely- George and Nick in the play. Both are presented as post-Modern men rather than the traditional male chauvinists having big, dominant egos, striving hard in the outer world for a stable profession or career. George doesn't have that aggressiveness or fiery passion like Nick to succeed professionally as the Head of the University by replacing Martha's father rather he

was contended with his position and life. It is because of this that Martha insults him often. Both the men are depicted as effeminate in their distinct behaviours. For instance, George in being passive in tolerating the rude and condescending behaviour of his wife towards him. On the other hand, Nick who had an attractive macho man personality turns out to be an actual impotent during Martha's sexual encounter with him. The title of the play –“Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf” is used as a pun which refers to the Disney story of *The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf*. Besides this, it also refers to Virginia Woolf, the great modern female novelist who introduced the “Stream of Consciousness” technique in her novels. It was a unique technique to expose and reveal the hidden, secretive, suppressed emotions and impulses of the various characters in her work. All the characters in the play have taken the refuge of certain illusions, which they are afraid to confront for instance often George and Martha keep on singing this line- “Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf...” (Albee 12) in the play to continue living in illusions and not accepting the reality. After the psychoanalytical theory proposed by Sigmund Freud people accepted the various fragments or complex divisions of human mind -the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious mind. A new part of psyche or human mind was accepted and acknowledged i.e the unconscious mind. This newfound freedom among the large sections of females in the post-modern society and the acceptance and acknowledgement of the intricacies of the unconscious mind through psychoanalysis, along with the mental and psychological disillusionment concerning the uncertainty and absurdity of human life and existence, increasing materialism, loss of faith in God and spirituality led to the decline in the quality of social life in almost all the spheres. The plays associated with the theatre of absurd depict this transitory phase of modern society with its degradation of the human values and crumbling of old traditions and beliefs. In this play, we have two couples namely- George and Martha, Nick and Honey who try to maintain normalcy in their marital relations by weaving a web of illusions and falsities around it. An ideal and perfect marriage should be based upon mutual feelings of respect, genuine love, understanding and trust. But through this play, Albee subverts all these norms. As opposed to the conventional image of an ideal female or wife, Martha is portrayed as a quarrelsome, domineering, and abusive wife. She insults her husband for his professional failure in front of others. Martha wants to satisfy her desire for power and control through George's power of masculinity. She is the daughter of the President of the University and wanted to see George as the head or in charge of the university. But George's lack of professional intelligence, lack of the competitive spirit, self- contentment and stagnation led to her complete dismay and frustration. She had certain expectations from her husband and when George couldn't satisfy her desire, she couldn't live happy with him. This consumer driven mind set of people had a profound impact on the society, including the relationships. People subconsciously were trained to think like a consumer and approached relationships also with a similar mindset. Even in the current times, we either consciously or subconsciously construct lists of criteria that our friends and significant others must meet. We, as consumers, become unhappy when any individual fails to meet our expectations, and we typically respond by either ending the relationship or treating the individual in a condescending manner just like Martha. George was still a Professor in History Department as he was when he married Martha. Due to this, she was unable to give any respect to her husband instead she insults him openly in front of other people. In the notion of a normal family, wife is supposed to give respect to her husband due to her financial and material dependency on him, one of the social roles that has been ascribed to the male gender. It is also one of the reasons of a female's subjugation to a male. Martha on the other hand defies this tradition as she is not afraid or hesitant to insult George every now and then in the play despite of her monetary dependence on

him. Another instance of Martha's rebellion against the power of male authority or dominion can be seen in her usage of physical prowess in the play where in a boxing game, she punches George fall flat on his back. Thus, she is presented as more masculine than her husband. She even teases and challenges her husband's manliness by flirting openly with Nick. George's subdued and often attacked manliness tries to come to the surface many times but is most of the time controlled. For instance, When Martha keeps on insulting George by telling the secrets of his personal life, George appears with a gun and fires at Martha, but an umbrella pops out. Secondly, when Martha's taunts continue, George reacts violently by breaking a bottle thereby again controlling his anger. Thirdly, even after being aware of his wife's promiscuity and her flirtations with another man (Nick), George tries to remain calm and composed. His character is explored to uncover his flaws as a human being, which lead to his failure to perform his gender roles whether as a son, husband or even imaginary father. It also discusses the psychological causes that push Martha into demeaning and emasculating him. The analysis reveals that George as a person has failed himself on various levels. He has settled into a state of lethargy and lassitude that makes him non-willing to restore his position as the patriarch of his family. He has lost his authority and his respect along with it due to his own personal imperfections. As a result, Martha assumes authority and maintains the upper hand. However, in the end he wins over her in the psychological battle. When Martha refuses to follow the rules of the games (marriage) set by both, he punishes Martha by killing their imaginary son which both conjured up to keep their egos and dysfunctional marriage intact. According to societal norms a woman's birth is accomplished only when she becomes a mother i.e gives birth. Martha on the contrary is shown as infertile thereby, not fitting in the mould of a conventional or ideal female. She focusses more on material things like- money, success, power, and physical satisfaction i.e. in those very things which should be given less importance by a female sex. She is a masculine in the way she indulges in loud quarrels, physical fights, candid sexual expression of her suppressed desires and in being unafraid to insult and criticize George in public. Similarly, George opposes the conventional image of a husband who should be stronger both physically and mentally and should be more goal oriented, competitive, and aggressive in all the spheres of life. In the play, George is shown as a passive aggressive male who is treated like a doormat by his wife and is subjected to frequent character assassinations from time to time. Further, unlike the real and positive emotions of love, mutual respect, trust etc. the marriage between this couple is based on mind games, mutual insults, disloyalty, and illusions. Here, the image of ideal family has been replaced by degraded values based on a corrupt and false foundation which was very much a reality of modern American society of Albee's time. Similarly, the marriage between the other couple- Nick and Honey who are invited as guests by George and Martha is also exposed and dissected. George and Martha in their mutual combat or war with each other also tears apart the false façade of the happy and ideal marriage of Nick and Honey. The marriage between Nick and Honey in the end, turns out to be more fragile as compared to George and Martha. The very foundation of their marriage was the hysterical pregnancy and wealth of Honey and not any mutual love or genuine emotions between the two. Honey fakes a pregnancy just to become an ideal wife of Nick and to trap him in the marriage though the fact is that she never wants to get pregnant and takes birth – control pills to not become pregnant. The character of Honey in the play, reflects the viewpoint of the post- modernist society women who started taking independent decisions in the matters of pregnancy. As women stepped out of the homes and started to work, they started aiming for more professionally oriented goals and material accomplishments and an independent lifestyle. They do not want to be burdened with the responsibilities of motherhood or to lose their financial independence.

Overall, everybody in the modern society had the fear of commitment and taking responsibilities. They wanted to be more independent and not to be tied up in any kind of responsibilities which might hinder in their independence or free lifestyle or material progress. Marriage is seen more like a commodity placed on display in the market shelf. If the product fulfils all your desires without costing much in return, then it is a profitable deal. In the play also, Nick marries Honey not for any true love but for her wealth which in turn assures him a future security and success. He becomes a Professor of Biology at a much younger age. He is not just smart practically and professionally but also has an attractive physique or personality. He is shown as complete contrast to the character of George. Moreover, the field of study which both the characters are related are also opposite. George was associated with the subject of History which is more archaic, traditional, and conventional symbolizing the loosening of grip over the past tradition or time paving way for the new. Nick is related with the field of Biology i.e Genetics which is a modern, progressive, and advanced branch of science. Nick thinks he is smart and manipulative, but it is ironical that he was outsmarted by his own wife who lies about her pregnancy which is later revealed in the play. Both the marriages in the play are thus presented as imperfect. Albee through this play, tries to naturalize and change the perspective of the readers by seeking acceptance for this new kind of idea of imperfect marriages by defying the concept of gender roles. Among the two female characters, Martha is projected as more masculine in her behaviour and actions. She doesn't hesitate to express her suppressed feelings and hidden emotions of lust and sexuality. She very truthfully projects the image of a modern woman who is aware of her power of sexuality and seduction which can be very easily used as a tool against men to control them and overpower them. Earlier women were not allowed for such candid expression and they were told to remain away from such topics like- sex, infidelity and casual affairs which were legitimately ascribed to the males. Males were free to get indulged in multiple affairs, polygamy, and casual sexual relations. But females were admonished to practice any such thing as it was considered immoral on their part. Martha however is shown to be more vocal in her expression of sexuality, seductiveness, and attraction. In the play, the real situation of the society and the degradation of its morals and values has been described very well. The love of both the couples is based on consumerism, superficiality, and disloyalty. They act and speak irrespective of each other's feelings or emotions. Further, disloyalty is common in both the marriages as both Nick and Martha are ready to cheat their respective partners without any feeling of guilt or shame. They are driven by their baser animal instincts rather than by their enlightened moral principles or societal norms. Human beings were not ready to be bound by any fixed rules or roles. The moral degradation of the society is also reflected in the excessive consumption of liquor throughout the play. Though it is a family-oriented play as it is based on the theme of marriage and relationships, yet Albee has chosen the backdrop of cocktail party and booze. Both the male and female characters are shown as drinking heavily from the beginning till the end of the play. The characters in the play take refuge of alcohol to escape the reality of their failed marriages and to vent out their suppressed feelings which they couldn't practice in conscious state. Martha's masculinity is again reflected in the manner she consumes alcohol in large amount just like a male. One point of time in the play George complains her for this. She doesn't take small sips of liquor as a fashionable and modern upper-class woman displaying off her polished femininity rather, she drinks heavily and uncouthly like an aggressive male.

This play opposes the idea of a perfect American family and societal expectations as "it attacks the false optimism and myopic confidence of modern society" (Biggsby 268). Albee takes a heavy-handed

approach to displaying this contrast, making examples of every character and their expectations of the people around them. Societal norms of the 1950s are based on the concept of a nuclear family i.e. two parents and two (or more) children. And in this idea of a family father was featured as a breadwinner, and the mother was presented as a housewife, and the children well-behaved. “*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” however, flouts these conventions of such family by presenting the picture of a realistic family which is far from being perfect and possibly ruined. There is an imbalance and kind of absurdity which has been presented in all these families. The families of Honey and Martha were dominated by their fathers, with no sign of a mother figure in their lives. George and Martha's chance at a perfect family was ruined by infertility and George's failure to become a prominent figure at the university. Earlier in the times before the two great World Wars human beings followed and worked toward a more systematic and balanced approach towards life but in post-modern world, they have learnt to accept the fragmentary, unsystematic, absurd, and imperfect also without much complain. They do not want to work towards an idealistic society or life rather they cared more for their selfish interests over others. It doesn't mean that the society or life was perfect and ideal in the past and there were no problems earlier. The fact is that the deep and dark recesses of unconscious mind were never explored or expressed earlier. Due to this the immoral and imperfect was never discussed and brought to light before. But in modern times human beings came more closer to reality and accepted the psychoanalytical aspects and the complex functioning of human mind with the growing influence of science. In this play, Albee breaks this gleaming mirror of perfect family and human life which people try to attain all the times and display in society as an ideal. But by breaking the mirror and exposing its deeper cracks he reveals the bitter and suppressed truth hidden underneath which when comes to the surface disturbs the equilibrium and balance of life. All the characters and their married relationships are instances of imperfection in the play. The characters try to vent out and get rid of their suppressed deep emotions and self-created illusions by engaging in physical duels, mind games, verbal abuse, and fights etc. The way George and Martha talk cynically and disrespectfully with each other by making fun of one another's physical appearance and age, shows their incompatible and failed marriage based on contempt, mockery, and humiliation. They try to keep it together by holding tightly to the self-created illusion of having an imaginary son and hence having perfect and ideal family. But their disagreements can still be seen clearly in their argument with each other regarding the colour of their non-existent son's eyes. Thus, there is no ray of hope of reconciliation in such kind of marriage. Instead of supporting each other and fighting together against the common problems of life, the couple behave like enemies fighting at a war front, ready to slay each other with sharpest weapon possible. Similarly, the outer projection of Nick and Honey's marriage is shown to be perfect, but the reality is completely opposite. Unlike George and Martha, they are not even aware and ready to admit the fact that there are any kind of problems or issues in their marriage. Their marital relationship however is deeply afflicted and worst hit in the play. It is because of these expositions and experiences of problems in modern marriages which makes the option of divorce more acceptable and agreeable in the society. The new perspective of the society of this time was that love, marriage and children are not the sole aim and purpose of life. If one finds both material satisfaction and love in marriage its well and good and if the marriage fails in any case and doesn't provide you with the required and expected happiness and satisfaction, then don't hesitate to dissolve it, and move out of it. As George says in the play:

It's very simple..... when people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they do one of the two things, either they....either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have

or they set about to ....alter the future. And when you want to change something.....You Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! (Albee 178)

To conclude, literature has always been termed as the mirror of contemporary times and society in its various changing colours. This play of Albee very well justifies this, by giving the readers a glimpse of the changing tendencies of the modern American society which in fact can universally be applied to any modern society.

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