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Sexual Games of Power and Status in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Abstract

*This article explores the use of sexuality as a tool to achieve power and status by the characters in Edward Albee's drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In this drama, the characters ignore the values of marriage, love, and sex in order to dominate others or control the situation for their intended goal. Reading Michel Foucault's discursive nature of power based on his work *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, this study has justified the characters use of trivial sexual games and their motives to obtain power and status in a highly intellectual society. The characters of Albee's drama are prone to exercise power using their own sexuality. Negotiating and subverting the roles of gender and sexuality in private/public sexual games, they frequently foreground to fulfill personal desire in the existing social milieu. To unveil these aspects, this article has interpreted Albee's drama with the theoretical dimension of power and sexuality postulated by Foucault, and has applied the content analysis method.*

Keywords: Discourse, gender subversion, identity, power, sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality usually refers to a biologically based inner drive or impulse that sustains life and creativity. It is individual practice and identity in course of human civilization.

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Human sexuality has been constructed socially, culturally, and religiously throughout history. Similarly, the concepts of sexual identities have been rigorously discussed in philosophical and theoretical understanding. The idea of marriage, love and sex has been discursively contested in various areas like literature, sociology, psychology, religion, medicine, and so on. In this connection, Edward Albee's drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* explores sexuality as a tool to achieve power and status in a highly intellectual circle of college professors and their families. Sexuality, in the drama, foregrounds inner motives in fulfilling personal desire to control circumstances in power play games, ignoring the ethics of family life. It seems that the traditional values of love, marriage and sex are reduced to a mere fun and games. Michal Foucault, in his seminal book *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*, views that "... power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate..." (42). The modern sexual discourse seems to deploy sexual subjects in negotiating or subverting their sexuality for the attainment of power and status. Foucault has focused the deployment of power as a discourse in various ways that enforces in the construction of sexuality. He suggests that language is one of the most efficient mediums of discourses which is based epistemologically in textual representation. Sexuality, in this connection, becomes a discourse of power either to achieve something or dominate others as a tool.

Sexual Performance of the Characters

As the drama commences, the central character George and his wife return home from the party organized by the president of the college, where George is a professor in the history department. There are new lecturers and their wives whose live experiences indicate the power that reinforces sexuality. When George patiently argues with Martha "...If your father did not set up these goddamn Saturday night orgies all the time ...", then Martha replies, "you didn't do anything, you never do anything ..." (158). George evidently does not like Martha's father as a president of the college organizing "Saturday night orgies" is a troupe of power to control the college family. Martha encourages George to do more action to get power and position in the college so that she has invited young lecturer Nick and his wife Honey to have a party at her home. The marriage, a unit of "family cell" according to Foucault, is a social system traditionally enforced by social norms and values (117). However, Clum and O'Brien in their introduction of the edited book *Sex, Gender and sexuality in Edward Albee's Plays* argue that Albee's plays "are all related to his critique of marriage which Albee usually presents as a series of performance rather than as a loving relationship" (2). George and Martha's marriage

is rotten not only being impotence, but also the mores and manners they exhibit to each other's power play. George remarks "...try to keep your clothes on too. There aren't many more sickening sights than you with a couple of drinks in you and your skirt up over your hand ..." (164). Martha is presented as "sub- human monster yowling at'em from inside "(165), and her voice is too loud in using vulgar words to George. Throughout his work, Albee offers "aberrant version of marriage to show that the hereto –patriarchal marriage paradigm...lends to layers of emotional and physical crisis, addiction and domestic warfare" (Clum and O'Biren 3). The marriage between George and Martha does not bring peace, stability and happiness rather directs toward the battle of sexes.

Furthermore, the marriage between Nick and Honey -the guests - turns to be the mechanism of power play. As Foucault claims "...sexuality is tied to recent devices of power, it has been expanding at increasing rate since the seventeenth century..." (107). The marriage or sexual relationship between Nick and Honey happens not on the ethics or moral obligation rather it occurs due to Honey's hysterical pregnancy and her money. So, the power of social fear and economy plays the vital role in the matter of sexuality. As Nick says to George, "I married her because she was pregnant" and "It was a hysterical pregnancy " (216), indicates that Nick is preoccupied with social norms in case of marriage, but the power of supposed pregnancy before marriage hits on his head. At another conversation, Nick admits that "My father-in-law...was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich" (226). It suggests that marriage is exchanged in term of money. The power of college intellectuals, the center of learning and civilization are reduced to the games of sexual practices to get high rank and position in the institutions.

It is quite obvious that the younger professors are busy in screwing up younger wives of the faculty, an immoral culture developed in modern American society. Michael E. Rutenberg states, "It is apparent that Albee is out to prove that the most sexually provincial society in the world is in reality not at all as prudish as its citizen's would have one believes. Promiscuity is the practice at New Carthage" (100). George admits that the center of learning is the place where, "Musical beds are the faculty sport around here" (175). As a daughter - in - law of college president and as a senior faculty of the history department, George's conclusion foregrounds that sexuality has become a most powerful weapon to get success. The situation of college sexual discourse is readily accepted by a new biology professor Nick who goes on saying that "I'm going to be a personal fucking machine" (200). A machine only works when a power generates it. Nick himself finds that he is no more than a machine in an academia. Being

a young biology professor, he realizes the immorality that sweeps the whole environment of the college. His gender role is also at risk as he admits that he is unable to satisfy Martha.

Subverting Gender Roles

As we precede the drama, Martha teases George to dominate violently but he passively resists her power. Martha reminds him how she humiliates with a boxing punch in front of her father. George shows a gun and fires at her but a parasol comes out. These examples and situations are created as Foucault states, "Power relations are intentional and non-subjective" (95). He further explains, "If in fact they are intelligible, this is not because they are the effects of another instance that 'explains ' them, but rather because they are imbued, through and through with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (95). George and Martha's power games are calculated and aimed at bringing down their unfulfilled sexual desire under cover.

In the same way, Lois Mcray asserts that "sexuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body but rather the effects of specific power relations..."(Hypatia 125). Albee has deployed a number physical and psychological battle grounds to surface sexuality at the hand of aggressive characters. Martha mentions a boxing match as a clue to forecast her marriage dynamics with George as she says, "POW! Right on the jaw... and he was off balance... CRASH, he landed ...flat... in huckleberry bush! (191). She recounts an instance of physical game in which George's masculinity is shattered into pieces. However, George also invites another boxing match in the final act of the play by saying; "we are going to play this one to the death "(290). It suggests George's inability to perform the role of a husband. He is physically weak so that he invents a story to threaten Martha psychologically. In a work of fiction, he kills his parents and later kills his fictional son too. As a result, Martha is psychologically handicapped, but physically strong to defend her cause. Her physical and sexual performance has been extended further in the drama.

In an article " A Body of One's Own: Martha's performative physicality in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*", Mary Ann Barfield argues Martha as a "physical and sexual symbol of power ..." (97). It suggests a masculine figure of an athlete. Her role model is the Daddy whose position and status in the college becomes the only way she wants her husband George for. George seems to be dominated all the time from his own wife who is the daughter of his college president. Being sexually impotent, George becomes powerless character in front of the society. His real identity is invalid as a queer so that he invents various games to gain power and status. But he negotiates with his wife time and again and finally kills his own

imaginary son in order to come out of the illusion of his life.

Moreover, identity also plays a vital role in subverting sexual performance. Henry Albright, in the essay "The Uncrossable Line: Reading Martha as Transgender in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*", reads the play as a "portrayal and subversion of stereotypical gender roles"(104). To change one's own identity, a person must use power. The gender identity defined by the socio cultural classification of masculine and feminine is strongly rooted in our society. It is certain role of gender performance that an identity is established. Martha, in this case, performs masculinity rather being feminine. In other words, she collects power to rule over her husband as if she forgets her own gender performance. She continuously dismisses her womanhood and challenges the heterosexual patriarchal norms. She asserts, " I'm loud and vulgar, and I wear the paints in this house..."(260) which is a challenging aggression to obtain domestic power in the hand of a married woman. Parisa Shams and Farideh Pourgiv in the paper "Gender Trouble in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* " also sketch the character of Martha" in a non-stop game of power in which George and Martha collaborate, Martha shouts, orders, humiliates her husband, pokes fun at him and constantly accuses him of knowing nothing" (88). Martha's masculinity crosses the bar of social, sexual and gender roles only to dominate and control George. In such a situation, she seems a victorious women but it is not always possible.

On the other hand, money and status can serve powerful tool in traditional marriages which is evident in the marriage of Nick and Honey. Valentine Vasak in " Do you want it? The commodification of Sexuality in the late plays of Edward Albee", points out that "the exchange and negotiation" (137) lies the very heart of heterosexual marriage. When George asks Nick " I'll bet she has money too", Nick agrees and replies, "My father-in Law... was a man of the lord, and he was very rich" (226). One of the reasons why Nick married Honey is the money Honey's father has left after his death. So, wealth has been used as a tool for Nick's attraction toward Honey. Money also plays a vital role in the relationship between Nick and Honey.

Chris Brickell, in the article, "Sexuality and the Dimensions of Power" suggests, "We might also consider the effect of power on the materiality of sexual practices and interactions"(64). To obtain power and status in the society, a person must have fortune that Nick is always seeking for. Though Honey is not physically fit for Nick, he married her for her property. "But Albee makes dishonesty a virtue, perversion a joke, adultery a simple party game" (6), remarks Schechner in "Who is Afraid of Albee?" He indicates that the characters, all four, are presented ill, perverse and sexually degraded. Whether it is to humiliate the host

or hump the hostess, the games are not played accordingly to the rules of social norms. These sexual games foreground the deep desires of the characters to achieve power and control over the situations. George kills the imaginary son as a punishment to Martha because she involves in an adulterous games with Nick. Nick humps the hostess to get favor of her as well as her father in the university. This young biology professor seems to gain power and authority by engaging himself in immoral sexual games. On the other hand, Martha willingly tests the sexual power of the young professors to control and dominate him in the presence of his wife. Later the battle of sexes among the characters begins in highly dramatic atmosphere.

The Battle of Sexes

The second act of the drama “Walpurgisnacht” is metaphorically chosen to describe the characters that joined together like the witches annual party with drinks and sexual activities. George and Nick dominate Martha and her father insulting "she was a good witch and she married a white mouse" (227). Comparing Martha with a witch and her father a white mouse, the superiority of masculinity is being established. However, the cunning idea of power utilization is suggested by George seems immoral as he suggests, "The way to a man's heart is through his wife's belly, and don't you forget it" (229). Being a senior professor George trains a young professor to obtain power unethically. Foucault explains this situation, "The deployment of alliance has as one of its chief objectives to the interplay of relations, and maintains the law that governs them; the deployment of sexuality, on the other hand engenders a continual extension of areas and form of control" (107). Power generates through various ways in which sexuality is one of the pertinent area in modern society. In this connection, George invents various sexually connotative games like “Humiliate the Host, “Hump the Hostess”, “Get the Guest”, and so on. Games are generally taken as competition among people in which power is exercised to an extreme level. After having verbal games of insult, Martha and Honey start dancing together. Martha and Nick walk upstairs to play “Hump the Hostess” while George reads a book.

Again in the third act “Exorcism,” Martha's sexual frustration with Nick resonates her conclusion that "you are certainly a flop in some departments". And Nick replies that she "... should try me sometime when we haven't been drinking for ten hours" (275). Nick's inability to perform sexuality and Martha's announcement that she is the earth mother and all the others are flop inject the idea that a powerful mother like Martha misuses her sexuality to be an immoral woman. Nick charges Martha being, "Aimless...wanton...pointless..." (279) because he is reduced to a houseboy. The battle of sexes continues throughout the drama among the

characters to define themselves powerful so that the impression would change their future.

Similarly, Matthew C. Roudane states, "The play embodies universal psychological experience while contributing to our deeper awareness of primal familial relationship" (15). The basis of "familial relationship" is the issue of sexuality in relation to power play games. As Martha declares, "I'm loud, and vulgar, and I wear the paints in this house because somebody's got to," and the counter reply of George, "you're a spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, liquor ridden" (94). It suggests the gender subversion in power sharing familial relationship. Martha as a woman tries to rise from traditional role of a woman to dominate her husband and the guests. When Nick is unable to satisfy Martha, he is reduced to a house boy. Martha's power to manipulate college professor is her father who is the president. She warns Nick, "You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you?" (279) echoes what Foucault thinks "...the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body ... its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used" (147). George decides to play a final game of power with Martha what he calls a "civilized game." This game is also no more a civilized game rather a shock for Martha who seems to have illusion that power always works at her favor. Foucault states that "where there is power, there is resistance ..." (95), and there is no way out to escape from the power relationships. George and Martha's symbol of familial power exists in between their illusionary son who is supposed to come home at his twenty first birthday. George's final resistance to Martha's power is completed when he announces the death of their imaginary son. While Martha is recollecting her past with the son and all the pains and troubles to raise the boy, George recites Latin verses to exorcise the illusive power symbol of their life announcing the death of the imaginary son.

However, family is one of the important social bindings even in this postmodern capitalist society. The rules and regulations of family once violated destroy a whole foundation of social system. The strength of family lies in keeping secrets out of the public in traditional family order. But in this drama, the outsiders Nick and Honey step into the bedrooms of George and Martha and destroy the family secrets in playing vulgar sexual games. The secrecy of imaginary son of George and Martha is also disclosed in the meantime. It seems that the sole aim of Nick is to win the favor of Martha so that he would have a good status in the university. So, sexuality has become a dominant factor even to destabilize the unity of a family.

Conclusion

The games played in the drama are the instances of power to control and resist the sexual subjects. George and Martha's fun and games are seriously taken as the subversion of American cultural notion of marriage, love and sex. The young biology professor and his wife act as if they too are victimized in a society where sexual performance is a tool to achieve a designated goal. Language has remained a medium of discourse to strengthen the physical as well as verbal games. Albee's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* employs various techniques to define the roles of sexuality as a tool in power play politics. The characters seem sexually charged and they regard marriage, love and sex as a ladder to get status, power and position in the society. Albee seems to warn the people to think seriously about the roles of sexuality and its manifestation for the construction of morality since modern American society is on the verge of sexual degradation. The discourse of sexuality that dominates the drama is ultimately vulgar and destructive because the characters often utilize it for the sake of power and status. Albee's serious concern is that the whole social institutions such as kinship, marriage, husband, wife, and children must be reexamined and reevaluated for the acceptable existence and progress in the society. The drama still attracts the multiple dimensions of postmodern reading.

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