**Shiraz University**

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# REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN EDWARD ALBEE'S PLAYS

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Supervised by
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May 2012

# IN THE NAME OF GOD

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

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BY
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*o My Family*

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# Abstract

## Representations of Women in Edward Albee's Plays

By
**Mona Hoorvash**

This dissertation aims at a reevaluation of the critical views regarding some of the female characters that appear in the plays of the American playwright, Edward Albee. In this research, I hope to disavow the traditionally reductive readings of these characters which have resulted in serious charges of misogyny against their author. Rejecting such views, I draw on feminism and psychoanalytical criticism, especially Luce Irigaray's theories of mimesis to propose a new reading of these characters, demonstrating Albee's acute awareness of the flawed phallic economy which objectifies, commodifies and marginalizes women. Furthermore, by attending to the differences between his earlier works and the later ones, I trace the signs of development in his representations of women. These differences prove his growing consciousness and sensitivity about the way he depicts women in his works, and implies the influence of the increasing power and acceptability of the feminist discourse.

The introductory chapter to my dissertation includes a comparative timeline of Albee's career and the struggles of the Women's Movement in America, as well as an overview of the basic theoretical framework used in this study. The second chapter focuses on the character of Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and points out Albee's awareness of the oppressive economical, social and political aspects of a woman's life. Chapter Three deals with the female characters of *All Over,* a play which belongs to the middle phase of Albee's career. This play, it is argued, is a chilling portrayal of the deadness of familial links and feminine pleasure that patriarchy breeds, yet it also includes female characters who try to avoid being tied down by tradition. Unlike the dominant trend in analyzing these women, I propose that Albee's depiction of these characters does not intend to degrade women, but to condemn what the phallocentric logic of the social order does to women. The fourth chapter is devoted to the tracing of Irigaray's subversive mimetic strategy in two plays. It is in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* that we see woman as a self-conscious actor. Martha is the first of Albee's women who deliberately and consistently indulges in the task of subversive mimicry of the feminine gender role to challenge the patriarchal social order and the phallocentric discourse. The idea of woman as the mimos is developed further in the analysis of *Occupant*, where the woman's theatricalization of her role as a woman is more decisive and effective, without the excessive anxiety that this process seems to engender in Martha, since it is combined with the empowering creativity that is at the heart of woman's subjectivity. In the final chapter I conclude, primarily, that Albee's representations of women in his plays are far from hostile and, secondly, that Albee has demonstrated the possibility of change by gradually allowing his female characters the playful mimicry which is in Irigaray's thought a necessary prerequisite for revolutionizing the dominant phallocentric frame of mind.

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Introduction: Albee's Career in the Context of the American Women's Movements

The Seneca Falls Convention, held in July 1848, is usually regarded as the starting point of the women's movement in America. The Convention was a memorable event during which women pointed out several areas of domestic, social and political life that were symptomatic of the oppression of women, and demanded reform. Obviously, the idea of women's oppression was not an unprecedented one. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* provided one of the first major intellectual treaties anticipating feminism. But the Seneca Falls Convention was probably one of the first organized women's gatherings, and definitely the first to set a movement in motion. In this Convention, women presented a Declaration of Sentiments, based on the Declaration of Independence, which asserted, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal" (Ryan 16), and demanded "equality in education, inheritance, property rights, divorce, child custody" and the most controversial of all, suffrage (16).

It took the women's movement seventy two years to taste its first significant victory. In 1920, the U.S government ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote. Eight years after the victorious culmination of this phase of the movement, which is usually referred to as First Wave Feminism, and five years after Alice Paul wrote the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) asking for the prohibition of gender-based discriminations, Edward Albee was born.

Adopted by Frances and Reed Albee, Edward Albee entered a family of theatre owners, and was named after his adoptive grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee II, "co-owner of four hundred vaudeville theaters across the country (the Keith-Albee Circuit)" (Mann x). Life in this wealthy but emotionally detached family provided Albee with themes, concepts and images that would keep re-

appearing in his drama.

During the following years, Albee enrolled in several schools and academies and was expelled from all, except the Choate School, Wallingford, Connecticut, where he started writing and publishing in the school's journal. Young Edward had a troubled home life. The Albee family was a dysfunctional group. “From their son’s point of view, the Albees were the oddest and most removed of couples. Frankie was imperious, demanding, and unloving, though she was an active, if often an offstage, presence in her son’s life. In contrast, Reed was uncommunicating and disengaged. At least, as their son remembers, they hardly ever spoke” (Gussow 26). The father was also chronically unfaithful. Edward felt no connection with his father, and his mother made her feel unattached and insecure. “With bitterness, Edwards says that whenever his mother became angry with him, she reminded him that he was adopted. The inference was in the air that, if he did not behave, if he did not measure up, he could be returned to the orphanage, like an unwanted possession” (39). Different aspects of his parents’ lives and character keep appearing in Albee’s plays, and his troubled relationship with his mother has had an enormous effect on the tendency toward biographical readings of his plays.

In 1949, he finally left home, and not long after that settled up in Greenwich Village. He continued his experiments with writing until 1959, when he surprised theatre critics by his first produced play, *The Zoo Story,* an unusual play about loneliness, power, violence, sexuality and gender-roles. That was seven years before Second Wave Feminism officially began to rise.

Having reached its most urgent demand, the franchise, the women's movement seemed rather dormant after the 1920s. But the Second World War changed the place of women in the American society permanently. As men went to war, women had to take over the positions previously held by men, venturing freely in the realm of economy, and learning that they could be as hard working and efficient as men (Head). As Tom Head explains, "some six million women recruited to work in military factories, producing munitions and other military goods, were symbolized by the War Department's 'Rosie the Riveter' poster", clearly emphasizing women's physical power. By the end of the war, America became financially prosperous. There was an exaggerated return to traditional family roles in the propaganda of the 1950s, to the image of the woman as the happy housewife, the homemaker, and the consumer, and the image of the man as the money maker and the father of many children. Naturally, the period also

came to be known as the baby boom era. Emancipation and women's rights were derogatory words in the eyes of the conformist woman of the fifties.

Ryan asserts that, "the rebirth of feminism can be traced to the family-centered years of the 1950s. This was an era which re-established women's place in the home after their move into paid employment during World War II" (41). There was a growing, unknown, an unacknowledged sense of frustration and dissatisfaction that was experienced by many of the women of the period. Many of them did not find the happiness that the ideological apparatus of the state busily claimed they would find in housework, as wives and mothers. Perhaps women had not expected the return to their previous, limited domestic sphere to be that awkward and unpleasant, neither had men. Under the apparent conformity of the fifties, there was a tension, a 'delicate balance' which was broken by Betty Friedan's influential work, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she writes, "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique" (qtd in Ryan 39). In 1966, Friedan's co-foundation of The National Organization for Women (NOW) officially marked the beginning of the Second Wave Feminism.

By that time Albee had written eight plays, adopted two, won a Pulitzer Prize, and was being accused of misogynist treatment of women in his plays. In the few years after *The Zoo Story*, Albee got the theatre critics excited by producing a number of very successful plays: *The Sandbox*, *The American Dream*, and above all *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the play which was chosen for but then denied the Pulitzer Prize because of its disturbing content. But after the brilliant *Virginia Woolf*, Albee's popularity began to slacken. He started writing adaptations, which were quite unsuccessful. The next original play, *Tiny Alice*, written in 1964 confused critics so much that they began to suspect Albee had lost his talent. The suspicion grew as many of his following plays became less and less successful at the box office. Ironically, two of the plays written during this period of his career won the Pulitzer, probably as a compensation for the injustice done to *Virginia Woolf*. The unfavorable critical reactions did not stop the playwright's determination to raise problematic issues, write uncompromisingly, and experiment with form and technique. For more than two decades, critics were suggesting that Albee's career was already over. But in 1991 he shocked them again by *Three Tall Women*, a surprisingly touching and understanding play about his mother written after her death. *Three*

*Tall Women* won Albee his third Pulitzer Prize and reminded the critics that from then on they should stop taking his plays for granted. He has written several other significant plays in the past two decades, including *The Play about the Baby*, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, and *Me, Myself and I*. In 2012, Albee is still regarded as one of the most important living American Playwrights.

Albee's canon is on the whole a controversial one. Critics' attacks on his middle plays were as severe as their celebration of his early ones. Price believes that the harsh reaction of the critics was mainly because of the unusual quality of Albee's plays (especially after *The American Dream*) which have affinities with those of Beckett and Ionesco, but show a "faith in the possibility of redemption" (Bigsby, *Modern* 125) and distinguishes them from what is usually regarded as the Theatre of the Absurd (Price 249). Such critics had apparently forgotten about the uniqueness of each work of literature and were looking for "false universals", expecting all plays to express "a 'human condition' as inescapable as the original sin", and dismissing a play like Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* as "'purely realistic' and therefore 'bad'" (249). Such a critical attitude was so widespread that even Martin Esslin, the critic who coined the phrase, the Theatre of the Absurd, wondered, "whether I should feel a thrill of pride every time I read a reference to the Theatre of the Absurd . . . , or whether I should not rather hide my head in shame" (179).

Kuo, on the other hand, argues that the critics' animosity to Albee's plays in the first place was because "he refused to conform to the traditional image of 'ideal young American male playwright'. He, on the contrary, questioned and challenged their traditional view points and principles" (71). The general assumption about what an absurd play should be is only one of these challenged viewpoints, as are the traditional assumptions about power, love and family.

Family is an indispensable ingredient of Albee's drama. The home is the setting for most of his plays, and the relationship of married couples, as well as parents and children, is of primary interest to the playwright. Naturally, being part of America's domestic tradition, women have a significant role in such plays. However, Albee's characters belong mainly to dysfunctional families. It is imaginable that this fact contributes to the tendency to read his drama as misogynist, since the common opinion holds the woman responsible for the integrity of the family and believes that if a family is dysfunctional, then something must be wrong with the woman of the family, the wife, the mother.

Though the critical attitude toward Albee’s plays has changed a lot

throughout the years, in one aspect there has been little progress: the critics' evaluation of his female characters. Even in the 21st century, there are still critical responses that regard his work as misogynist. This accusation is what germinated the present study, which intends to examine the representations of women in Albee's plays.

As Price states, many of Albee's critics believed that in his plays "the more convincing the female character, the greater the likelihood of discovering that she was really a man" (259). Rita Felski discusses the "general tendency of American criticism", which regards the male authors as only capable of creating "Madonnas and Whores, the extreme and mutually exclusive categories available to women within a patriarchal culture" (Hall 6). A close examination of Albee's female characters, however, demonstrates that many of them are too complicated to be labeled that easily.

It is undeniable that many of Albee's women are portrayed unconventionally. Jerry's disgusting landlady, Mommy in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, and Martha with her aggressive behavior seem to suggest to critics a hostile attitude toward women on the side of the playwright. But the critics who jump to universal conclusions based on this evidence seem to forget that Albee's later plays inhabit several other female characters who do not as easily conform to such conclusions. Neither do the complicated and multi-dimensional characters of the earlier plays. Such a view is necessarily over-simplifying, neglecting the sadness, understanding, compassion and powerfully ironic view of the playwright with regard to these characters.

The portrayal of the witty and wise Grandma in *American Dream* is in no way a demeaning of women, and a seemingly shrewish character like Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has a lot more to say about women than their being 'masculine' or 'emasculating'. Also, his later plays show a clearer picture of powerful women. Stevie in *The Goat* is nearly perfect, and *Occupant* is basically a tribute to a very successful woman artist, Louise Nevelson.

The apparent change in the surface representation of these characters has certainly something to do with the various victories of the women's movement on social and political, as well as domestic levels. The public consciousness of women and their issues has undergone irrevocable transformation due to activities such as NOW's several marches, fasts and gatherings, forcing the state to support women by passing laws and legislations with regard to equal employment (in 1964), divorce (in 1969), abortion (in 1973), marital rape (in

1976), sexual harassment (in 1986), and violence against women (in 1994), among many other issues.

There is more to Albee's representation of female characters than what is usually thought, even in his early works. Albee has always been a rebellious playwright, shaped by an era of social reform. It is unthinkable to imagine him unaware of the women's claims and movements from the beginning of his career. It is also strange, as some critics have suggested, to picture him upholding the patriarchal values of the society, while condemning its other traditional values. As Price puts it, it would be helpful to regard Albee's drama not as a "confrontation", but "as an attempted dialogue" between the different cultural and social realities of his age (249), including the ongoing struggle between patriarchy and women's movements.

## 1.2. Significance of the Study

Never before has a critic examined a selection of plays covering Albee's entire cannon, including the recent plays, with the emphasis on his depiction of women. Of the occasional studies that have commented on several of Albee's women, only a few have deviated from the widespread belief in his misogyny and none has registered the signs of change or development in his characterization of women.

Given Albee's place in contemporary American drama and the numerous and various female characters that appear in his plays, it seems strange that so little attention has been paid to this aspect of his works. Hall notes that feminist dramatic studies of the works of male modern playwrights are very rare:

> Unlike scholarly, feminist studies of the novel that began by examining the representations of women in male-authored texts, modern feminist dramatic criticism is characterized by its focus on women's work and its argument for such work's validity and markability. (2)

One reason for this attitude could be "the economic realities of theatrical production", the urgent necessity that feminists face for promoting women's writings so that producers would be willing to stage them (2). But a more subtle reason is what Rita Felski regards as "the assumption that male authors cannot create 'real' female characters" (qtd. in Hall 2-3), as can be seen in Helen Cixous'

depiction of the theatre as a sadistic and patriarchal organization in which "female spectators . . . have no one to identify with" (qtd. in Hall 3). Hall rejects this view, emphasizing the need to explore the plays of male-authors to have a more comprehensive and inclusive appreciation of modern drama and its portrayal of women, since female characters created by playwrights such as O'Neill, Pinter and Shepard are psychologically complex, or to use Hall's word, "problematic", and play a significant role in the plays in which they appear (5-6). Albee's drama, one can argue, is of the same category.

The present study is important from a literary point of view, in expanding the ways Albee's works could be read and understood, from a cultural-critical point of view, in demonstrating an example of the influence of the growing power and acceptability of a discourse (the feminist discourse here) on the shaping of the culture of an age, and from a feminist point of view, in claiming the sympathy of yet another canonical figure with the cause of women, and in challenging the destructive tendency to regard as conventionally supportive of patriarchy the works of one of the most liberally unconventional contemporary playwrights.

## 1.3. Objectives of the Study

The present study assumes that calling Albee's early plays misogynist reductively simplifies many of his complicated earlier female characters, and disregards their relationship with his later women, whose portrayal, I hope to prove, more consciously and clearly demonstrates Albee's refusal to validate the patriarchal oppression of women.

In this study I seek to reread a number of Albee's early plays with the intention of examining his portrayal of female characters and looking for signs of his consciousness of the women's oppression in the patriarchal society. The examination will be extended to some of his later plays to look for instances of change in the playwright's representation of women. I also try to find out the degree and nature of this change, and to decide whether Albee's female characters are radically transformed from unfavorably portrayed to sympathetically depicted, or whether the playwright's early plays, too, show signs of affinity with his later career, when the growing acceptability of the feminist discourse has enabled him to express the condition of women more appropriately.

## 1.4. Review of Literature

The majority of scholarship on Albee is primarily concerned with his male characters. A recent example is Bigsby's *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* in which a chapter is specified to Albee. Bigsby gives the priority of significance to the male characters of most plays and discusses women's role as only complimentary to what has already been established through the male characters. Thus, the centre of discussion in *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is mainly George(132), in *Tiny Alice* it is Julian (137), Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* (138), the dying man in *All Over* (140-41), and even in *The Lady from Dubuque* it is Sam who is mainly analyzed (146).

The few studies which do pay attention to Albee's women, very often tend to misread their significance in the plays. In "The Play That Dare Not Speak Its Name", Philip Roth identifies *Tiny Alice* as a play about "emasculation", "a homosexual day-dream in which the celibate male is tempted and seduced by the overpowering female, only to be betrayed by the male lover and murdered by the cruel law" (109). This surprisingly narrow perspective completely ignores the play's metaphysical implications, and turns a blind eye on Miss Alice's internal conflict and exhaustion, among other things.

John Simon, too, in his *Uneasy Stages* lightly dismisses the implications of a female god in *Tiny Alice*, exclaiming, "She's a bitch" (11). Also, in his 1980 commentary on *The Lady from Dubuque*, he is totally unsympathetic toward Jo, the woman who, suffering from cancer in its most developed stage, is helpless with pain and in no mood to entertain her rather inconsiderate guests, a natural behavior which Simon describes as "beastly" ("From Hunger" 36). These examples show the reaction of critics to Albee's women, which is far from objective and strangely hostile.

Rachel Blau Duplessis turns this trend of criticism upside down in her 1977 review of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which she argues that in the end of the play Martha is subordinated to George to glorify patriarchal standards (6). She concludes, "Losing power over men, over career, over rivals, an Albee character will seek to gain power over women and children" (7). Duplessis's argument is similar to the previous reactions to Albee's female characters in that it is limited, reductive, and hostile, albeit in the opposite direction, and it still shows Albee to be a misogynist, still with inadequate proof.

In "What's New at the Zoo? Rereading Edward Albee's American Dream(s)

and Nightmares", Mickey Pearlman presents a feminist reading of the female characters in *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*. She proposes that "these women are powerful and pathetic, damaging or deranged, vulgar or vicious, impinging on the spaces of men with damaging regularity" (45). Pearlman's major problem is that she extends this definition to Albee's "later plays" without having examined them, since even a less than thorough examination of Nancy in *Seascape,* the Wife in *All Over,* and Nevelson in *Occupant*, for instance, proves them neither vulgar, nor vicious. Neither does a closer look at the Grandma in the very plays Pearlman refers to demonstrate how she could be deranged or damaging. Rather than the "pathetic, ill-used" (48), and "pitiful figure" Pearlman suggests she is (47), this character in *The American Dream* is a lively survivor, an articulate character whose sense of irony helps her prevent Mommy and Daddy from dragging her toward stagnation.

Of the few works that pay attention to Albee's representations of women in a balanced and moderate light, one is Chiang-Sheng Kuo's PhD dissertation, titled *Images of Masculinity in Contemporary American Drama: Albee, Shepard, Mamet and Kushner*. Quoting Stanley Kauffmann's 1966 comment that "three of the most successful American playwrights of the last twenty years are (reputed) homosexuals" who present "distorted pictures of American women, marriage and society in general" (72), Kuo observes that the harsh criticism of Albee's plays "reflected the heterosexual masculine matrix against which … [they] were judged" (73), since his plays actually introduce "the intersubjectivity between different genders and sexualities" (74). This claim is very much in tune with the thesis of the present study in that it helps reject the accusation of Albee's sexism. But Kuo's study, as its title demonstrates, focuses more on the playwright's characterization of male characters and masculinity.

John M. Clum's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* is another recent study which pays specific attention to women in three of Albee's plays. In "'Withered Age and Stale Custom': Marriage, Diminution, and Sex in *Tiny Alice, A Delicate Balance,* and *Finding the Sun*", Clum asserts that "while some critics have attacked Albee's misogyny, he actually sympathizes with his strong women who are failed by the men they married" (59). Though the major concern of this article is "sexual, . . . emotional and spiritual frustration experienced by his [Albee's] husbands and wives", Clum's evaluation of women in these three plays supports the thesis of the present study.

In this section I have only provided a general overview of Albee