

Tribhuvan University

Martha as Virago Character in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled “Martha as Virago Character in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*” submitted to Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Kathmandu is my original work. It is done in the form of partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English under the supervision and guidance of Pradip Sharma, lecturer, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Kathmandu.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis submitted to the Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus by Mrs. Sapna Rana, entitled “Martha as Virago Character in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*” has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee:



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Abstract

This thesis on Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* examines how major characters' act of assuming of opposite gender roles subverts the patriarchal ideology of gender binary making her a virago character. The study analyzes the play from the perspective of third-wave feminism especially drawing ideas from gender criticism of Judith Butler, Moi Toril, Ketu Katrak and others. In simple terms, third wave feminism is the act of feminism that began in the 1990s and has lived up until current day. Third wave feminism holds that that there should not be a universal identity for women as women come from many backgrounds. This includes religion, nationality, culture, sexual preference, and women of color.

Opposite gender roles in the play displays subversive politics with the radical potential to overthrow patriarchal ideals. In an attempt to escape from the existing reality, Martha and George live in performative world as they do not conform to the generally established notion of gender, family life, career and social values. In this way, Martha's virago character deconstructs the traditional notion of gender, which allows women to enjoy maximum freedom in patriarchal society.

Contents

Page No.

Declaration	
Letter of Approval	
Acknowledgements	
Abstract	
Table of Contents	
Introduction: Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Albee's <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf</i>	1
Role of Martha in Gendered Concept in <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf</i>	14
Deconstructing Stereotypical Gender Role	30
Works Cited	

**Introduction: Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Albee's *Who's Afraid of
Virginia Woolf***

Sex and Gender

Apparently, sex refers to biological category and gender is a cultural term which people internalize and learn from the society in the process of socialization. But the socialization process differs from society to society, so it is not the same in every society. In the article "Doing Gender," Candace West and Don Zimmerman reiterate sex is a "biological categorization and gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do" (125). To them, gender creates distinct feature and a separate identity of an individual. So it is implied that the sex which we carry from birth and is biological is universal – same all over the world – and cannot be changed whereas gender is socially constructed and is not the same throughout the world. This is the reason why we find different cultural practices and different roles of man and women in various societies and cultures. This can be implied that gender is socially or culturally constructed behavior of individual man and woman and can be changed according to the need and desire of the individual and society.

History shows that gender roles have been changing over time and as required by the circumstances. The concept of gender is based on stereotypes of male and female behavior that are often associated with female sex. For example, in most of the cases women rear children and do the household chores because they get hardly any time and opportunity to work outside. This has created a big gap between man and woman in terms of areas ranging from household works to office works to other social works. This has led to the discrimination between the two sexes.

‘Gender’ is a term used to distinguish social and cultural sexual identity from biological sex. When we talk of gender we discuss the socio-cultural and psychological behavior of people that makes the distinction which is associated with the biology of the individual. Gender studies the roles and behavior of individual that creates a separate identity of man and woman and tries to analyze those situations in detail which otherwise would not have created. According to Joan Scott, “Gender becomes a way of denoting ‘cultural construction’ – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for men and women. In this definition, gender is a social category imposed on a sexed body” (1056). As society dictates both sexes to perform dos and don'ts, it is society that establishes convention. In this sense, gender is a cultural construction.

Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify such inequities. This situation still exists occur today as it excludes women from equal access to everything. As Lois Tyson writes:

. . . inequities still occur today, excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making position – in the family as well as in politics, academia and the corporate world – paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job – if women are even able to obtain the job – and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. Many people today believe such inequities are a thing of the past because anti-

discriminatory laws have been passed, such as the law that guarantees women equal pay for equal work. (84)

However, these laws are frequently being bypassed directly or indirectly. For example, an employer can pay a woman less for performing the same work as a man simply by giving her a different job title. So, women still are paid poorly in every society in comparison to their male counterparts.

According to Sanjiv Upreti, patriarchy is, thus, by definition sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is called “biological essentialisms” because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women (234). A striking illustration is the word hysteria, which derives from the Greek word for womb (hystera) and refers to psychological disorders deemed peculiar to women and characterized by over-emotional, extremely irrational behaviour. Upreti thus observes that women are relegated to household activities preserving tradition and customs, whereas men are let free out of the household doing activities beyond convention. This determines the thinking horizon of men and women in society (234).

As feminists have observed, the belief that men are superior to women has been employed to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political and social power. Men have done so to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. For example, it is a patriarchal assumption, rather than a fact, that more women than men suffer from hysteria. But because it has been defined as a female problem, hysterical behavior in

men won't be diagnosed as such; instead, it will be ignored or given another less damaging name, for example, shortness temper. Biologically, men generally have been endowed by nature with stronger muscles. On the other hand, women are born comparatively smaller and weak. This has made men take advantage of women in many ways. There are indeed biological differences between men and women but these distinctions do not have to become the basis of a sexual hierarchy.

Feminism

Gender role created gender discrimination. As a result, Feminist movement came, which seeks equal right and status with men to decide on their careers and life. The patriarchy – a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it – considers women weaker in every sphere of familial and social life. Because of this biological or physical construction and deep-rooted gender conception, men dominate women. Abeda Sultana defines patriarchy as the system of the "male domination both in public and private spheres" (1). So, feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to describe the power relationship between men and women. Thus, the main objective of feminism has been to revolt against such ideology and parochial gender construction. Nowadays, the female writers have begun writing advocating for the emancipation of women from the oppressive patriarchy and have tried to establish women's position in male-dominated society. As Samantha Howell writes, "the success of women writers has increased and now, they do not face as much unjust gender based remarks regarding their writing. Women—and their voices – have emerged and been heard by the public with more recognition and success" (25). Thus, women have now begun to take larger roles in society and project their voices through their writings though they have faced many obstacles in male dominated society.

Feminine and masculine relation has got predominance on the basis of their power relation at present. Domination of men over women in every social, economic, cultural and religious milieu of human life has caused the hierarchical power relation and male domination. According to Kamala Bhasin, feminism's main concern is to expose the patriarchy, male domination, and "the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (3). This prejudice, historically existent sustains itself in the form of male-domination against female subordination through ideological practices. The patriarchy promotes the gender based inequalities that describes man as superior and women as inferior, man as powerful and the woman as powerless. One of the leading American feminists Kate Millett sees patriarchy as "grotesque, increasingly militaristic, increasingly greedy, colonialist, imperialistic, and brutal, with a terrible disregard of civil liberties, of democratic forms" (511). Millet describes patriarchy as exploitative with no sense of regard for women.

As time passes, feminine consciousness gradually emerges among women and makes them realize the inhuman treatment of patriarchal system. From antiquity, women have gradually felt a need to launch a united movement against these injustices, inequalities and violence so as to eliminate discrimination and narrow the hierarchy between the two sexes, as Millett believes: "You don't have any oppressive system without its continuance being assured by members of the oppressed groups, that's true of oppressed people" (511). This led to the birth of feminism.

Feminism is concerned with women's voices, which are silenced in the patriarchal ideology. The feminists try to break the silence of women. So, feminism is a political movement which has become successful in giving due place to the

writing of non-canonical women writers. Feminism has emerged as powerful movement against female marginalization as our society and civilization is pervasively patriarchal because it is male-centered and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature- which is described as feminine. By this cultural process the masculine in our culture has come to be widely defined as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative, the feminine by systematic opposition to such traits has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional.

Feminism is concerned with several norms and values that belong to the women's issues. Despite the diversity, feminism is often demonstrated as a single entity and somehow concerned with gender equality and freedom. Chris Beasley defines feminism as a "doctrine suggesting that women are systematically disadvantaged in modern society and as advocating equal opportunities for men and women" (27). The main common theoretical assumption as shared by all branches of the movement is that there has been an historical tradition of male exploitation of woman.

By the time women became conscious of their position and discrimination in society, many feminists raised their voice to end this discrimination between men and women. It shows the consciousness of women who have begun to reject their own passivity. Feminism came into existence for the sake of women rights and human equality. The main aim of the feminist movement was to develop women's personalities. It, therefore, studied women as people who were either oppressed or suppressed or rejected the freedom of personal expression. All women writers who

struggled against patriarchy to contain their womanhood were generally, considered feminist. Men may also be feminists but they cannot be feminists in the real sense of the term because of lack of feminine experience. That's why, unlike ancient women, today feminists are proud of their existence. In this regard, Toril Moi, a feminist writes: "the word feminist or feminism are political labels indicating support for the aim of the new women's movement" (187). Moi views that feminism refers to the movement or political campaign so as to further their own interests. Thus, feminism as a political movement seeks equality between men and women.

In addition, Ketu Katrak goes one step ahead as she celebrates the feminine body. In *Politics of the Female Body*, Katrak makes an important scholarly contribution in analyzing postcolonial women writers' representations of female exile from the body and community, and resistance through speech and silence. She takes the female body as "both a site of oppression and a site of resistance" (35). Katrak explores texts from postcolonial locations in which shared colonial histories – racial hierarchies, educational institutions and so on – come into contact with traditional socio-political structures particularly the family and attitudes to motherhood, wifehood and widowhood. In this way, the female body becomes a site of both oppression and resistance.

In a nutshell, the term "feminism" explores the domination, exploitation, injustice and inequality prevalent in male-dominated society where women's rights are violated in different terms and conditions. It also attempts to end various kinds of oppressions against women for their emancipation. From the short discussion done above, it can be summed up that feminism is not a simple or unified philosophy. Many different women – and even men – call themselves feminists, and the beliefs of these groups of people vary quite a bit.

Gender Stereotype

Stereotype has been described and defined in a variety of ways in anthropology and literary criticism. Bhabha describes 'stereotype' as "arrested, fixated" or "inert images" (75), Lippmann defines it as "a partial and inadequate way of viewing the world" (qtd in Murphy 34). Nevertheless, these definitions and descriptions may further be challenged. The images stereotypes offer cannot be inert, because neither stereotypes nor the cultures that create and perpetuate them are static. "Nor are the stereotypes consistent: they vary over time . . ." (Mihesuah 13). Some stereotypes involve ethnic or racial groups, but other stereotypes refer to issues of ageism, homophobia, misogyny, or religious intolerance. So making the definition explicitly racial leaves out what are widely recognized as "stereotypes" of groups that are not viewed by others or by their own membership as racial or ethnic.

Lippmann hints that necessary to the definition of "stereotype" might be the possession of inaccurate beliefs, but inaccuracy alone is too broad to categorize the group interactions that seem to be necessary for stereotyping to occur. Ashmore and Del Boca offer a more comprehensive definition of stereotype as "one group's generalized and widely accepted beliefs about the personal attributes of another group. In essence, the perception of a group as generic rather than being made up of individuals" (34). However, a stereotype may involve only one belief about a stereotyped group and not an entire set of "beliefs"; nor is it particularly clear why an individual could not create a stereotype by assigning a novel set of beliefs to a group which are not widely accepted by anyone else, but nevertheless generalize that group to the point of erasing its individuality.

Lawrence Blum, in writing on stereotypes as a general phenomenon, tries to give a cohesive definition of stereotyping generalizable across a range of social

interactions. As he remarks, "Stereotypes are false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. A stereotype associates a certain characteristic with the stereotyped group" (251). Blum goes on to provide additional characteristics inherent to the act of stereotyping, which can be synthesized into a basic definition for the act of stereotyping. He limits the stereotyped group to the area of human beings; he states that the group is of a particular salience (ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. or unique combination thereof), is portrayed as "fundamentally the same" (261), and cannot be conceived of regularly otherwise.

Although gender-role stereotyping is not often talked about openly, it has badly affected our lives in society. In the technological age, we can easily determine the sex of our fetus before it is even born. From that moment of discovery, we begin socializing our children to be either masculine or feminine. Gender-role stereotyping is a simplistic generalization about the differences in male and female behavior and interests expressed by each gender. The differences between males and females can be attributed to more than anatomy. Sex hormones, such as testosterone and estrogen are considered to be contributors to the more aggressive nature of males and the more moody nature in females. As Moore notes, those differences unrelated to anatomy and sex hormones have been attributed to learned characteristics about how to be masculine and feminine.

Gender-roles play an important role in our society. "Roles are sets of norms that define how people in a given social position ought to behave" (Moore 23). Gender-roles are learned attributes that make an individual masculine or feminine. These expected behaviors affect each of us very differently, and it is important to think about the positive and negative effects that of gender-role stereotyping has, on

our young people. These cultural expectations have a big impact on our daily lives and our perception of what it means to be male or female. In our society, women are expected to express more feminine characteristics such as taking care of the children, cooking and other household chore while being emotionally soothing.

Men are expected to be more aggressive and the bread earner for the family. Moore further notes, “Stereotypes for femininity include expectations to be domestic, warm, pretty, emotional, dependent, physically weak and passive. By contrast, men are thought of as being more competitive and less emotional than women” (20). Socially we can see gender-stereotypes at work on children from a very young age. Boy babies are dressed in colors such as blue and green, whereas girl babies are dressed in pink. It is common to see people play more roughly with baby boys than baby girls, even though at that age they are relatively similar in interests and desires. The important point to be made here is the fact that people believe the socially defined characteristics and act on them treating men and women differently.

The internalization of gender-role develops at a very young age. Gender stereotypes begin to produce gender-typed behavior patterns toward behaviors that are socially gender-appropriate. Research indicates that children as young as eighteen months show preferences for gender-stereotyped toys. By the age of two, they are aware of their own and others’ gender and between two and three years of age, they begin to identify specific traits and behaviors in gender stereotyped ways.

Early childhood is the time when gender socialization occurs. Gender expectations are reinforced with rewards and punishment. Boys tend to receive harsher punishment when engaging in activities that are seen as being not gender appropriate behaviors. Stronger pressure on male children to follow gender stereotypes results in stronger gender type preferences at an earlier age in male

children. This ultimately creates gender binary leading to gender discrimination, which, in fact, needs to be deconstructed for equality in society.

Gender Performance and Identity

Closely associated with the term gender is gender identity. Gender identity refers to the self-awareness of one's biological, social and cultural characteristics. Two other terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' also derive from gender. They need to be distinguished from 'male' and 'female'. 'Male' and 'female' derive from 'sex' about natural sexual difference and they are relatively stable terms. While the notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' is culture-bound and change along with economic and social order that underpins them. The notion "gender ambiguity" means that an individual's gender is ambiguous, combining both masculinity and femininity. To talk about gender ambiguity is to deconstruct gender stereotypes, and to prove that every individual, man or woman, owns both masculine and feminine characteristics, neither is superior to the other.

Stereotypically, gender is not ambiguous, and there is a clear demarcation of gender differences: masculinity is attributed to man while femininity to woman. The stereotypical manly characteristics are: sturdiness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, smartness, strong-heartedness, and toughness, and the stereotypical womanly characteristics are: submissiveness, passivity, tenderness, mindlessness, emotionalism, sensuality, frailty, nurturance and domesticity, "the qualities that come naturally to men and women determined by cultural construction" (Schneider 245). As Virginia Woolf claims in *A Room of One's Own*:

The age-old view was that women are naturally and biologically weak, fragile, and emotional, whereas men are strong, intelligent and capable. . . . Beyond these areas, women were personally,

professionally and legally powerless in their male-dominated society.

(qtd. in hooks, 84)

Here, Woolf explains how men and women have been historically categorized in strong and weak beings respectively. On the basis of patriarchal demarcation of men and women, it is the women who have always been on receiving end.

The formation of the stereotypes of gender originated from the myth of Genesis: female is a derivative of male; man takes priority over woman; woman serves man as his mirror, his temptress; and woman functions as a seductress of the evil powers of his own unconsciousness – “God gave Adam authority over Eve as a penalty for the Fall” (Dusinberre 77). Man is superior to woman, and masculinity is superior to femininity; masculinity remains consistently opposed to ‘femininity’ – all these gender principles, in Marilyn French’s words, “have turned the ‘dichotomy’ of the sexes into a battle between the two opposing spheres rather than a harmonization of the masculine and feminine into an organic whole” (123). So, as the gender criticism questions the traditionally accepted binary, it naturally triggers conflict between the two sexes.

As opposed to the fixed masculine/feminine gender binary opposition, Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble*, calls for a new way of looking at sex and gender. Instead of trying to assert that ‘women’ are a group with common characteristics and interests, which reinforces a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear-cut groups: women and men, she would rather open up more possibilities for a person to form and choose his or her own identity in society.

Butler also notes that feminists have rejected the idea that biology is destiny, and then developed an account of patriarchal culture which assumes that masculine

and feminine genders would inevitably be built, by culture, upon 'male' and 'female' bodies, making the same destiny just as inescapable. She prefers the historical and anthropological positions to understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. In other words, rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. Concerning the following questions: 'What is gender, how is it produced and reproduced, what are its possibilities?' (Butler, xxiii), Butler argues that gender is not just a social construct, a core aspect of essential identity, but rather a kind of performance, a set of manipulated codes, a show, a set of signs we wear, as costume or disguise.

In this sense, cross-dressing and gender are closely related. Cross-dressing is a man dressed like a woman or vice versa. Gender is everyone's costume, and everyone puts on his or her own gender identity. Butler's main metaphor for cross-dressing is 'drag', i.e. dressing like a person of the 'opposite sex'. All gender is a form of 'drag'; there is no 'real' core gender to refer to. Butler says: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). In other words, gender is a performance: it's 'what you do' at particular times, rather than a universal 'who you are'.

Butler thinks that the interrelation between gender and clothes is based on cultural inferences, which might be wrong. Aret Karademir remarks that when a man is "dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as man", normally we regard his or her "real" gender as the reality without costume, the anatomy of the person, and we take the appearance as illusory (Karademir 140). This naturalized knowledge is based on a series of cultural inferences, but some of which might be erroneous. With

regard to transsexuality, it is no longer "possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body" (Karademir 140), because gender performance functions on the basis of cultural convention.

Role of Martha in Gendered Concept in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

In the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee Martha is shown as a rebellious woman who at various stages flouts the enforced traditional gender roles. Her act of challenging reverses the notion of traditional gender identity. The spouses, George and Martha are engaged in the constant play of performance of gender. Martha assumes to play the role of oppressive male as she shouts, gives orders and humiliates her husband. At times, she makes fun of him and repeatedly accuses him of knowing nothing. She seems to be imitating the socially recognized role of a man in a traditional society. By the middle of Act II, George and Martha declare "total war" on each other (175). Spurred on by the conflict between the husband and wife, Martha attempts to develop a close relationship with Nick. This attempt of Martha breaks the conventional rule of patriarchal values as her personality leans more towards the masculine. In addition, each of the four characters has ways in which he or she loses any sense of gender identity; he/she does not feel like real women or real men because of their activities.

From the very beginning of the play, Martha's vulgarity and aggressiveness can be observed. This is often attributable to male behaviour in patriarchal society. George and Martha speak a language of violence, yelling at one another, name-calling, indulging in abusive language employing a comic tone, through which they attempt to cover bitter reality of patriarchal codes. She tells George, "I don't know what you're so tired about . . . you haven't done anything all day; you didn't have any classes or anything . . . You didn't do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk" (7-8). This shows the wife plays the role of traditional husband. On the very first page of the play, Martha scolds George saying, "What a cluck! What a cluck you are . . . You pig" (3, 17). She shows a tendency to take

control of everything. Sometimes she even imitates the children's way of talking as when she says, "I'm firsty" instead of saying "I'm thirsty" (17). At this, George replies, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody, the way you do?" (8). She refuses to be treated as the good, loving wife and caring mother. At other times, Martha acts like a "monster" in the house as George calls her, "some subhuman monster yowling at 'em from inside . . . ?" (20). George compares Martha's behaviour with aggressiveness manner of monster. Martha refutes Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born, rather becomes, a woman" ("Introduction," *The Second Sex* 1). Though Martha is born a woman, she becomes man by her deeds. Significantly, Martha is constantly trying to perform the male role because when readers imagine an image of a monster we generally associate it with maleness or manliness.

In an environment filled with anger and rage, Martha refutes George's accusation that she's a "monster." She asserts:

MARTHA: I'm loud and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in the house

because somebody's got to, but I am not a monster. I'm not.

GEORGE: You're a spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded,

liquor-ridden . . .

MARTHA: SNAP! It went snap. Look, I'm not going to try to get

through to you anymore. . . I'm not going to try. There was a

second back there, maybe, there was a second, just a second when I

could have gotten through to you, when maybe we could have cut

through all this crap. (173-74)

This is a significant scene in the play. Women were supposed to be, especially during that era, docile, proper and well-mannered, which is the epitome of traditional notion

of femininity. But, Martha behaves like a man as she performs or possesses masculine behaviour. 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 drink large amount of alcohol as George remarks: "My God, you can swill it down, can't you" (17). She drinks straight, tough-guy booze, like whiskey and bourbon. As she acts like a man, George calls her 'spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden' which are conventionally associated with male activities. George is helpless in front of Martha's alcoholic and sexual behaviour, her vulgar and dirty manner in public, her filling the house with "empty bottles, lies, strange men . . ." (240). So, Martha's act challenges traditional stereotyping of feminine gender, which is a socio-cultural construct.

In the process of creating her own gender, Martha moves beyond those social and cultural norms and expectations, and gets the figure of a "monster" that creates a sense of fear in the minds of weaker beings. In addition to the verbal games with which George and Martha involve themselves, Martha is not a woman who only aims to deny a certain gender or approve another through mimicking masculinity. In essence, she performs exactly what she wants to do at the moment of expression just as a harsh man does. As Butler notes, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). As Stoller clarifies Butler's points "gender identities do not exist prior to their expressions" (100). It is not to say that we are performing a gender like an actor performs on the stage because none of us here is expressing something that existed prior to its expression. Thus, we do not express or disguises our interior self through performing gender. Rather we perform socio-culturally prescribed gender roles in society. Gender is, according to Butler, an act

“which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (100).

Gender is thus a socio-culturally constructed entity which turns into a social parameter or mores.

Here, Butler’s concept of performativity is applicable in the play. Her concept is grounded in an idea of language, and “is concerned with the ‘performed’ character of (gender) identity and the implications this has for agency, resistance and subjectivity,” so the notion of language games is evoked in such an understanding of performativity (qtd. in Dent and Whitehead 7). Thus, Martha’s constant involvement in verbal games or arguments and her seeming role playing emphasizes the fact that she assumes masculinity in order to question the traditional notion of gender stereotyping. This also proves that she is also poking fun at the established roles assigned to males and females. This is in line with Butler’s claim that human beings are involved in a constant game of playing gender. This shows that gender is not an attribute or quality; rather, it is a practice. Butler proves that there is no fixed gender role; each man and woman portrays masculine and feminine quality in accordance with the prevailing socio-cultural practice regarding gender. In other words, we all perform gender roles prescribed by society. As such, the characters in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* are all performing gender.

In the play, Martha's father has failed to have a male heir. This incident has motivated Martha to have her father's desire fulfilled, which she does by assuming male identity. So, she exudes a pervasive display of masculine characteristics or traits. One of the advantages Martha has is that she is older than George; she has actively courted him. Martha has been sexually active and has chosen her own husband. It was a blow on the patriarchy when her father had her marriage cancelled 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 as he remarks "your skirt up over your head" (18). This very well shows her as a female with independent thinking who believes in living her life according to her own terms and conditions. In terms of physique, 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. Besides, she is far more aggressive in an open, harsh way. As males have traditionally tended to subordinate women, Martha tries to disgrace George after he has explicitly warned her against her behavior. Here, she assumes domineering male characteristics. This is a stereotypical masculine pattern of behaviour, while George is given the feminine attributes.

In front of the domineering Martha, George appears to be submissive from the very beginning. He looks helpless and powerless as Martha humiliates and insults him. When she chides him, George submissively says, "I'm tired, dear . . . it's late . . . and besides . . ." (7). Martha does not care about the traditionally assigned gender roles. What she does at the moment is that she is bent upon challenging the accepted gender identity. She orders him to do things and refuses to obey him though he becomes defiant later. She behaves and treats her husband as if she is the male figure. Martha wants to break free from the conventional role played by a woman in being disloyal, aggressive and disrespectful to her husband George. The following dialogue between Martha and George shows how the couple tends to perform opposite roles:

MARTHA: Hey, put some more ice in my drink, will you? You never put any ice in my drink. Why is that, hunh?

GEORGE: (Takes her drink) I always put ice in your drinks. You eat it, that's all.

It's this habit you've . . . chewing on your ice cubes . . . like a cocker spaniel. You'll crack your big teeth. (15)

The above mentioned dialogue describes the unusual kind of behavior between the husband and wife as they are performing opposite gender roles assigned to them in patriarchal society. By doing this, Albee erases the lines between fixed categories of gender through the characters who denounce the gender binaries. A college-educated woman, Martha always humiliates her husband for his lack of ambition and professional failures. The way the characters behave shows the fluidity of gender, because each one of them seems to shift between genders at different times and in different contexts, rather than holding onto a fixed stereotypical gender role assigned to them. The characters do not obediently follow the norms gender identity. As the female characters assume the masculine nature, they act out the masculine roles. In other words, they perform the male roles. Thus, they represent the performativity of gender roles which are socially constructed ones according to Butler.

As a domineering woman, Martha comes across as a strong, loud, drunk and violent in the play, which demonstrates her masculine attributes. She is an energetic woman who is described as a powerful person by her husband "Martha had her daguerreotype in the paper once . . . oh 'bout twenty-five years ago . . . seems she took second prize in one o' them seven days dancing contest things . . . "biceps bulging, holding up her partner" (141). Here, George defeminizes the image of Martha dancing with images of male athleticism.

Her masculine qualities are even further emphasized by George's comparative weakness or femininity. George appears as quite feminine compared to the strong Martha. During a conversation between Nick and George, George claims he has been trying for years to "clean up the mess" he made (113). Here, the 'mess' symbolizes his

marriage with Martha: "Accommodation, malleability, adjustment . . . those do seem to be in the order of things, don't they?" (114). While Martha adjusts herself to the manly role of the husband, George's unmanly character is revealed throughout the play. The other male character Nick on the other hand, refuses to relate to George's character, and he tells him specifically: "Don't try to put me in the same class with you!" (114). Nick's inability to relate to George's problem can be read as his unwillingness to imagine a male who is not conventionally masculine. Nick thinks that a man, who cannot fulfill his wife's needs, is incompatible with the hetero-normative male role. What Albee seems to be depicting here is two men representing the male gender category in very different ways because compared to the strong, masculine Nick, George emerges as weak and emasculated person.

George's continuous process of falling into emasculation is described throughout the play. In one of the instances, when George lights Martha's cigarette, it foreshadows his defeat as a masculine figure and thus subversion of traditional gender identity. On the other hand, asking George to light her cigarette reflects her desire to add more strength to her masculine attitude. This symbol has first been hinted at in the first act, when George refuses to light Martha's cigarette:

GEORGE: . . . Can I get you something?

MARTHA: . . . Well...uh...sure, you can light my cigarette, if you're of a mind to.

GEORGE: [considers, then moves off]: No . . . there are limits. I mean, a man can put up with only so much without he descends a rung or two on the old evolutionary ladder . . . [Now a quick aside to NICK] . . . which is up your line. (54-55)

Out of fear or respect, George offers his wife to serve her. Another interpretation of the symbol of lighting cigarette reflects George's inability to light up Martha's sex life. In other words, George has failed to fulfill his masculine role of satisfying his wife. Whereas, Martha has become more outspoken in terms of expressing her desires as males have traditionally done.

Although he never gets angry with Martha, George's rage is indicative of his vulnerability and weakness. He feels humiliated as he cries:

GEORGE: You can sit there in the chair of yours . . . with the gin
 running out of your mouth, and you can humiliate me you
 can tear me apart... All NIGHT ... and that's perfectly
 alright . . . that's O.K. . . .

MARTHA: YOU CAN STAND IT.

GEORGE: I CANNOT STAND IT.

MARTHA: YOU CAN STAND IT! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!!

(A Silence)

GEORGE (Quietly): That is desperately sick lie.

MARTHA: DON'T YOU KNOW IT EVEN YET?

GEORGE (shaking his head): Oh . . . Martha. (170)

Despite Martha's outrageous activities, George cares for Martha and wants to bring her out of her performative world as he says: ". . . I don't mind your dirty under things in public . . . well I do mind, but I have reconciled myself to that . . . but you've moved bag and baggage in to your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your own distortions . . . (259). All this shows how Martha is trying to subvert gender identity through her performance of masculine gender attributes.

George is aware of the opposite roles he and Martha perform in the play. In this performative act, it is Martha who is dominant. George has lost his power, so he tries to seek some new means of fighting Martha. The following dialogue between the couple reveals this:

MARTHA: Well, I guess you didn't get the whole story. What's the matter with you, George? You given up?

GEORGE: No . . . no. it's just I've got to figure out some new way to fight you, Martha. Guerrilla tactics, may be . . . internal subversion . . . I don't know. Something. (139)

The performance of opposite gender roles has put Martha at advantage over her counterpart as it has helped her assert freedom and liberty. Here, George is presented as a meek man rather than a patriarchal masculine figure of a husband; he is not able to manipulate the situation to dominate in the house. It is Martha who rules in the house. Martha, the harsh and aggressive housewife seems to lack emotionality and sentimental behavior.

Apparently, Martha and George mimic masculinity and femininity respectively. The play conveys the idea that there is no predetermined gender; instead, individuals are constantly creating their own genders through performing gender. As Butler suggests, "Gender comes into existence in the moment of its "performative constitution;" therefore, "gender is not something prior to its performative acts" (19). Therefore, Albee portrays Martha as a woman who has stepped outside her female sphere prescribed by socio-cultural norms and values. The writer describes Martha who creates and performs her own gender. She utilizes the performances to protest and depict her dissatisfactions, and challenges the socially prescribed gender roles. Every time she reverses established values though she is living in a

society where there is a tendency towards stereotyping women, and she is unconsciously under the influence of the socially and culturally accepted norms. She is influenced by the powerful figure of her father as she always refers to her father in every instance such as "Well, Daddy knows how to run things" (28). She is consequently forced to seek identity through her father and to achieve her deferred dreams through her husband's career.

Martha's father appears to be a figure of obsession for her in the play. It seems as if Martha has idealized her father and he has a great influence over her life. She refers to her father several times in the play. She draws on what her father thinks, believes and says. She always boasts that her father is the president of the department, and she tries to seek her identity through her father. Influenced by her father's interest in boxing, Martha has beaten George as she mentions to Nick, ". . . and George wheeled around real quick, and he caught it right in the jaw . . . Pow ! (Nick laughs)" (61). Martha's self identity is in part formed through her submission to her father, and later on, her submission to the male dominated society. Her formation as a subject is related to her realization of the role of her father in her life. As the male figure of her father has dominated and influenced her life to a great extent, Martha performs masculinity to become influential in relation to her male counterparts.

George is a man who has failed to play the typical masculine role of being financially and professionally a successful supporter of the family. This can be figured out through Martha's frequent, humiliating and rude references to George's failures in different respects: "I hope that was an empty bottle, George. You don't want to waste good liquor . . . not on your salary. Not on an Associate Professor's salary" (93). She also freely laughs at George's attempt to publish a book, which was a failure:

MARTHA. Well, Georgie-boy had lots of big ambitions.

In spite of something funny in his past . . . Which Georgie-boy here turned into a novel. But Daddy took a look at Georgie's novel.

GEORGE. Stop it, Martha!

MARTHA. And Daddy said . . . Look here; I will not let you publish such a thing . . . (149-150)

Martha always expresses her anger towards George and the disappointment he has caused to her and her father. Her father has been an important figure of authority, whose presence and power has always influenced Martha's life and her relationship with George has shaped her relationship with him as well because Martha's father obviously embodies the spirit of patriarchy. He indirectly manipulates Martha and her life as he has motivated her into abiding by his decisions and demands absolute conformity. This is what Martha tries to emulate from her father.

Martha and George show their reality; that is their real identity, even if they consciously involve themselves in a game of mimicking gender. They give the impression that they are pretending the identity, which does not belong to them. This shows that they are performing the opposite gender roles. In fact, Albee's intention to do so is to question the traditional gender identity. Their pretending act thus questions or challenges the patriarchal social order. Although their act might seem unusual to the audience's framed mentality as the audience was constantly and unconsciously affected by what the society and culture dictates to them as the appropriate behavior to expect from a man and a woman. As Martha finds no way other than defining herself through men – daddy, husband, and son in the patriarchal set up, she imitates their male chauvinist attitude to counter patriarchy. Having failed to have a son or

husband who can run a department at college, she finds herself desperately sad and unsuccessful. When George tries to physically challenge Martha to rip her to pieces, Martha retorts: "You aren't man enough . . . you haven't got the guts" (175). She makes fun of George and blames him for his inability to succeed and get a promotion at work, and attaches herself to an imaginary son who is beautiful and strong. As Martha has experienced the subordinate roles of females in society, she finds discrimination between males and females, which motivates Martha to perform masculine gender for freedom and equality.

When George provokes Martha toward the end of act two however, Martha flirts unashamedly with Nick, and dances closely with him. Martha deliberately flirts with Nick to hurt and provoke George. George observes her performative acts and responds to her provocation with contempt:

MARTHA: Never mind that I said I was necking with one of the
guests.

GEORGE: Good . . . good. (188)

George's coolness irritates her. However, when Nick tries to pass a remark that George has no self respect she instantly counters him by saying: "you don't hunh? You don't think so . . ." (172). Nick's assertion that he is better than most of them does not stop Martha from stating that he is like anybody else and there is nothing special about him.

George and Martha are not the only characters of the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* who seem to take on subversive performances. Honey seems to be the nice sweet housewife of the play. In the beginning, she behaves in a normal manner. However, as the play moves on, she gets drunk, begins to protest, and declares her dissatisfaction. Thus, Honey and Nick, just like the other couple, are suffering from

difficulties in their relationship and their interaction with the world outside. In spite of what appears at the surface, Honey faces a lot of problems regarding the decision to become a parent, and finds herself in conflict with her role as a woman, wife and a mother. She appears to be a typical woman—a submissive one yearning for a child though she earlier refused to have one as she says "I want a child. I want a baby" (236). However, when she gets drunk she stops performing the socially prescribed gender role. In the same way, Nick looks like a man who does not behave in a masculine way in spite of being an athlete who has also a well-formed body. Martha tells him, "you sure are a flop" (199). Contrary to what Nick appears to be, it is shown that he is not so much of a masculine figure. He is a failure in his male role as Martha remarks, "I wasn't talking about your potential; I was talking about your goddamn performance" (199). Here, Nick's 'performance' connotes multiple meanings. Nick is a failure in his profession as well as in sexual matters as he suffers from impotency. So, she humiliates him and questions his strength as a man, calls him a "houseboy", saying, "You can be houseboy around here for awhile" (205). Here, she likens him as having feminine qualities. The two major male characters George and Nick tend to perform feminine role as they lack male attributes. So, their act defies traditional stereotyping of gender roles.

Thus, their gender is a mix. There are culturally assigned roles for them, but they resist them in some way or another; Martha by being harsh and vulgar, Honey by getting drunk, George by refusing to act like the controlling authoritative man. He even ignores it when he realizes that his wife is openly flirting with Nick. He goes outside the house, instead of intruding upon them, and tries to end their game in a way that puts him in the upper hand position. These examples from the play confirm Butler's view that gender is not a reality, and what constitute our gender are

discourses and norms we follow or reject. Butler writes, “Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today [It] is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted,” and what shapes resistance, subversion and displacement is the same “subjectivating norms” whose repetition represent performativity (17). According Butler, gender identity is matter of performance and repetition. In that sense, it is constructed identity, which we can reject or follow.

As a result, the characters of the play have dynamic genders. Albee does not draw a line between man and woman, and between what is considered masculine and feminine. The playwright Albee brings into light the problems of men and women of this play, who protest against the socially constructed gender roles attributed to their bodies. They are involved in an unconscious and at times conscious attempt to take control of their bodies so as to redefine their gender identities.

In order to explain the characters’ way of gender performance and to figure out why they either are obliged to act the way they do, it is necessary to take note of Butler who believes that “subversion must occur within existing discursive structures” (59). Gender is a particular type of process, it is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (qtd in Salih 63). Therefore, the subject is not free to choose which gender to enact since the script is already determined within that regulatory frame within which the subject makes a choice of gender style (Salih 63). This is to say that the gender roles the characters perform in the play are taken from the definitive norms of their society regarding family, parenthood, occupation, femininity, and masculinity. In other words, even if Martha’s aggressiveness, for instance, can be taken as a subversive strategy, her choice of how to present this subversion has been made within the norms that already existed in the discourse regarding masculinity,

femininity, and power. That is, Martha performs her opposite roles in accordance with the gender norms prevalent in the society. She idolizes her father as a role model of masculine figure as she imitates his behavior.

Martha is so obsessed with the male figure that she fantasizes about her imaginary son, not daughter. While Martha insists on affirming the imaginary son, George vehemently denies it.

GEORGE: Martha . . . I can hardly bring myself to say it . . . (sighing heavily) Well, Martha . . . I'm afraid our boy isn't coming home for his birthday.

MARTHA: Of course, he is.

GEORGE: No, Martha.

MARTHA: Of course, he is. I say he is!

GEORGE: Martha . . . (Long pause) . . . our son is . . . dead. (245)

George's sterility makes Martha to take on masculine attributes. This is how George's sterility directly affects her life, motivating her to act like males. Martha indirectly refers to his sterility in this way: ". . . that maybe George boy didn't have the stuff . . . that he didn't have it in him!" (92). This line reflects George's sterility. So, George's failure in his career as well as procreation makes Martha's life meaningless. As a result, she resorts to bouts of drink, which is one of the recurring symbols in the play.

As a general practice, patriarchal society demands that women have to be submissive. But Martha tries to create her identity through repetition of masculine behaviour. She tries to resist the current discourses of her society in some way or other. Nevertheless, her subversion takes place within the existing patriarchal discursive structure. She tries to imitate male behavior befitting male attributes in patriarchal society. Thus, the identity she creates is based upon men such as her

authoritative father. As Salih notes, “Butler insists that the law is generative and plural, and that subversion, parody and drag occur within a law that provides opportunities for the ‘staging’ of the subversive identities that it simultaneously suppresses and produces” (60). Butler describes drag as a strategy of subversion and agency. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler suggests that drag “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (174) and writes, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (174). This proves that the category of gender is a constructed one and is always remains under contestation.

By repeating and reiterating opposite roles, especially the female characters question a set of norms under gender normativity. These are the norms imposed by the power structures and discourses of the society. They seem to have been perennially engaged in creating different identity. From their point of view, their acts seem appropriate and natural. But under existing patriarchal socio-cultural reality, they are placed outside culture and considered anti-establishment. So, the female characters especially Martha and takes on a subversive gender performance as she resists the discourses and institutional powers of traditional patriarchal society.

Conclusion: Deconstructing Stereotyping Gender

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf reflects how the traditional gender identity has been deconstructed as the characters George, Martha, Nick, and Honey assume opposite gender roles unlike the traditional in the play. From the very beginning of the play, Martha acts as a dominant character as she humiliates and insults George who is submissive. She is loud, vulgar, shrewd, intelligent, assertive, sexual and outspoken, which is exactly contrary to the traditional notion of femininity. And in many ways, Martha's bold acts seem to be anti-establishment of the traditional patriarchal society. She rebukes George giving him orders to do things. She treats her husband as if she is the male figure in the house. She continually shouts at George for not doing anything substantial. His sterility makes her feign her own sterility. This makes her even bolder and harsher. So she asserts that she is compelled to wear the pants to compensate for George's failure in life. George serves her submissively catering to her every whim like a conventional housewife. To appear like males, Martha organizes parties at home and drinks freely. Drink is one of the reigning symbols, which is associated with male attributes in patriarchal society. Martha's unsympathetic, harsh and aggressive nature lacks emotional and sentimental nature required of women's traditional identity. This is her deliberate attempt to assume masculinity, which she does through performance.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the characters are not virtually portrayed as man or woman. Rather, they play the role of man and woman. Martha smokes and shouts a lot and flirts with Nick in front of her husband lacks sensitivity and craves for a son who could bring meaning and happiness to her life. She lacks emotions such as love and appreciation, something which she not only refrains from admitting directly, but also insists on portraying the contrary.

Martha's performance of masculinity is substantiated by her obsession with the powerful and influential male figure that she idolizes her father and often brings his reference in the house. Moreover, her fantasizing of imaginary son substantiates her longing for masculine power. Therefore, Martha always tries to be like her father as she frequently talks about her father. All her acts reveal that Martha performs and repeats masculinity to have masculine identity as theorized by Butler in gender studies because she views that gender identity is recognized and established in society through performance and repetition of patriarchal culture.

Martha's deliberate deviation creates conflict between the Martha and George at home. And she does it knowingly in order to appear like male, she develops intimate relationship with Nick. This endeavour of Martha questions the conventional rule of patriarchal values. Additionally, each of the four characters in the play assumes reversed gender roles and as a result, he or she loses traditional sense of gender identity. They perform and repeat opposite gender identity for their empowerment and liberation. So, the acts of George and Martha question the traditional gender stereotype challenging the stifling traditional gender roles and proves her virago nature.

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