

Women in isolation in the play's marriage to Edward Albee Marriage Play (1987)

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Edward Albee's career extends to more than fifty years during which he has exposed different images of male and female protagonists mostly within the same frame; domestic instability. Albee's men and women are middle-class couples who find themselves entrapped in a meaningless world. Most, if not all, of Albee's men are detached from their wives due to existential problems or middle-age crises. Women, therefore find themselves obliged to sustain their husbands and marriages alone. Women in Albee's élan are cynical, frustrated, articulate as well as brave, strong and domineering.

Marriage Play is one of Albee's works that tackled such image of these women. The play was commissioned by the Vienna English Theater on March 17, 1987. The play was an example to a familiar Albee territory: husband and wife in a living room talking about their failed marriage. **Marriage Play** tackles a domestic instability that extends to "some duration and persistence between two heretofore quick and rational people", Jack and Gillian¹.

Man and wife gather in a bitter-sweet relation that has been swinging back and forth between love and hatred, calmness and violence. Their hostility ranges from verbal assaults to a savage physical fight. Dana Rufolo-Horhager describes their marriage as being "a wedding in the sense of welding; the male and female are two halves of a perpetual motion machine which is propelled by a perfect balance between hostility and need."²

Despite the fact that Albee succeeds in manipulating the audience's points of view about these two halves, the play's greater sympathy is established for the wife, Gillian.³ The playwright exposes the hidden and terrifying secrets of a wife who lives a twisted marital relation within a failed marriage. Gillian is aware that her marriage is unstable, yet she believes that even "a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all."⁴ The play, therefore, is not a dramatic meditation on the reasons behind the failure of a marital relation; it is rather a dramatization of the question: why does any unsuccessful marriage continue?

Jack and Gillian have been married for about thirty years, and their marriage “has survived infidelity, familiarity and boredom.”⁵ They are entrapped in the monotony of this continuity. Their marital life is repeated day after day with all tiny details. Their endless doings and re-doings or telling and re-telling convey “both the tedium and absurdity of life as it is lived.”⁷ These actions are seemingly central to their domestic life. In spite of that, they keep going on “for the sake of going on” (p. 306) as Jack says. Actually, Jack is fed up with the tedious rhythm of his life with Gillian. He decides to find the change out of his marriage, as he thinks, in the endless extramarital relations. He is a womanizer who believes that having short and quick sexual relations might bring him back some of the lost vigorousness and vitality that he misses with Gillian.

Jack tends to lead an opposite life to that he experiences inside his marriage, hence he indulges himself in the instinctive pleasures. He is looking “to live by instinct ... animal instinct” (p. 301). By doing so, he thinks that he would be able to fill in the emptiness and meaninglessness of his marriage. Each time he has a new dalliance means that he has a new experience with a new woman, and that means he tries in vain to add some newness to his monotonous life. Jack has turned his back to the lack of communication that labels his life with Gillian. He tends to find this communication through the physical contact with whomever as a substitution for the void that he feels in his marriage. Jack has proved his disbelief in the idea of monogamy that is why he has found another life outside the borders of his boring marriage. Hence it is Gillian's hard task to maintain the household despite its hollowness and meaninglessness.

Gillian is one of Albee's typical females. She is a middle-aged housewife, articulate, witty and self-aware. She understands that her tedious marital life is a minimized version of life itself as it is lived, and that the monotonous rhythm of yesterday is that of today and definitely will be of tomorrow. Her marriage is facing the enemy of life; that is the habit or as C. W. E. Bigsby calls “the dull unquestioning acceptance of process.”⁸ Gillian is fully aware of the irony of existence. She asks Jack “Do you still care? Does cause and effect still interest you?” (p. 301). According to her there is no chain of causality as the “habit has become the substitute for being”⁹ which they experience in their marriage.

Though these existential facts seem to be well-known to the two spouses, Gillian has a different view. Gillian believes that to endure the pain of being alive she must stick to the need

of being conscious. Gillian is the mouth-piece of Albee as she feels the necessity of the consciousness of being alive. She is aware of the absurdity of being alive “to stare in the darkness” (p. 303), otherwise she would live “the unexamined life which is, indeed, not worth living; it is not living at all.”¹⁰ Gillian, thus, is after maintaining the form of her marriage which resembles “the world of latent consciousness.”¹¹ It is a world that has reality and significance against the huge void out of it. Gillian, therefore, yearns to keep the form of her marriage, to do what they have been doing despite the hopelessness of their situation, and to continue continuing. She seizes the chance when Jack mentions their garden:

Jack : It's time for the garden; it would be time for the garden.

Gillian: Yes! Go dig the garden; put the garden in. (Jack shakes his head) Yes! Put it in

Jack : (Hapless) Don't you know what hopeless Means?(Silence. Rage) WHY WOULD I PUT A FUCKING GARDEN!!!!???

Gillian: (Gentle; quiet) You put in a garden every year; you always have; it's hopeless every year- everything: the garden, going on, everything. You put in a garden; you do it every year. It is.. what you do... Just.. scatter some seeds.. (Gently) something will come up. (p.305)

According to Gillian it is important to preserve the form of the garden and marriage as well, otherwise everything would fall apart. Marriage and the garden resemble a sort of a contact, between husband and wife, between the land and the one who scatters the seeds. Gillian yearns to any kind of communication, whether by love or hatred, because this communication means that she is still alive. It resembles her shelter from being alone in the cosmic dark and void. Gillian believes that the individual's being is determined by the relations he / she has with those around him / her, otherwise he /she is a mere hollow creature. Norma Jenckes comments on this account by saying that “The terrifying undercurrent of Albee's Marriage Play is the sense that while being human entails more than 'being', it is relationships that create our existence, and the quality of those relationships defines the quality of that existence.”¹²

Gillian, hence, thinks that her existence as a woman, and eventually as a wife, is determined by her relation to Jack. She keeps in her mind that she chooses to be with Jack for this relation

gives a meaning to her existence. Her marriage, despite all the frustrations and disappointments, constructs her being. After all any human being without relationships would be a mere scarecrow in the wilderness. It is worth mentioning here that Gillian's conception about the idea of her existence does not mean that she has a dependant identity. She admits that her marriage has made her an individual. She sees that "marriage does not make two people two" (p. 304). Gillian and Jack are two separate entities for they "have not become each other"; they've become themselves (p. 304). Both husband and wife have their own ways of life and their own ways of thinking. They do not meet but in their marriage under the shelter of their frustrated relation. Her marriage gives her the chance to choose. she has chosen to lead this tedious life rather than to have a blank terrifying life, "When two people choose to be together though they're strong enough to be alone, then you have a good marriage... We've not compensate, we've complemented [each other]" (p. 304).

Gillian believes that her marriage is the force that keeps her aware and conscious. Her relation with Jack provides her with the "consciousness of pain."¹³ The frustrated and mal relation that she experiences with her husband gives her the sense of being alive, to be alert better than to be numb. Her relation with Jack is not of a perfect standard. It has had its ups and downs which enrich her feeling of irritation. Gillian's suffering within this failed marriage "open the window on the real world"¹⁴ to make her feel alive. In an interview with David Richards, Albee asserted that "all my plays are about people missing the boat, or about to, my task is to rock the boat, to make them learn how to strive to live their lives to the fullest."¹⁵

According to Gillian this marriage represents to her the shelter from being swallowed up by the huge mouth of nothingness. She fears loneliness and desolation after separation, "from living alone without the company of another soul."¹⁶ In fact, Gillian's fears of solitude do not mean that she has not got these feelings while living with Jack. She feels and senses the absence of her husband's soul and body the moment he has started his dalliances. Jack has left a pretty big vacuum and void in her sexual and emotional life. When Jack comes home to announce that he intends to leave her, Gillian says "if we are to be left it should be by someone we shall miss, someone whose leaving will produce a vacancy not only in our bed but in our heart ... I missed you for years" (p. 285).

Gillian has an interesting interpretation of what she is experiencing with Jack. The sterility of

their marriage is due to her solid belief that what they are going through is "the satisfying passion of nothingness" (p.302) Gillian sees that all spouses are gathered in a way or another to a kind of emotions. There must be a kind of passion or feeling that governs partners so that it would lead to a kind of communication. She says:

Passion in marriage never dies, it changes. When the passion of passion wanes there are all the others waiting to rush in—the passion of loss, of hatred, the passion of indifference; the ultimate, the finally satisfying passion of nothing. (p. 302)

Gillian sees that all these kinds of passion should lead to a mutual communication, otherwise they are useless. They should be manifested into a lively contact even if it may appear through a physical fight. Eventually there must be a contact. On the contrary to all her yearnings and beliefs, Gillian is experiencing sterility in feelings and an almost total lack of communication. This lack of contact is manifested in the scarcity of physical and emotional communication that she witnesses. Due to the lack of a lively contact with Jack, Gillian decides to live in the past. She resorts to her memories of courtship with her husband. In an attempt to find a refuge from the chilliness of her meaningless life, Gillian resorts to a home-made book in which she has noted each time she has made love with her husband. She names it 'The Book of Days'. She believes that the truly counted days of her life are those which she has had a real contact with Jack. For nearly thirty years Gillian has been writing a journal that contains amusing details about her and Jack's making love:

Every time we have made love I have notated it here, I have commented on it-duration, position, time of day, necessity, degree of enjoyability; snatches of conversation, the weather. (p.264)

When the curtains rise Gillian appears on the stage, curled in her chair, as if looking for a physical warmth. She is reciting and giggling about some selected intimate passages of her book, "The Book of Days". The stage direction reads that she looks "fairly friendly" (p. 252) for she is recalling some of the pleasures of the happy past days with her husband. By doing so Gillian is trying to "find meaning for the present from the intimacies of the past".¹⁷ She is clinging to the times of communication and physical attachment so as to substitute the spiritual and emotional

void of her marriage. 'The Book of Days' is her way to keep herself conscious; she says:" The Book of Days. That is what I call it. I keep it by my chair, I write in it, I read from it: it amuses me sometimes. It's reasonable, and interesting- a record of our touchings." (p. 255)

Gillian is not after sex for the sake of sex. She is yearning for affectionate contact and passionate attachment with her husband. She wishes to re-experience the same feelings of their old days when they were honeymooners. Those days resemble the opposite experience to what she is undergoing now in her emotionally and physically sterile life. The stage direction reads that Gillian recalls her honeymoon cruise "reluctantly"(p. 270) for it reminds her of how it has been a pleasant time that she does really miss now. Sexuality resembles "the gauge of vitality"²¹ in her marriage, hence, she recalls these days pleasantly:

What I remember most is everyone knew we were honeymooners...
Everyone would look at us... I knew we gazed into each other's eyes a
lot, heads slightly tilted... we would hold hands... we hold hands a lot
then-and they would look at us, at our twined fingers. (p. 270)

Gillian, while reading from 'The Book of Days', recalls how much she loves Jack, how distinctive he has been to her. The newly married couple succeeded in establishing a mutual physical and emotional understanding; Jack has been the man of Gillian's dreams; Gillian reads:

Gillian: I am selfish by nature, I think, or self-aware, certainly, to a
degree not entertained by many.

Jack: I can follow

Gillian: ..But he has taken me to a level of it-(To him, not reading)of the
self-awareness I was talking about before... to a level of it I
have been unprepared for... It is that I have come into contact
with some essence? (p.272)

Gillian has retaliated Jack's dalliances. She has had an extramarital relation. She has thought by doing so she might bring back some of the lost affection that she misses in her cold marital life. While Jack pursued the sexual pleasures in his countless dalliances, Gillian has thought she is looking for Jack himself in the figure of her romantic date. The atmosphere that Gillian describes about this date is that of a woman who is after romance.

Jack and Gillian visited Venice twice, but Gillian insists that there has been a third time. This

time has not been with Jack, hence, he fails to remember a third journey to Venice with Gillian

Gillian: It was April- before the tourists and the stink-clear: a little windy, but clear.

Jack : I don't remember.

Gillian: I arrived before you: I don't know where you'd been. Somewhere; it was one of those times we joined up.

Jack : Twice. That's all.

Gillian: Yes! I heard you in the downstairs hall, the desk; I heard you on the stairs and into the room. I pretended to be asleep; I heard you put your bag.. I opened my eyes to your advancing form, and ..no it wasn't you, was it?

Jack : No, it wasn't.

Gillian: (Pause) I'm sorry. I could have sworn. (p. 297-98)

The subtle details above given by Gillian convey two main things: first, the way that Gillian describes her romantic date refers to her wish that Jack may remember with her the old times that they have had once. Hoping that she might succeed in stirring his passion again to what they are missing now; the days of physical and emotional contact. Second, she is telling the story in suspense, which shows her eagerness to the tiny details of romance. Subsequently, Gillian fails to enjoy cheating Jack. She is after the affection of her husband “Clearly I remembered it as you? Wanted it to be? Wished it were?” (p. 297).

In an interview Albee talked about the lack of real feelings that is intensified by the waning of a genuine communication. He asserted that “sometimes I wonder why we all go through our lives without touching one another very much.”²² By the word touching Albee means the physical and the emotional contact as well. According to Albee, establishing any kind of contact is a fundamental cornerstone to feel that people are truly alive. They can defy their sense of the monotony, meaninglessness and the pain of existence by looking for a way “to survive, to live their lives to the fullest before it is too late.”²³ It is true that this striving is useless, but it is better than they would “skid through their lives [or worse] sleep through them sometimes.”²⁴ The most terrifying idea to Gillian is to “sleep through” her journey in life, or to be hypnotized by the

tediousness of life itself. Gillian, therefore, fears loneliness after separation and simultaneously she denies the isolation that Jack practices upon her by the monotonous rhythm he is leading their lives with.

Being entangled between fear and denial, Gillian feels obliged to find away to keep them both alert. Feeling that she fails to stir up Jack's affection, she decides to use another card: the passions of indifference and hatred. Gillian resorts to womanish tricks, the diversion in conversation, the pretence of carelessness and the vexation and irritation which may lead to Jack's anger. She believes that these wits may succeed in establishing any kind of communication even if it appears in the shape of a furious physical combat. And she succeeds, Jack has fallen in the trap.

When Jack comes home early to announce "I'm leaving you" (p. 252) because he, suddenly, finds out that his "life is about to change profoundly" (p.255), Gillian reacts indifferently to his frustrated account. She launches her plan and she starts to seek for diversion. Due to her well acknowledgement of Jack, the first thing comes to her mind is that he is having "a dalliance, another dalliance?" She asks him "Are you dallying ... with someone? Are you having yet another one of your dalliances?" (p. 253). Linda Ben-Zvi says that, the "repetition of the word "dalliance" renders its humor, making the act it signifies seem absurd, and shifts the register from content to form."²⁵

Most conversations that Gillian and Jack lead seem repeated. The lines seem to have been said previously, and gestures seem to have been made periodically with some slightly changed words. When Jack exits to come back again and re-deliver his announcement, Gillian says to herself but meaning Jack "you have done everything at least once too often" (p. 260). Repetition has become "the curse and the salvation of their marriage."²⁹ It is a curse for it is drained of its meaning, it is as well a kind of a mal "parody of communication."³⁰ Language, and silence as well, have become the substitution of their experience and finally of their being, which, by itself is a salvation for they have no other choice. Hence, to repeat doing their conversation is Gillian's way to whatever salvation she may grasp in order to make her marital life bearable, that is why, Gillian recurses to some game play that may vex Jack to make an action. "What a wangled web we weave" (p. 293). She grips so hard to "practice deception",³¹ so that her marriage would gain some life. Toby Zinman notices that the play is not called 'The Marriage Play'; the shifted article

“The” suggests that the word 'play' refers to the script of the drama and to the game-play device that Gillian resorts to in handling Jack's detachment. She believes that these games are “fundamental to her marriage, and to their communication.”³²

Jack and Gillian's life is cleverly described by Gillian's sour sentence “perhaps we should put in a revolving door” (p. 260) which provokes Jack to hit her. Due to their experience of a meaningless marital life and the long-termed tedious rhythm of their daily quibbling. It is uneasy now to re-establish a vigorous conversation between them. Gillian handles Jack's emotionless announcement with “placid smiles and lightly clapped hands”³³ for she has no other way to contact with Jack that may reduce the distance between them. She is after annoying him hoping he may react, though angrily.

Due to Gillian's indifference and cold reactions to Jack's announcement, she manages to make him exit and come back again for four times. He thinks that by repeating his declaration more than one time Gillian would pay a proper attention to him. Gillian succeeds in setting Jack up in her trap; she manages to vex him. Alvin Klein comments on this account by saying that:

Gillian manages to smash Jack's crown–male-dominance by making him go out and come in for about three or four times so that to deliver his announcement " I'm leaving you", and each time her reaction is ranging from "what do you mean?" to " I knew it". Ultimately, he is paralyzed in her thrall .³⁴

Throughout these long years, Gillian has developed her skills to be able to absorb Jack's anger and to react upon his fury with cold blood. She has figured out when to use verbal assaults and when to stop, how to repeat questions and how to answer with diversion. She always has a plan to deal with Jack's tedious actions. Gillian is seeking for meaning and continuity within the declining world of her marriage. The problem is that Jack always keeps her at distance. She, hence, must be always holding the tightropes of continuity due to which she suffers the feelings of boredom, loneliness and physical abuse.

Despite the fact that Gillian knows how to deal with Jack's monotonous behaviors, she has paid for it; she has received various kinds of verbal and physical abuses. Jack calls his wife a “wanton bitch” (p. 271) and a “withered woman” (p. 285). He underestimates her intellectuality for composing her book “The Book of Days”:

Jack: (Smiles, almost laughs, mimics) "It is a book I am writing "You're writing a book !

Gillian: Well don't make it sound like it's something beyond me. " You're writing a book !?"You , barely brighter than a gazelle, or frying pan, you write a book?! (p. 263)

Gillian has exposed herself to the danger of being insulted and sometimes beaten and seriously injured. For about nine times Jack has announced that he is leaving, but the most solid and impressive attempt is his intention to take a small bag to put some of his clothes in when Gillian blocks his way shouting "I'll block you . . . you will not leave me" (p. 282). In order to make her point clear she starts with him a real wrestling scene. Despite all the scenes of anger of Albee's many married couples, this is the only real marital fight scene in all of his plays.³⁵ The stage directions indicate that the scene is to be vivid, violent and long:

A serious physical fight, during which Gillian slaps Jack hard, he slaps her hard and pushes her out of the way, she grabs him from behind, they struggle, then fall on the floor, they roll over on top of one another, Jack rises, Gillian grabs him by the leg, dragging him down a gain.. (p.282)

So forth and on, a perfect scene of jabbing and slapping that comes as an expected extension for their shouting, verbal abuses and Jack's several attempts to hit Gillian due to her icy responses. Gillian has been looking for any kind of attachment and now she grasps it tightly. They come across each other again though by hatred and violence. It is one of Albee's rules which is the necessity of violence of establishing an effective mutual contact. According to Albee "what is important is that one must communicate whether by love or hurt."³⁶ Gillian has been after this communication to be alert, despite its humiliation and physical hurt. The stage direction indicates "can there be blood from her nose, say?" (p. 282). Eida Edemariam says that, "The impact of the play springs from the recognition that this wife-any wife-can live day by day more in terror of being left than in dread of being hit."³⁷

Gillian is aware that life carries its meaningless significance and that she should go on living for the sake of going on. Life continues until it ends; we are, after all, "born astride the grave",³⁸ but it is man's nature to keep doing what he has done until he can no longer do it. Albee has great

zest for living life to the absolute fullest degree. Gillian can be identified with Albee's standard in life. She experiences the cruelty of life as a means to keep her alert and aware of her situation. Albee says, "The journey through consciousness should be participated in as fully as possibly by the individual, no matter how dangerous or cruel or terror-filled that experience may be."³⁹ Gillian, therefore, believes that she should accept the absurdities of her marriage, symbolizing life itself, as they are, not only accept its failures but also hails them as being a means to re-establish communication and mutual contact. She, thus, strives to maintain the form of her marriage with its frustration. She instinctively bears a hope for a better day to come. In his interview with Emily Mann, Albee asserted that "one must have dreams, even though falsity, in order to survive ... It's okay to have false illusion as long as you know they are false."⁴⁰

The play ends as it starts. Jack announces to Gillian that "I'm leaving you" (p. 306) without any indication that he is actually doing so. Life continues willy-nilly. The familiarity of their life continues and they are left as they are "two kids in the dark"⁴¹ unknowing what may happen to them save that they will do another futile exercise on the next day. Repetition will always be "the torment and the comfort"⁴² of their marital life.

Gillian is entangled between two choices, either to lead this hilarious life that is filled with terror and violence or, worse, to be sentenced to a lifetime of solitude. The sweetest of which seems the bitterest. After all, her marriage has given her the will to choose, and she has chosen to be alert better than numb.

Albee is more objective about women's vivaciousness as he explores the reasons behind their malicious personality. They are a mixture of extremes but at the same time know their goals and eventually reach them no matter how hard and thorny the road is.