

Absurdity of American Family: A Study

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Abstract

Albee repeatedly examines the absurdity of American family which is the biggest pipe dream of all. Albee showcases that civilization's unwillingness to face the reality has affected the relationship in a family which is just a microcosmic representation of macrocosmic crumbling civilization. Albee is a champion of human relationships, since the time of his very first production *The Zoo Story*, Albee has been portraying the relationship of man with his fellow man and continues doing so in his later plays. He examines husband-wife relationship in his first Broadway production *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, parents-child as well as family-friend bonds in *A Delicate Balance*, futility of love and marriage in *Finding the Sun*, troubled relationships in *Counting the Ways*, the problems and solutions of marriage in *Marriage Play* and a homosexual or bestial sexual affair which disturbs the placid family in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* Albee's presentation of these various types of relationships and ties gives us the idea that how American civilization's craving for a better social and familial atmosphere and inability to cope-up with what they have leads them to an uncomfortable life and affects their relationship with their co-dwellers.

Introduction

Henry Hewes rightly points out the reasons of this absurd condition: "The women want to castrate the men, the men want to return to the cozy comfort of the womb, and the whole society is preoccupied with money, status, convenience and conformity" (quoted in Rutenberg 76). So, Albee in his plays tries to expose the hollowness lying beneath the concept of American Dream i.e., the idea of happy American family and contented society. But all these ideas are just 'Life-Lies', not realities, which are created by the mass-media of communication; as the fact is completely contrary to it, family – an institution which provides love, care and support – has lost its meaning.

Albee diagnoses this entire upheaval in familial ties and draws our attention to various reasons for the chaos. The major reason being, lack of interaction or incapability to share one's fears and limitations with others. The characters appear in a group in which they are enjoying, but are unable to communicate with one-another. Their inability to reveal their true nature frustrates them, and ultimately this incapability to communicate becomes a reason of disharmony in their relationships. This lack of communication leads to a distance, due to this the characters are unable to support the other characters in the hour of need. Another reason is their discontentment with whatever they have in their lives and a rat-race to fulfill their expectations. Thus, the denial of the role of family, as says Hansberry, is because of "his ambitions, his frustrations and his decisions . . . which decisively drive the play on" (quoted in Bigsby, *Drama* 317). This denial never let man be at ease with his family members. The next reason is

selfish behavior of man. They become self-centered and start ignoring others who belong to them. The last reason and an important one is, their unwillingness to face the reality of their crumbling relations, and because of this escapism they are unable to give vent to their secrets and thus cannot unveil their truth. This is the *raison d'être* of their frustration as it makes them strangers with their own relatives. This strangeness with the family makes a person alien and solitary being, and this is why the person stops looking at the other family members for any help or support; which ultimately destroys the relationship of a person with family. Thus, there are so many reasons which make the relationships hollow, so “Albee has decided to begin his expose of the American scene at its roots: the family unit. And according to Albee it is breaking down, in need of immediate repair” (Rutenberg 63).

Albee examines the two wheels (man and woman) who are essential for running the automobile named “family” or “marriage”. These two wheels are not working properly in the most of Albee’s plays, and this is why there is one after another accident (emotional accident) in Albee’s families. If we talk about the role of man and woman in a household then the title of “home-maker” (instead of “House-wife”) is given to woman in every family in America. So, woman plays the most important role in making house a home – a place for harmonious dwelling. Lillian Hellman’s comments are rooted in gender difference but the comment makes woman understand her responsibilities as a home-maker:

I think women almost have to be more . . . interested in a personal life than men have to be . . . I think women, no matter how liberated they are, feel more pressed to look for a personal life, whether it’s a husband or a lover or a house or children or whatever it is, than men feel pressed to. (quoted in Bigsby, *Critical Essays* 317-18)

Albee’s families are crumbling because women in his plays are not playing their roles of “home-makers” properly; either they are too dominating, lacking motherly love like Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Mommy in *The American Dream* and Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith* or they are too submissive and are unable to do anything because they are trapped in their own dreams and lies, such as Honey in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Abigail in *Finding the Sun* and Jo in *The Lady from Dubuque*.

Albee’s characterization is replete with psychological touch. Thus, the exploration of male and female characters of Albee is also helpful in understanding the wide and vast range of human psyche. Sigmund Freud in his paper “Some Character-types met within Psychoanalytic Work” points out:

When the physician is carrying out psycho-analytic treatment of a neurotic, his interest is by no means primarily directed to the patient’s character. He is far more desirous to know what the symptoms signify, what instinctual impulses lurk behind them and are satisfied by them and by what transitions the mysterious path has led from those impulses to these symptoms. (84)

Thus, the traits of characters play a vital role in unveiling the hidden psychic traits of human beings and in finding a remedy of the affects of these psychic imbalances.

The most important exploration in this regard is done by separating Albee’s characters in two categories – male and female. Albee’s critics mostly focus on the tension between male and female and the defeat of American male by the American female, or the defeat of Daddy characters by Mommy characters.

Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* both are bitchy, domineering, loud and sterile women. In the same way Mommies in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, and Wife in *All Over* are self-centered and dominating. All the above mentioned women treat their husbands and everyone around them as children, yet they are childish themselves. Also, the Daughter characters, such as Julia in *A Delicate Balance* and daughter in *All Over* are also sterile and domineering. Though they are old enough to be Mommy, but are unable to be. They are childlike, irresponsible and indecisive, often they are bitter and their bitterness debilitates them. They condemn the hypocrisy of their parents but offer nothing better. Thus, they, too, are unable to establish any lasting union with a male or their better-halves, "The daughter is never a mother; her childlessness symbolizes an emotional sterility, an inability to give. The generation of the daughter characters represents the future: they are without warmth and compassion or the ability to love" (Julier 35).

A number of mother figures, such as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and Mommy in *The American Dream* are also childless. These women characters are exposing the grimness of modern American civilization, for the daughters are symbolizing the future collapse and the mothers are symbolizing the present grimness i.e, the grimness prevalent in contemporary America. These characters compensate for their physical debility by creating a child in their illusions because they only want to attain pleasure by escaping the stark realities. So, they are following the pleasure principle as they are creating an ideal present without thinking about their doomed future.

Albee's way of naming the characters, such as Mommy, Wife, Daughter, Mistress, Girl etc. emphasizes Albee's interest in the type of characters he wants to portray. Names unveil the psychology of characters. The mommy characters, daughter characters, mistress characters all possess a different type of psychology to act and react. There is not any one type of woman characters because Albee focuses on the choices of life and the decisions they take in order to concentrate on the role they are playing as a woman. This imbalanced part of female is destroying the harmony of the family. Freud also remarked that mother provides the most important base for the growth of child and family, and when this figure is herself imbalanced then how can the foundation of her home be strong.

The "other significant" i.e., the male-counterpart is also unable to fulfill his duties and always tries to escape from his responsibilities of taking decisions and providing the mental comfort to the family members. The male characters of Albee mostly develop as a contrasting personality to female characters. The male characters – George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*, Sam in *The Lady from Dubuque*, Daddy in *The American Dream* and Boy in *The Play about the Baby* – have failed to live up to their wives' or beloved's expectations and their failure is the root cause of their better-halves' inability to face the reality. Most of Albee's male characters attack on human weaknesses and by doing this they demonstrate the general human psyche of presenting males more adaptable and stronger than woman, but they are not too strong to face the reality. Albee's characters are always lacking in one way or the other because:

The dramatist is always commenting on people, and the problem is to comment effectively and make art out of it. You're making a critical comment when you create the life of somebody. You can make propaganda out of it if you think somebody is entirely bad, entirely good. You must expose both attributes. A character totally unworthy of love would be totally unworthy of attention – the author's attention or the audience's. (Albee, *SMM* 35)

So, both the important parts of family are unable to perform their duties well, and this becomes the reason of frustrations and disturbance in family life. This irresponsibility in personal life further leads to an irresponsible society and gives birth to a dissatisfied individual, family and society. In order to explore the hollowness of familial ties, some of Albee's plays will be examined in this chapter which discuss the idea of crumbling family ties, such as *The American Dream* (1961), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *Counting the Ways* (1971), *Finding the Sun* (1983), *Marriage Play* (1987), *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002) and *Homelife* (2004).

The American Dream has been discussed in the previous chapter as well, and it has been seen that for Mommy and Daddy, relationship is a medium to fulfill their American Dream. The problem with which Albee is dealing here is the isolation that modern man faces despite the presence of his relatives. There is lack of conversation between husband and wife and even if they talk to each-other they don't pay attention. This is what Albee requires from his audience and through the mouth-piece of Mommy asks us to "pay attention" because interaction and communication is the base of a happy and satisfying relation. Mommy and Daddy are isolated because they are unable to get a smooth family life or have never attempted to attain a happy personal life, Grandma is left all alone because for her daughter and son-in-law she is nothing but a burden or a waste material because of whom their apartment is crowded, the adopted son is killed because he is unable to live up to their expectations, and the Young Man is a solitary person as, having no emotions, he is empty from inside.

The play exposes the inhumane treatment of the old people by their children. When we first meet Grandma, she enters carrying innumerable carefully tied boxes of various sizes. Mommy begins to order Daddy to plan something in order to get rid of the old woman (her own mother) and asks him to send her to an old age home. Grandma comes and reproaches her daughter for her egotism, her intrigues and plots. Grandma exposes her daughter's hollowness: ". . . it's Mommy over there makes all the trouble. If you'd listened to me, you wouldn't have married her in the first place. She was a tramp and a trollop and a trull to boot, and she's no better now" (*AD* 1507). Before this exposure Mommy herself has told us about the reason why she married Daddy. "We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we're very rich" (*AD* 1506). Thus, the very base of every relationship is selfish motif. A mother is respected and given some space in the house until she is fit and fine but as soon as she is old and of no use she becomes a burden; a husband is lovable only if he is rich; a child is lovable only if he is intelligent and good-looking. How can relationships work then? The relation of a daughter and mother is so futile that Mommy humiliates Grandma and wants to throw her out of her house as if she is an old car, broken furniture or a useless thing. She gives a baseless reason that the old people just make the place "crowded" and ". . . it's too crowded in this apartment" (*AD* 1508), she wants to throw her mother out of the house like a trash which is just crowding her place. Grandma knows the nature of Mommy that she is planning to throw Grandma out of this home, so she keeps hallucinating about the coming of old-age home's people to take her to the old age home: "The van people? Is it the van people? Have you finally done it? Have you called the van people to come and take me away?" (*AD* 1508). This proves that relationships are only a 'need' for man, as long as they need someone they are happy to have him/her but as that person seems useless they plan to get rid of that person because now he/she is just 'crowd' for them. The futility and ruthlessness of relations and familial ties are exposed by demonstrating that these ties are tied not with a bond of love but with the selfish thread of need and desire.

This problem is prevalent throughout the world. The old people are welcomed in the home only since they have money and authority, but when they turn weak and useless they are considered and treated like a trash bag. The exceeding numbers of old age homes all over the world are the evidences that useless and wealthless parents are not welcomed by their selfish children. This callousness of Mommy reminds us the unsympathetic and cold nature of Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* who do not love and need their father once they grab his wealth. Goneril declares that, "I'll not endure it" (120) and Regan throws him out of her place. Lear's pleas go unanswered: "I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad" (168) and his ungrateful daughters hurt him to full extent.

In this play Albee explores the American way of life as one in which normal human feelings and emotions have been deprived of meaning; the gestures of love, emotion, affection, attraction, family feeling and hospitality have gone. The characters are isolated from each other in the world of selfishness, lovelessness and impotence, thus warmth of human conduct is lost. Mommy and Daddy are not only incapable or unwilling to take care of the old mother, but also of their adopted child. This symbolizes that their past (Grandmother) and future (son) both are hopeless, and so is their present. The play presents a picture of sterility – the inability to beget a child as well as the inability to foster a child. The baby becomes a victim of the socializing process of American way of life and dies. His murder is not only an end of bumble's life but proves the end of affection and care in American family life, as Albee believes that a baby is a link between husband and wife for a good relationship.

The setting of the play – the "stuffy apartment" – also describes how disturbed and troubled their family life and ties are. We notice that amid the general air of familial frustration, things are breaking down everywhere in the house. The refrigerator, doorbell and bathroom all need repair, and the repairman does not come. This is highly symbolic of the hustle and bustle in their life. Albee through the use of various symbols is attacking the very root of American scene – the family unit – and shows that it is breaking down. The author has chosen the symbols of life's most basic needs. The 'refrigerator' is symbolic of hunger drive, which is at the moment not being taken care of adequately. The 'broken down bathroom' represents that the waste is piling up in that grotesque house. The 'broken door-bell' suggests that the family is isolated from the outer world. In this way, Albee has given us a true portrait of the crumbling family ties by using various symbols.

Some basic traits of each and every character, too, help us in understanding the futility of their life and relationships. Alan Schneider labeled each character with their traits:

Mommy is a "tumescent monster"; Daddy an "acquiescent blob"; Mrs. Barker, a "professional woman . . . a cheerful predatory robot; Grandma, "a gentle shrewdie – knowing what's going on and wanting to survive the emptiness and have the satisfaction of dying with dignity"; and the Young Man, "like a homing pigeon" he heads of some kind of personal completion somehow in spite of the emptiness. (Quoted in Gussow 143)

The characters are lacking humanism, and they are not complete as man. Thus, the characters are also symbolical – Young Man is the 'American Dream' come back, or, more precisely, Mommy's dream; Mommy represents destructive woman; Daddy is a submissive cuckold. Anne Paolucci aptly remarks: "characters are ironic symbols. They are not, properly speaking, individuals but rather states of mind or conscience, of guilt and sin and apathy and regret and indifference – often in opposition to one another.

We seem to be gazing behind faces rather than at them” (35). So, this work satirizes troubled life of family, the emptiness of American life, the inanity of its conformism, the idiocy of the images of pseudo-culture.

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