

Disintegration of American Nuclear Family in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*

6**J. Arul Anand***

The success myth and the great American dream have more negative impacts on the lives of the Americans. The mad craving for success exerted enormous pressure on the average Americans who, unable to cope with the ever-increasing demands of the society, become mere abject abstractions. Healthy human bond becomes a thing of the past, resulting in alienated individuals. Human relationships, even within the family, have received damaging cracks, leading to marital misunderstandings. And, the American concept of nuclear family, which, according to dictionaries, is a basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not, stands denuded of joy and unity. Edward Albee has been, right from his Off-Broadway adventures, preoccupied with the familial frictions in his affluent American society.

The word "family," in human context, refers to a group of people living together usually under one roof. In most societies around the world, it is the principal institution for the socialization of children, as the basic unit for raising children. The nuclear family, also known as the conjugal family, consists of a husband, his wife and children while the extended family includes, besides the members of the nuclear family, the parents of either the husband or the wife or even both. The concept of family is also used to control our sexual behaviour in general and sexual relations in particular.

*Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar

Bigsby considers Albee as “a post-nuclear” writer. While for Bigsby the term “post nuclear” clearly designates the post war period in American drama, for Reka M. Cristian, a Senior Assistant Professor at the Department of American Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary, the term has a wider sense. In the opinion of the Hungarian, the term can be extended to mean the playwright’s handling of “the disintegration of American nuclear family and the painful state of domestic affairs in the context of the excessively consumerist society of the post war era” (1).

Though critics trace down elements of Albee’s personal life in the depiction of families in his plays, his chief concerns are not merely the expression of what he has lost in his personal life. On the other hand, he is very much concerned with the tumbling crumble of the basic social institution called family. Albee is aware of the meaning and importance of the nuclear family. He was orphaned by his biological parents. Though adopted by a rich family, he was only a poor victim of the richness. His longing for a dream nuclear family is completely in contradiction with what he personally experienced and what the others in his affluent American society experienced. By his powerful portrayals of marital strife, he has only tried to give a rude jolt to the things (the American dream and the unfettered enthusiasm of the people for material prosperity) that unsettles the life in the families. Albee’s portrayal has clearly revealed that the term “family is no longer anything but a word, a hollow institution, an outmoded convention” (Tradition and Renewal, 33).

The nuclear or elementary family centres basically on a married couple. Love and affection and high regard for moral values are the very foundations of a happy successful married life. Success and happiness in life was measured in terms of healthy bond among the members of one family. But, the

emergence of industrialization and capitalism and the economic expansions after the World Wars have changed all. With the new wealth, the growing middle class moves to the suburbs where they find spacious homes, get better education for children and have feelings of greater social security. With these rapid economical expansions, people have started measuring success and happiness only in financial terms. Money and material affluence occupies the core of modern life (actually the core of grief of modern life), clearly replacing love, affection and moral values. Degraded into viable financial units, the basic family structure simply falls apart. Over the years, Albee has observed several decades of American society as well as the changes in attitudes and values of the American population. In almost all of his plays, he looks at the American family and its various manifestations, criticises it, mocks at it, and reveals its dishonesty. The chief concern of Albee in relation to family is the allegiance within marriages. The relationship between the husband and wife is of paramount importance for a healthy social unit and thereby a promising society. Unfortunately, this aspect is sadly marred and surely vanishing from the lives of the people of the town in the 1960s in America. Almost all the couples, both on and off stage, in his plays are discontent in their marriages.

Jerry's mother has deserted her husband and son and "embarked on an adulterous turn of our southern states... a journey of a year's duration... and her most constant companion... among others, among many others...was a Mr.Barleycon" (*Zoo Story*, 11). Albee does not give any details about the married life of Jerry's parents but the "adulterous turn" has clearly suggested that all is not well with them. Besides seeking adventures outside the marriage, she fails in her role pattern as woman. When she deserted Jerry, he was only ten and half years old. The young boy was deprived of a caring mother in

his most formative years. She was certainly after happiness but, in the process, destroys the happiness of her husband and young son. The story of Jerry's mother is just a tip of an iceberg that Albee intends to fathom out.

Jerry's mother is an offstage character and her adultery may not have any serious impact on the audience. But with that character, Edward Albee has clearly questioned the frames of what the nuclear family was meant to represent: the indestructible unity of powerful fathers, beautiful, dutiful, loving mothers, and wise, nice children. In Jerry's life, the frames are but empty.

The first couple that Albee theatre presents on the stage is Mommy and Daddy, the principal characters in two of Albee's early one act plays. They first appear in *The Sandbox*. As it has been already stated in the previous chapter, the play requires only fourteen minutes for its presentation on the stage and within these fourteen minutes, Albee has quite efficiently managed to present their sterile couplehood which is indicative of the banality of their life. Mommy, like almost all other women characters of Albee, of course with the exception of Grandma, is domineering and aggressive. In fact, she is the head of the family. Her husband, like the other husbands in his other plays, is emasculated and submissive. Whatever Mommy says is heeded and unquestionably final for Daddy.

The words of Thomas E. Porter may be very apt here to describe the kind of communication these two characters have between them. They "converse without communicating anything" (225). The couple cannot communicate because they have nothing new and meaningful to say. The following conversation in *The Sandbox* is enough to reiterate that they have nothing meaningful and nothing new to talk to each other.

Daddy: Shall we talk to each other?

Mommy: Well, you can talk, if you want to ... if you think of anything to say... if you think of anything new.

Daddy: (Thinks) No... I suppose not.

Mommy: (With a triumphant laugh) Of course not! (SB 38)

Marriage is uniquely beneficial to society because it is the very foundation of the family. When this fundamental social institution called marriage is in disarray, the family tree is sure to be denuded. Albee is all pains to see the very concept of matrimony becoming a mere means to achieve a financial security promised by the American Dream. Allegiance in connubial life has no longer been based on love, with money replaces it at the core of modern life.

The cruel and aggressive Mommy has married an emasculated Daddy for his money. Daddy is rich and has "money... money... money" (SB 39). In fact, Mommy has married only money and since Daddy is the owner of all the money, he becomes the husband of Mommy. This point is made even clearer when the bossy Mommy, this time in *The American Dream*, declares:

I can live off you, because I married you...I have a right to live off you because I married you, and because I used to let you get on top of me and bump your uglies; and I have a right to all your money when you die. (92)

These words of Mommy are a clear reflection of the detestable attitude of women of the period of economical expansion in America. For her, marriage is only a means of future security. Because she married Daddy, she thinks she has every right to live of him. Marriage gives licence to intimacy between the husband and wife and that intimacy is what

strengthens the bond between the two. But for Mommy the sacred intimacy means a means to his money. She allows him to get on top of her while all the time keeping her eyes on the wealth of Daddy. She clearly fails in her role pattern as woman. Not simply failing, she abjectly forgets that she is his wife. By confessing that she allows him for his money, she belittles herself to the level of a sex-worker. The painful fact that Albee wants to convey is that Mommy is not the only one but a representative of all the women of her society. Even the death of her husband is seen by her as an opportunity to claim a right to all his money. It is really shocking to learn that even death fails to deter the unfettered enthusiasm of people for money.

References:

- 1 Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story and Other Plays*. London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- 2 Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama. Volume II*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. Print.
- 3 Cristian, Reka M. "From Delicate Absence to Presence: The Child in Edward Albee's *Alternating Families*." *Americana* 2.2 (Fall 2006): 68-77. Print.
- 4 Porter, Thomas E. *Myth and Modern American Drama*. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1971. Print.