

Materialism and the Deteriorated American Family: A Baudrillardian Reading of Edawrd Albee's *The American Dream*

المادية والأسرة الأمريكية المتدهورة: قراءة بودريلاردية للحلم الأمريكي لإدوارد ألي

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Received : 11/11/2020 Accepted : 20/12/2020 Published: 01/03/2021

Abstract:

Terms like "anguish", "void", "dehumanization", "estrangement" and "nothingness" have become, if not household words, at least basic to the jargon of the literature that describes socio-economic realities. Twentieth century American drama is highly preoccupied with the impact of material life on the individual. It describes the amount of fissure and the damaging cracks in the US family due to the consumerist tradition. Edward Albee's *The American Dream* is glaring example of what might be called a textbook case of the response of the American drama to this existential vacuum. This article offers a Baudrillardian reading of Albee's magnum opus. Considering materialism as the *hyper-real* which substitutes the real values, the aim of this scrutiny is to highlight its negative effects on family, society, and the American dream.

Keywords: American dream, dehumanization, disintegrated-family, hyper-reality, illusion, materialism..

ملخص:

تعتبر مصطلحات "الكرب"، "الفراغ"، "التجريد من الإنسانية"، و "العدم" من بين المصطلحات الشائعة والأساسية في الأدب الحديث الواصف للواقع المعاش والحقائق الاجتماعية. لقد اهتمت الدراما الأمريكية في القرن العشرين بوصف مدى تأثير الحياة المادية على الفرد حيث أنها سلطت الضوء على مقدار الانشقاقات والتصدعات المدمرة وسط الأسرة الأمريكية بسبب التقاليد الاستهلاكية. تعد مسرحية "الحلم الأمريكي" للكاتب المسرحي إدوارد ألي مثالاً صارخاً لما يمكن تسميته الرد الأدبي للفراغ الوجودي. يقدم هذا المقال قراءة بودريلاردية لمسرحية أولي الشهيرة الموسومة بـ "الحلم الأمريكي". تؤكد هذه الدراسة أن المادية صارت هي الواقعية المفرطة والتي حلت بديلاً للقيم الحقيقية. وعليه، فإن الهدف من هذا المقال هو التدقيق وإبراز الآثار السلبية للمادية على الأسرة الأمريكية والمجتمع وكذلك الحلم الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المادية، الفراغ، التجريد من الإنسانية، الأسرة، الحلم الأمريكي، الواقعية المفرطة، الوهم.

1. Introduction

American playwrights masterfully made use of family plays so that emotional leverage can be transferred and revealed to audience. They have utilized plays for family as a means to inject and convey socio-political messages. Flimsy American family has always been the central issue in contemporary American theater. American playwrights' main task was to bring to the stage the inner conflicts of postwar-life. Social, economic and political changes have consolidated the theme of families in the American drama in which realism was

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established through all facets of everyday American life. Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee cherished stark and bleak realism in their plays.

Edward Albee has been controversial for his denouncement of American values and for his unwavering commitment to produce higher and unique drama. His plays make statements about the condition of man. They present a cynical expression of repulsion against false American optimism. Albee has taken over the responsibility to produce a play that throws away the false virtues and vices of the American culture and at the same time describes the consequences of the fall of that culture. The portrayal of such a situation is the main concern of any playwright who belongs to Samuel Beckett's realm. *The American Dream* is perhaps the best example of what has come to be known as the "American theatre of the absurd." By means of caricature and the comic irrelevancy of its language the play mirrors the meaninglessness of American life.

2. Issue and Methodology

In *Simulacra and Stimulation*, Jean Baudrillard argues that the distinction between what is 'real' and what is 'imagined' is continually blurred and meaning is systematically eroded. For Baudrillard, the contemporary world consists of signs that are associated with their "actual referents in reality". The society is reliant on models and maps that make it lose contact with the real world that preceded the map. Reality itself has begun merely to imitate the model, which now precedes and determines the real world. He believes that the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless "the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 1).

Baudrillard's point is that in the modern age, people lost the ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice. People are nowadays confronted with a *precession* of simulacra; that is, the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real. The postmodern world consists of hyperrealities, or simulations of reality. In a view of that, Baudrillard asserts that the simulations of reality "hyper-real" are "more real than the real." (56). Therefore, it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of "substituting the signs of the real for the real" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 2). Within this context, the present article tackles the impact of substituting the signs of the real for the real in Edward Albee's *The American Dream*. Our reading of the play revolves around the clash between the real and the hyper-real, and the impact of hyper-materialism on dysfunctional American family. The present study argues that hyper-materialism disintegrates the family and threatens the American dream.

3. Edward Albee: The Founding Father of American Absurdism

In *British Theatre 1950-70* Arnold P Hinchliffe distinguishes between the committed playwrights and the absurdists. While Brechtian plays are highly committed in their aim to imitate reality, Samuel Beckett's absurdism in *Waiting for Godot*, Hinchliffe believes, fits the representation of modern existence (13). Hinchliffe asserts that Anti-theatre of the absurdists was not a deviation as it was a brief period of photographic realism. He agrees with absurdists in their belief that there is a compelling need to free oneself from the former assumptions about the character and the values, in order to reflect the haunted contemporary world and its lack of meaning. It was with Martin Esslin's famous *The Theatre of the Absurd*, however, that the term absurd was introduced and some playwrights were presented as its practitioners. Edward Albee, the American playwright is considered as one of the founding fathers of the American theatre of the absurd.

Edward Albee is one of the most influential American dramatists of the twentieth century. Trailing just behind Arthur Miller, he wrote a number of plays that are considered landmarks in the history of the American drama. His theatrical career is full of achievements. He is a famous one-act playwright. Most of the playwrights write one-act plays as well as full length plays, of course, putting a hand in every sort of sub-genre. This applies to all the greatest American playwrights including Eugene O'Neil, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Like Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter, Albee has variously depicted the absurd in the modern man's life. *The Zoo Story* (1958) is probably the play which catapulted Albee to fame. It was followed by other massive plays including *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959), *The Sandbox* (1959), and *The American Dream* (1960). Thereafter, Albee had a victory with his first full-length play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962, and went on producing two his full length plays *Tiny Alice* (1964) and *A Delicate Balance* (1966).

Albee's absurdist plays satirize, lampoon, refract and criticize the American contemporary existence. He is labeled by Martin Esslin as an absurdist playwright. Esslin sees that Albee "comes into the category of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American Optimism" (302). Like Jean Paul Sartre, Albee believes that the responsibility of drama is to help modern man recognize the ultimate significance of human life. As a dramatist of human condition, Albee probes into the human psyche and like other contemporary writers, Albee's dramas take the shape of a search for meaning which involves man at every level of his conscious experience. He monitors in his plays the essential sickness of the American soul and explores the possibilities of meaningful existence in a supposedly meaningless universe. The purpose of the genuine "theater of the absurd", as Albee states in "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?", is "to make a man face up to the human condition-as it really is." (31)

Edward Albee brings out this kind of crisis of modern human life in almost all of his plays. The crisis of modern human life is due to the lack of communication, individualism, materialism, alienation and lack of motivation for living life. Throughout his plays, he explores the tragedy of the modern man in a very sensitive and comprehensive way. From the beginning of his career, his ears were sensitive to the voices of anguish of human life. *The American Dream* is a convoluted piece which satirically skewers the notion of "the American dream". It draws on the playwright's own dissatisfaction with his strained, painful childhood. The play was first performed at the York Playhouse, in New York, 1961. It has been read as a comedy about the absurdity of contemporary America. It is considered by Esslin as one of the "promising and brilliant first examples of an American contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd" (268). He maintains that it "clearly takes up the style and subject-matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and translates it into a genuine American idiom" (267). Nicolas Jr. Canaday, also, considers the play as America's "best example of what has come to be known as 'the Theatre of the Absurd'" (28). Albee announced in the preface of the play that it is "an examination of the American Scene," and an attack on the wrong artificial values in the American society. Therefore, a subtle dramatic investigation of *The American Dream* will explore that the play is a kind of condemnation of the modern empty life in a highly materialistic world.

4. On the American Dream and the Twentieth Century Dysfunctional Family

Americans have always idealized the term American Dream. From pilgrims to Donald Trump and through many influential politicians in US history, the notion of the ideal nation and the call to work harder to be successful have always been present. The notion of a "self-

made man” can be put right next to *the Dream* as it exemplifies that everybody can go from rags to riches if they work hard enough. The belief in the American dream has been one of the leading principles in the American society. Yet, the concept itself was first introduced in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic America*. The ideal American family is often portrayed in works of fiction as a “relatively stable, close, extended kinship” consisting of, as stated in an issue of *Winston Quarterly*, “husband and wife and raising children in an atmosphere of love” (147).

During the first half of the twentieth century, human relationships, even within the family, have received damaging cracks, leading to marital misunderstandings. In a view of that, Virginia Woolf had once stated that:

On or about December 1910, human nature changed [...] All human relationships shifted [...] those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relationships change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. (321)

Modern and postmodern literatures portray the shift in human relationships and the breakdown of the social and cultural norms. Edward Albee's plays are dedicated to the task of recording, reflecting, and refracting the change in relationships in American families in the wake of consumerism and materialism. He microscopically sheds light on the new American family which is highly affected by the socio-political and economic factors. Albee once stated that *The American Dream* is intended to criticize the middle-class society. His criticism is directed not only against American society but also against all of West European culture where the bourgeoisie exhibit a tendency toward passivity, short-sightedness, and in the long run, self-destruction.

Albee has been, right from his Off-Broadway adventures, preoccupied with the familial frictions in his affluent American society. *The American Dream* ridicules the hopes of Americans to achieve, material success and familial happiness. Being absurdist, Albee's play debases Aristotle's requirement that a drama should contain praxis and must be based on action. Rather than having the protagonist search for theoria, truth and self-knowledge, *The American Dream* has its characters searching for satisfaction. Mommy and Daddy especially Mommy-move from dissatisfaction to satisfaction. While the play does, thus, dramatize character development, this development is toward something that is artificial and results in stasis.

The term “dysfunction” has been generally adapted to represent the site within the functionality of the family in which its main function as a family gets down to a halt. In other words, the belief in the nuclear family and its role in stabilizing society is no longer valid. Hence, the usual chance for the operation of the family is no longer at work. Accordingly, the term represents the possibility to disclose how the normative restrictions operate in the emotional phenomena of the family and disrupt the healthy operation. Its significance lies in the way it defines a deadlock in the functional approach to the family and its relationships.

The dysfunction of the American family is recurrent theme in twentieth century American literature. The socio-economic and political factors of the 1950s contributed to the rise of the new American materialistic family that is/was devoid of spirituality. The industrial and technological mania and the widening gap between the social classes in the wake of the 20th century worsened America's spiritual life. Business and the myth of material success augmented to threatening levels. The materialistic atmosphere had a great impact on the notion of nuclear/close-knit family and social collectivism. According to Mehvish Syed (2014), the postwar America witnessed “a sudden release of the army boosted family marriage, breadwinner-father and homemaking-mother and several children all living in the suburbs on the outskirts of a larger city” (207). As the nation headed towards material

ascendance, a deeper spiritual and moral decadence dominated the new American existence. Social responsibility, moral commitment and sacrifice withdrew before "the crafts of survival".

Edward Albee's plays, in fact, convincingly dramatize his indictment of American culture in particular and human condition at large. He sharply projects the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in American society and American psyche simultaneously. Thematically, his plays turn around issues like isolation, repetition, illusion, consumerism, and the loss of human values. The nuclear or elementary family, which is the belief in family as the peak or the basis of social order, revolves around the notion of harmonious married couple sharing love and affection. Besides, success and happiness in life are usually measured in terms of healthy bond among the members of one family. However, in a capitalist and materialistic society, citizens measure success and happiness only in financial terms. Money is the leading principle and material affluence. It occupies the core of modern life clearly replacing love, affection and moral values. Degraded into viable financial units, the basic family structure simply fell 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 examines, criticizes, and mocks at the contemporary American family. 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.

The American Dream tells the story of an American family that consists of Mommy, Daddy, and the old Grandma. It begins with Mommy and Daddy sitting in their apartment waiting for someone unknown to the reader (the audience) and keep making remarks on how "they are late." Then Grandma enters the scene with her boxes. Mommy and Daddy make a big deal about her boxes then make remarks about Grandma and her "Johnny-do's." Mommy is a manipulative dominating wife while Daddy is a weak emasculated character. Grandma is the wise member in the house, but she is the victim of Mommy's mockery and assault. Mommy is constantly threatening to put Grandma away. Because of their cruelty and mistreatment, Mommy and Daddy killed their adoptive son, "bumble of joy", long years ago. This secret is revealed by Grandma who tells Mrs. Barker how they mutilated him. At the end of the play, they get "his twin, the Young Man, as a son. At last, they can achieve "satisfaction. The Young man goes to work for Mommy and Daddy. The play ends after Mommy provocatively speaking to the Young Man and Grandma addresses the audience.

Throughout the play, Albee depicts the impact of materialism on the American family. By so doing, he brings on the stage images of emptiness and the hollowness of the American society. He microscopically describes the absurd American family in terms of the broken relationship between the husband and the wife, and weird relationship between parents and their children. The new American family is highly obsessed with money, power, primacy, prestige, and satisfaction. Albee's uniqueness lies in the fact that he microscopically depicts the impact of the hyper-real on the different components of the American family as the dehumanized relationship between the husband and the wife, mother-daughter damaged rapport, and the fake mother-son relationship.

5. Money-Based Marriage and the Emotional Void

Albee delineates absurdism through the family which becomes selfish and materialistic in achieving good life. Essentially, marriage is uniquely beneficial to society because it is the very foundation of the family. Nevertheless, this aspect is sadly marred and surely vanishing from the lives of the people of the town in the 1960s in America. When

marriage is in disarray, the family tree is sure to be denuded. Albee is all pains to watch the very concept of matrimony becoming a mere means to achieve a financial security. Allegiance in connubial life has no longer been based on love and affection. Instead, money is the only leading principle. Through Mommy and Daddy's relationship, Albee successfully attacks the institution of marriage which has lost its significance in the eyes of people.

It is not lack of money but lack of love and affection that makes unhappy marriage. The opening passages of the play are very suggestive. Earlier in the play, we are introduced to Mommy as a dominant woman who tells the emasculated Daddy about her experience in buying a new hat:

Mommy –I went to buy a new hat yesterday.

(Pause)

I said, I went to buy a new hat yesterday.

Daddy – oh! Yes... yes.

Mommy –pay attention

Daddy – I' m paying attention, Mommy.

Mommy: well, be sure you do.

Daddy: oh! I' m

Mommy: all right, Daddy, now listen

Daddy: I' m listening, Mommy.

Mommy: you are sure?

Daddy: Yes.... Yes, I' m sure; I' m all ears" (*The American Dream* 100).

Mommy and Daddy live in an urban modernized apartment which Albee chose to present his archetypal couple. The play makes the reader believe that Mommy is materialistic, rude, demanding, masculine, and a controlling person who only cares about appearance and fake satisfaction. She does not show respect for anyone. As the conversation illustrates, she always forces Daddy to pay attention to what she says. He is disinterested even when he makes efforts to exhibit the contrary by reiterating to what Mommy says.

Mommy had the intention to climb the social ladder at a younger age. Grandma says that when she was eight years old, Mommy "used to climb up on our lap and say, in a sickening voice, 'when I go up, I'm going to mahwy a wich old man; I'm going to set my wittle were end right down in a tub o' butter, that's what I'm going to do' " (AD 123). The play shows that Daddy is her social ladder. It was Nietzsche who once stated that it is not lack of love, but lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages. Their relationship is devoid of any feeling. They both lack the adequate love and friendship to be a harmonious couple. Their emotions have been throttled. Hence, Gilbert Debusscher admits that: "Their apartment is an emotional void which sterilizes and petrifies the manners and ceremonies of human life" (38). Their marriage is an act of convenience to fulfill their desires. It is the key to material comforts for Mommy and a way to quench Daddy's sexual thirst.

Mommy's materialism and Daddy's workaholic attitudes are not to be shared. Daddy is submissive to the fancies of his wife. He shields himself from the whims and dominating tendencies of his competitor wife, who does her best to take over the position of her husband in the family. Therefore, the relationship is a war of domination which can be translated into a conflict between the patriarch and New Woman. Clearly, it seems to the reader that through this fragile relationship, Albee attacks the institution of marriage which lost its value. Even sex which has always been a symbol of union that usually ties couples lost its value due to the lack of intimacy. It becomes a mechanical act performed without feelings. Commenting on the issue of marriage in the play, Anita M. Stenz argues that:

In the marriage which Albee is attacking, sex is treated not as an act of consummation but as an act of consumption. A potential avenue of real intimacy travelled without feeling and commitment has degenerated into mechanical physiological reflex. The human beings involved remain alone and the process of depersonalization is complete. (28)

Mommy admits it and emphatically tells Daddy: "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 your money when you die" (106). Daddy hints at Mommy's materialistic behavior and her opportunist tendency when he tells her that she was "a very deceitful girl" (110). She is the suitable label for the selfish American female.

The tension between the two major figures of the play represents a deeper clash between idealism and pragmatism. Daddy's idealism can be deduced from the fact that he married a poor girl and allowed her mother to live with them under the same roof. Mommy's pursuit after money and her belief that marrying a rich man gives a woman the right of living off him proves her pragmatism. Moreover, being rich is not a sign of happiness and satisfaction. They both are dissatisfied and fail to cope with the real values and principles of the private marital world which differs from the social world. The fact that she keeps reminding Daddy that she will inherit his property as soon as he passes away, Mommy becomes a glaring example of the hollow women. At this level, the reader is bound to deduce the extent to which materialism and individualism threaten human relationships. Commenting on the effect of materialism on humanity, C. W. E. Bigsby argues that "we are moving into a society in which the capitalistic ethic has spilled over into the area of personal relationships." (Albee 32)

Daddy's inability to realize his dream of being a senator has turned him into an alienated figure. He spent his youth in gathering money and worked harder to bring a fat pay packet to satisfy Mommy's materialistic needs and maintain status-quo in the social set-up. he is a confused person who seeks comfort in gathering money. Money is a substitute for the missing warmth in the human relationships. He is also a victim of the materialistic atmosphere which transformed his wife into a vicious person. Daddy's moment of being is finally reached as he understands that he spent his life meaninglessly earning wealth. His declaration that he just wants "to get everything with" (108) suggests that he has no further reason to live. At this level, Daddy dwindles into a comatose, acquiescent, puttering old man.

Both Daddy and Mommy have failed to meet each other's expectations. They are not meant to complete each other. As long as materialism is the basis of their union, the emotional bonding loses its strength. The materialistic behavior has a negative impact on communication between the two characters. As the play goes little further, the reader notices that they totally fall apart to become separate characters living in a world which devoid of love, care, and humanity. Their fake union is the playwright's tool to admit that love has disappeared in favor of materialism and has been substituted by sexual sterility. Moreover, marriage, which is supposed to be a sacred tie, has degraded to become a means of gaining worldly benefits and physical desires. George Wellwarth admits that Albee displays the distorted image of the American family. In *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Grade Drama*, he admits that in Albee's play, the happy family becomes "an emasculated money supplier dominated by an emotionally sterile, nagging wife; the idealistic hero becomes a handsome, empty-headed, hollow shell of a man with the outlook and philosophy of a professional pimp." (325)

6. Adoption, Infanticide and the Dehumanized Mother-Son Relationship

Central to Albee's satire is the dehumanized relationship between the mother and her son. The play exposes a bleak image of the American family that lacks emotion and pity. The story hinges on Mommy and Daddy's invitation to Mrs. Barker to their home to complain about the loss of their adopted child. Mommy and Daddy bought a child from the 'Bye Bye Adoption Agency' to fill the sterility and emotional vacuity in their lives. Nevertheless, the so-called Bumble of joy failed to provide any sort of emotional satisfaction to them. Mommy does not love him. She takes pleasure in heaping torture and punishment whenever he exhibits infantile desires.

Mommy and Daddy's treatment of the child shocks the reader and reveals the advanced level of dehumanization. In the play we are told that when "it" cried and only had eyes for Daddy, Mommy gouged the baby's eyes. They also cut off its tongue when it called Mommy an obscene name. The most humiliating scene in the play is when the reader, or the audience, is told that as the child grew older "it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay" (100). Mommy and Daddy dreamt to have a child who would stand for the ideal American child; a boy who would accomplish their hopes and wishes of being actually "Mommy and Daddy". They wanted to achieve the title "Mommy and Daddy". Sadly, this child turns out to be the contrary to the principles the mother and father were expecting from him, so they see mutilation as the only solution until it is reduced to nothing.

The Bumble of joy did not work out. It was not the means of satisfaction as Mommy and Daddy had thought it would be. Child murder in the play is very significant. Daddy and Mommy's dismemberment of their adopted child reflects their cruelty. Grandma repeatedly refers to the child using the pronoun 'it'. This shows that the adoptive child is a possession to be bought and sold, rather than a human being. Unaffected by his death, they become more distressed because the good they had bought had not been durable. At this level, Albee intends to argue that in a materialistic society, goods and objects are more appreciated and valued than man.

The end of the story is marked by the appearance of the Young Man. He is the twin brother of the mutilated bumble of joy. He is a materialistic man who seeks employment and will do anything for money. Introducing himself, he describes his belief that he is an illegitimate child. "My mother died the night that I was born, and I never knew my father; I doubt my mother did." One of the identical twins, "we felt each other breathe . . . his heartbeat thundered in my temple . . . mine in his . . . our stomachs ached and we cried for feeding at the same time" (114). He is the last character to appear in the play. He seems to have no idea what is the purpose of being at Mommy and Daddy's apartment. Separated at birth from a twin brother, The Young Man has suffered great losses throughout his life—phantom "agonies," the loss of physical and emotional sensation, and a crippling emptiness which prevents him from feeling anything but "cool disinterest."

Mommy is obsessed with appearances and illusions. By the end of the play, she is left with her own typical 'satisfaction' when she greets and welcomes the Young Man, the 'American Dream' with delight. The Young Man represents the hollowness of "the American dream". He looks shiny and promising on the outside, but is completely devoid of substance on the inside. He goes along with whatever is asked of him, and will sell himself out for cash, taking on any task, no matter how debased or amoral. Mommy and Daddy welcome him warmly, stating that he's much better than the "other" bumble. In spite of being automation and an empty shell, the Young Man fits Mommy's needs. She readily accepts the illusion that he is the 'American Dream' with great joy, an extra one to her 'vociferous flaunting character'

"He's very nice. Really top notch; much better than the other one. And we'll drink and celebrate. To satisfaction". (91) She sends him to fetch sauterne to celebrate their new family relationship, and he certainly will provide no resistance to her aggressiveness. She orders everyone to take a glass and drink to "satisfaction," which they all do as the play ends.

Since they paid for the adoption, Mommy and Daddy believe that they have a right to shape the child according to their taste. When it turns up to be dissatisfaction, however, they think that they should be paid back. Moreover, their dismemberment of the child is "the unabashed response to a satisfaction guaranteed market and mentality" child is mutilated because it was a waste of property and it did not work out. Hence, Albee's concept of parental relationship demonstrates the dehumanized situation of children within the American family. A child becomes a mere property. Accordingly, it seems that Albee presents his vision of the emotional, mental and spiritual trauma in which the child either totally fulfills the parents' expectations on the parents' terms, or he is rejected and destroyed as a person. Albee's burden of rejection in infancy seems heavy enough to explain his acute resentment of the cult of the family and his repeated attacks on 'the maternal image'.

7. No Country for Old Women: The Devastated Mother-Daughter Relationship

Mommy and Grandma's relationship is an epitome of the new American mother-daughter relationships. It is obvious from the moment of Grandma's entrance that the old lady is not loved, and the relation between mother and daughter is devoid of love since it is based on interest. Essentially, it is to Grandma that the reader must look for a positive response to what might be called the existential vacuum. She is the only source of hope that the audience is provided with. Among Albee's readers, there is an agreement that she stands apart from the other characters. Grandma is the most realistic character. She has a sense of humor, freedom, and dignity. It is through Grandma that all the secrets are revealed. Through Grandma, the reader knows about Daddy's disillusionment with Mommy and with marriage. She gives a realistic image of the good old days. She apparently has lived a full and pleasant life, although we are given just few details. Moreover, she is conscious of the Van Man's threat. She is the only one who knows the essential vacuity of the Young Man, but she can still enjoy his handsome, muscular appearance with an honest pleasure.

The dominant Mommy has totally rejected Grandma and her humanistic dream. Instead, by the end of the story she opts for the Young Man and his materialistic American dream. She wants to be the center of the family. No one is permitted to be independent and make his or her own choice. She believes that old people have nothing to say: and if they did have something to say, nobody would listen to them" (118). Her relationship with Grandma is one long terrible scene of cruel bullying insult. She rages at Grandma, alternately telling her that she has nothing to say or that she is a liar. Mommy threatens to hide Grandma's teeth, break her television, and send her away.

In a highly materialistic and consumerist society where the psychological and the emotional needs have been substituted by the economic needs and the conjugal partners discuss more of consumer satisfaction and economic satisfaction than the emotional one, it is not surprising that the elders of the family will remain in a position that is always vulnerable and threatening. Commenting on the American old people's situation, David Reisman admits in *The American Family Dying or Developing* that grandmother "cannot find a useful economic role" (56). Grandma offers a number of sarcastic epigrams on the weird condition of the elderly: "Most people think that when you get so old, you either freeze to death, or you burn up. But you don't. When you get so old, all the happens is that people talk to you that way" (104). This realization of rejection and ungratefulness fills Grandma with anger and

inspires her emotional outburst in the play. She arranges her boxes to leave, as she knows that her daughter is about to put her in a nursing home. Mommy discovers that Grandma is really emptying the apartment of all of its contents, including water.

In his essay, "Allegory in Edward Albee's *The American Dream*," Ervin Beck asserts that the whole play seems to be *Grandma's play*. She dominates the play and makes the reader believe that she is the wisest. Grandma wraps up all the contents of the American Dream home. She empties the whole apartment and puts everything. She knows that it is high time to leave. She- takes the substance of everything with her and leaves the empty shells for Mommy and Daddy. Her departure coincides with the arrival of the Young Man. At this level, the playwright draws our attention to the clash between the old and the new American dreams. Mommy's choice of the Young Man and her rejection of Grandma are at the heart of the plot of the play. The playwright's own comments on the play make this clear. In describing *The American Dream* Albee renders Mommy's exchange of characters abstract, even allegorical: "The play is an . . . attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society. Grandma's surprising exit indicates her marginal position in the family. Albee offers allegory in this play to represent the corrupted "American Dream". Grandma's departure actually heralds the death of the old American values and the rise of the new generation of consumerists and hollow-men and women.

In *Modern American Playwrights*, Jean Gould comments on the destructive power of materialism and its impact on the functional family. He states that Albee "speaks out with bold clarity in regard to the false values of a mechanized civilization, the vapidness of a man grown soft with the comforts of modern invention, the destructive force of unvaried, encroaching uniformity, and the decay beneath the shiny surface of a neon society" (286). Having explored the impact of materialism on Mommy and Daddy's marriage, their relationships with the child and Grandma, it becomes evident that Albee explores the hollowness of the new American dream and the fallacy of the ideal family. Everybody, in the play, is interested to go beyond ethics, relationships and moral values to reach out the individual pleasure that they think can only be achieved through economic prosperity and personal well-being.

8. Conclusion

The American Dream attacks the very foundation of materialism which substituted the real human values in America. Realizing that everything in the 'slipping land' of America is not 'peachy-keen', the father of American absurdism has made it his mission to make his countrymen realize that they have substituted artificial values for real ones. He depicts the havoc that arises out of man's refusal to fall back to truths from illusion. Throughout the play, Albee is convinced that the modern man is afraid of facing reality knowing that he rides on illusion. His attacks are upon the deviations from kind of implicit standard. Albee is a stern moralist who believes that there are right values and wrong ones. The moral lesson that underlies his text is that man is compelled to rediscover reality by 'acquiring the consciousness of peril and loss and a consciousness of the 'radical crisis' present in American life in which reality has become a masquerade.' On the surface level, the playwright depicts the destructive power of materialism which becomes the main reason behind the American family's disintegration. The family is the cogwheel of the society. Cogs allow the gear to transmit energy and direction to the other gears in the machine assembly. It is a basic part that allows much more elaborate machines to operate, and as such is often applied metaphorically to objects or people with similar functions. In this case, one may argue that the disintegrated family symbolizes the collapse of the American society, its values, and the American dream.

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