

A REALISTIC DEPICTION OF THE PLIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS PEOPLE IN EDWARD ALBEE'S PLAY 'A DELICATE BALANCE'

¹**Inayat Hussain Resray**

Research Scholar, School of Comparative Languages and Culture, Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya
Indore, Madhya Pradesh, 452001, (NAAC Accredited A⁺ Grade)

Email ID: inayatashiq701@gmail.com

²**Dr Garima Chhabra**

Associate Professor, Department of English, MJB Govt. P.G Girls College Moti Tabela, Indore,
Madhya Pradesh, 452001.

Abstract

The treatment of theme of alienation and quest for identity has been accomplished by abounding American writers in their writings. Edward Albee is one of the distinguished authors in this axiom. Each author in his or her time to a certain ambit manipulated to explore the existential ambient of America in addressing the central issues constrained Americans, such as alienation, gender, class, suppression, disparity and requesting their identity to be acknowledged. This research paper appropriately expounds this paradox in America over centuries, with documentation serving as the main source of information. This study which is largely based on textual analysis is going to analyze the Americans' combat to develop their identity, success, limitation and knowledge which is a fundamental entity towards any achievement in life. The writing of Albee reflects the state of rejection and fury that gripped the American society in the mid-twentieth century. This systematic search also focuses on examining the modern man's sense of alienation and struggle for identity as dramatized by Albee in his famous play, *A Delicate Balance*. It becomes perspicuous from the dramatic action of the play that it is not possible for the characters of the play to procure self-fulfillment and contentment for they obstinately prefer escape. This paper also touches the deterioration of relations among family members in America.

Key Words: Alienation, disparity, fractured relationships, identity crisis, miscommunication, pathos and suppression.

Introduction

Every dramatist has a particular vision and it gets reflected in the entire body of his or her works. Edward Albee is among those contemporary playwrights who keep evolving. His style encompasses autobiographical, enigmatic, existential, metaphysical, psychological, sexual, alienation and identity themes. It is not easy to comprehend the vitriolic satire hidden in the subtle dialogues as it tends to puzzle his readers and audiences. He is a legend who keeps on

experimenting with form and content by focusing on contemporary issues affecting human beings in the post-modern scenario in America.

Albee jolts the audience with his apocalyptic vision of the stark realities of the human existence. He being enraged and indignant at the society, grows anxious and satirizes relentlessly as August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen and G. B. Shaw. Since, Albee is considered to be an absurd playwright; his plays sincerely deal with the themes of alienation, identity, despair, tyranny, suffocation and cruelty of society. Albee points out and exposes varied aspects of social evils during his time subsisting in the American society like pointlessness, meaninglessness, alienation, failure of communication, fantasy and realism, havoc of relationships and racial discrimination. His foremost intention in revealing these social evils is to invoke change and to outshine the moral standards of human beings. As aptly quoted in his own words in the *Preface to The American Dream*, “The purpose of the play is, to offend-as well as amuse and entertain, and every honest work is a personal private wowl, a statement of an individual’s pleasure and pain.” (Debusscher 8.) In almost all his plays Albee enlightens that the world being ugly and desperate; people are also ugly and desperate. In his view, life has no content, it is zilch and one must have strength to face the emptiness without fear. His plays are mostly about people and their life, as illustrated in the words of Diana Trilling;

Albee’s plays are about people who cared very deeply about each other and who tried hard to be decent, people whose hopes were right for themselves and each other, but who here for reasons beyond their control because they truly reside in the human situation, had defeated their decency, their love and hope. (Trilling 86)

Albee, esteemed as an outraged social critic, takes sides with the oppressed, victimized and protests against social injustice. Michael E. Rutenberg says;

Albee turns his social microscope on the very essence of our civilization, revealing immorality, opportunism, cruelty, hypocrisy, and sterility in the private of those whose job it is to shape and guide the tastes and morals of this country’s next generation. (Reddy 17)

He dramatizes the characters whose identities are capricious and their physical agonies or their desire for madness show that they yearn to be non-conscious beings. Although they are realistically depicted, they have fragmented or contradictory past lives. Albee moves a step ahead than Samuel Beckett and censures his characters who take their social roles as their own identities. They try to belong to a social group and identify themselves with the group so as to attain an identity. His characters believe that life is meaningless and they are always anxious and question their existence as nothing is accomplished in their world. Being subject to the dilemma of existence, his characters attempt to establish their existence in this world. They are alienated from themselves and from the society instead they try to build an unperturbed life. Their appetency to be non-existent, their look for the validation of others about their identities and their being uncertain about themselves, alienate them from themselves. The insouciance of people causes them to be eliminated from the society and the prejudices of others alienate them from the society. Besides, the stories they tell, about cruelty or death, pertain to the identity and alienation

problems that they experience. Attempts are made to make contact with other characters, yet it is obsolete for most of the time. Due to desolateness, their behavior compositions are aberrant as they are contentious or easily offended.

Discussion of the play *A Delicate Balance* (1966)

The word alienation and identity have become fetish words as writers seem delighted in finding diverse uses for them. Alienation and identity involve some sort of separation in relationship, connection or position that once existed as natural, desirable or good has been lost. The subject of alienation and identity is not usually a person but it can be either of a person from something or of something from something else. These terms are used to characterize the social, political and economic structure when it is felt to be unrelated or oppressive to one's spiritual interests or welfare. These are used in collaboration with the subjective states of mind and objectively ascertain disparities and inadequacies.

Albee's art becomes a means to criticize and denounce a situation to which he is sensitive, as an American. He treats the question of 'alienation and identity' in his plays, which is partly a product of capitalism and partly an aspect of popular contemporary human condition. He follows the uncertainty, alienation, question of freedom and also focuses on immoralities of human beings. His characters suffer from their identity problems because they do not have fixed identities. The ambiguity of existence, presents another problem for these characters. Alienation of a human being from self and others is an existential theme that he deals with.

After the great depression of the two World Wars, Albee's America started disintegrating socially, though there was a great boom economically. The highly deceptive optimism turns nightmarish in the lives of many people in the society; as a result, human relationships received pernicious cracks causing a growing gulf between man and his society. The great American fantasy of a golden future, particularly the mad craving for material success, inevitably contributes to the afflicting deterioration in the family as well as the social fabrics of country. The subject of alienation, hunt for identity and non-communication are the preoccupations of Albee and anguish caused by identity and alienation is distinct in his plays. He considers that the human beings who are gregarious in nature are in fact lonely entities. His theme of alienation and quest for identity also revealed his observations in his own childhood where he never enjoyed identity, companionship, love or affection of his parents. He is alienated in every aspect and leads a solitary life which is expressed in his play *A Delicate Balance*. Frustration, loneliness, lack of love and non-communication in relationship with both his adoptive and biological mother, becomes converted into textual form. Albee's shattering personal experiences and perilous upbringing teach this rebellious, restless spirit of America to look at life like a lost soul seeking identity.

Edward Albee in his Pulitzer Prize winning play, *A Delicate Balance*, highlights the plight of a family from upper middle class and explores the themes like; loss of identity, loss of balance, loss of opportunity, loss of sanity, sense of inhumanity, causes of alienation, fear and escapism. This is one of the Edward Albee's most personal plays which have often been credited

as the classic study of the American society. The play contemplates into the chaos that creeps into a modern society's effort to avoid pain and discomfort.

This research paper tried to scrutinize the reasons that drove the central characters in this play to loss of identity and alienation from the society. Over the time, the reading of this play makes it gradually clear that what it tends to deal in common is an advertence of the performance of identity and discretion of play bordering around the postmodern sensibility that questions permanence of truth by blurring the boundaries between artificial and natural actor and character, authenticity and role playing in order to address the constructions of social, political, racial and sexual identity. Albee becomes especially relevant in today's world as his plays address the opposite issues of our time via social integrity, the true meaning of a national identity, the constant reconciliation of personal freedom and mutual responsibility.

A Delicate Balance is a crystal clear and deft piece, with little shouting and breaking of bottles. It opens in a living room of large and well appointed suburban house. There are six characters in the play and all are linked either by familial or social relationships which they think as love. In fact, there does not exist any love among the characters due to loss of belongingness. This play stages a series of critical episodes in life of a comfortable middle aged couple, Tobias, a retired businessman and Agnes, his wife. With them there lives Agnes' alcoholic sister, Claire. The equilibrium of the household is unalterably distorted by the simultaneous incursion of their daughter Julia, who flights from her fourth marriage apocalypse and the best friends Harry and Edna, who came there for security and protection. They came in the quest of comfort, in a hope to find shelter from sudden paroxysmal attacks in their lives. In this aura, the delicate balance of the middle class family is perturbed and for a moment they are compelled into the kind of introspection which leads either to a deeper perception or back into the anesthesia of contemporary life. In search of comfort, they find themselves face-to-face with their unknown fears. All of them are selfish in their protectiveness and hibernating in their separate worlds. Both Tobias and Agnes, in their late fifties, have an apparently viable relationship which saves them from outer loneliness, but, in essence, are estranged from each other and lead a hollow life in this hollow world.

A Delicate Balance strives to penetrate to the fear of which this impotence is merely one expression. Fear, in this play, invades various human relationships, including marriage, family and friendship. It overpowers the characters when they receive the casual glimpses of their real selves which they have lost in the false glitter of this material world. Also, the fear of what they will discover usually keeps them away from any deep introspection. The major fear is that experienced by Edna and Marry as they are spending a peaceful evening at home. While Edna was working at her needle point and Harry was reading French, they suddenly became terrified:

EDNA: (Open weeping; loud) WE GOT...FRIGHTENED.

(Open sobbing; no one moves)

HARRY: (Quiet wonder, confusion) We got scared.

EDNA: (Through her sobbing) WE WERE...FRIGHTENED.

HARRY: There was nothing...but we were very scared.

(AGNES comforts EDNA, who is in free sobbing anguish. CLAIRE lies slowly back on the floor)

EDNA: We...were...terrified.

HARRY: We were scared.

(Silence; AGNES comforting EDNA. HARRY stock still. Quite innocent, almost childlike)

It was like being lost: very young again, with the dark, and lost. There was no...thing...to be frightened of, but...

EDNA: (Tears, quiet hysteria) WE WERE FRIGHTENED...
AND THERE WAS NOTHING.

(Silence in the room) (Albee 46-47.)

This fear is the result of what Leo Tolstoy calls an advertence of the 'absurdity or meaninglessness of life.' In order to find an antidote for their fear and return the sanity of suburban living, they escape to home of their best friends Agnes and Tobias, and move in as intruders and pose a threat to the contrived delicate balance in the family.

Both Edna and Harry are faced an acute sense of displacement and in order to avoid this, they distort the equilibrium of a family of already displaced persons. Any disruption in one's daily routine implies a disturbance of the very foundation of one's existence. Normalcy can be preserved, that is why, only so long as the artificial order formed by society remains unthreatened.

Whenever there is a threat to precarious balance of compromise, the only place for refuge is the world of illusions. Claire for this world resorts to alcohol. But according to C.W.E. Bigsby Albee's concern is here with an ultimate and more dangerous refuge, that is, complete alienation from reality. Edna and Harry act, in a real sense, as substitutes for those whose home they have effectively taken over. They are very much like Agnes and Tobias. Though they can be granted separate identity, there can also be seen expressions of the suppression on the faces of Agnes and Tobias. In the modern age, the ancient precept of brotherhood has become a fantasy into which Edna and Harry, afraid of their aloofness, have sought refuge.

In fact there is no deep ligature between these friends. Tobias insists that the fact that they are labeled as friends give them the right to live in house. He loudly exclaims:

I DON'T WANT YOU HERE!

YOU ASKED?!

NO! I DON'T

(Loud)

BUT BY CHRIST YOU'RE GOING TO
STAY HERE!

YOU'VE GOT THE RIGHT!

THE RIGHT!

DO YOU KNOW THE WORD?

THE RIGHT!

(Loud)

YOU STAY WITH US!
I DON'T WANT YOU HERE!
I DON'T LOVE YOU!
BUT BY GOD...YOU STAY!! (Albee 162)

Tobias thus attempts to cover the reality of friendship which is missing with the illusions of friendship. But the sense of loneliness which drove Edna and Harry to Agnes and Tobias is intensified rather than alleviated by the intercourse of the friends during the play. The delicate balance, among what friendship traditionally should be, what the characters think it should be and what it actually turns out to be is upset. Edna and Harry are displaced souls who learn that the self is castle without a drawbridge.

Like Harry and Edna Julia, the daughter of Agnes and Tobias, also suffers from a feeling of displacement and loss of belongingness. Her feeling of displacement began during the two year period following her brother Teddy's birth and has haunted her all life. She feels she does not belong anywhere. Attempted escape from reality of her aloneness has led her to four unsuccessful marriages, and her escape from the unsuccessful marriage has been back to the home of her parents. Each of her husband replaced her with something else.

As Julia sleeps in her father's room, Tobias also feels displaced, and by mistake he enters Julia's room thinking it his own. Thus the deprivation of their own rooms in the play represents the character's displacement or feeling of insecurity and loss of belongingness. Julia is portrayed as a helpless creature in a hopeless world where people do not belong to or communicate with one another. She is rejected by her husband and not welcomed even by her parents. When Julia demands what is hers, her mother offering her little help and comfort, plainly tells her to decide first what is hers. Earlier too Agnes has expressed her lack of sympathy for both Julia and Claire by referring to them as not even people. She expresses the desire that she and Tobias could always be alone in their home. But Tobias says that Julia belongs just as Harry and Edna belongs. The idea that people, unable to communicate with one another cannot tolerate being in physical proximity, is also demonstrated here.

Claire like Julia is also dispossessed as she has no home of her own and lives in the house of a sister who does not like her. But on the contrary to Julia, she seems to have resigned herself to her displacement. There is no further balance in her life, so she takes refuge from the realities with alcohol. She is not alcoholic, as she says, her drinking is willful and a deliberate evasion.

In this play, the wife dominates over the husband. Tobias appears weaker than Agnes and is more placid and less willing to act to change things or to restore them to their former order. Agnes recognizes the emptiness and mediocrity of the family to the extent that she almost fears the states of insanity. Her life has been a series of failures, her son died, she does not especially love her daughter, her daughter has failed to make her a grandmother. She is jealous of and loathes her sister, her husband refuse to share her bed, and she realizes that she does not really care for her best friend Edna. As the play proceeds, Agnes' reasons for her preoccupation with madness become more crystal, particularly after she reveals her response to her son's death. In

an aberrant moment of vulnerability, Agnes speaks about the existential doubts which brought her to the edge of insanity. Significantly for Agnes, maskness is pictured as a confusing and afflicting loss of identity. Almost all the characters in the play are devoid of any enthusiasm for life and suffer from many other absurdist feelings as loss of identity, lack of communication etc. There is a deep sense of the lack of purpose which produces a metaphysical anguish in all characters.

The play, as discussed above, is the best expression of the peculiar solitariness of modern times. This loneliness ensuing terror has been explored with an ingenious insight and a compelling poetic vision. Albee's aim as exhibited through the discussion of this play, is to pass beneath the exterior of modern society to the fear and guilt which exist beneath, because he considers this to be the chief function of a playwright and main accountability of thinking individual.

In this play Albee deals with the theme of identity and alienation according to his own perception and understanding of it through the characters; Agnes, Tobias, Claire, Edna, Harry, Julia and himself. These characters have lost their identities and are alienated from their families and surroundings, because they exist in a world full of illusions denying facing the harsh realities of life. Their primary tendency is evasion, escapism and lack of moral courage. Instead of allowing any kind of change to effect their lives, they are contended to live in a world they have created for themselves. As a result, these characters find it difficult to relate to others and contact with them appears to be impossible for them. These characters in this play question their identity which they have lost.

Conclusion

The problems of identity, gender, sexuality and class that Edward Albee deals with are the most challenging problems underlying our contemporary philosophy and writings. A careful reading of his plays reveal, that what actually ties the entire oeuvre of his work, is the theme of quest for identity that underlies these dialogues of human alienation. This search for identity in his work is entwined with the search of sympathy, understanding and awakening of moral responsibility. Albee's master piece, *A Delicate Balance* may be the triumphant play in social information, as it manipulates the problems of alienation and identity in America which have been the disappointing issues for a long time. It explores the realistic spheres and reflects the most chaotic situations that are happening in America. This research paper will be very helpful in providing a deep insight on the current subjects of suppression, pathos, anguish, agony, alienation, discrimination, fractured relationships and identity crisis. Furthermore, it throws light on the lives of contemporary American society at a time when religious, moral, political and social structures have collapsed. It also provides a fresh insight on existential crisis, majority hegemony, arrogance, complacency, miscommunication, social disparity and dehumanization. These problems have to be discoursed continuously with the hope of accomplishing equality, freedom and identity in America, the land of diverse cultures.

References

- Debusscher, Gilbert. *Edward Albee: Tradition and Renewal*, Trans; Anne D. Williams, American Study Center: Brussels Belgium, 1967.
- Trilling, Diana. *The Riddle of Albee's Who's is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In *Edward Albee: Twentieth Century Views-A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. By C.W.E. Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Reddy, K. Suneetha. *Themes and Techniques in the Plays of Edward Albee*, Discovery Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 2014.
- Albee, Edward. *A Delicate Balance*, Atheneum: New York, 1967.
- Albee, Edward. *A Delicate Balance*, Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc, 2013.
- Nettler, G.H. *A Measure of Alienation*, American Sociological Review 22, December, 1957.
- Kaufman, Arnold S. 'On Alienation' in *Richard Schacht's Alienation*, Double Lay and Company Inc, 1970.
- Daronkolaee, E.N. & M.B Hojjat, *A Survey of Man's Alienation in Modern World: Existential Reading of Sam Shepard's Buried Child and True West*, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol-2, No. 7, 2012.
- Sayers, Sean. *The Concept of Alienation in Existentialism and Marxism*, Kent University Press, 2003.
- Hall, Stuart. *Ethnicity: Identity and Difference*, Ed., Geof Eley and R. Suny, *Becoming National: A Reader*, Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Wendling, A.E. *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Seeman, Melvin. *On the Meaning of Alienation*, American Sociological Review, SAGE Publications, Vol. 24, No. 6, 1959.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to the Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol-II*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.