

The Sandbox: Decline of family values

Dr. Ali Hasan

Lecturer of English

Government College, Malpura(Tonk)

The Sandbox marks a breakthrough in Albees' career. Moving away from realism it establishes him as the representative of the theatre of the absurd in America. Initially this play went unnoticed by the New York Press. However, later on the same press created a furore on the production of The American Dream. Perhaps its brevity alluded the critics. The play just takes fourteen minutes to perform. Albee considers The Sandbox, as his best play. In an interview, he says, "Sandbox is a perfect play. Fortunately it is short enough so that I can't make any mistakes in it. It'a... a very good play... a damn good play" (qtd. in Hayman 20).

A process of depersonalization of characters is introduced here which is at the centre of The theatre of absurd. None of the characters in this play have names. They are called by their functions such as Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Young Man, and Musician. Instead of Characters they took like cartoons and they talk and act on stage like buffoons. In the scenic description of the play and its characters Albee gives this hint "these names are of empty affection and point up the pre-senility and vacuity of their characters" (4). Like the theatre of the Absurd plays, the watching of the Albee's plays is not fun. It is quite a disturbing experience. R.K. Kaul thinks that Albee has depicted "a savage, ruthless cruelty in the heart of man - and woman" (5).

The play introduces the theme of "Momism" by showing a domineering mother in contrast to a Daddy, who is submissive and obedient. This theme is repeated in most of Albee's plays. The roots of this theme go very deep. Albee was an adopted child. His childhood was spent comfortably or rather leisurely. The problems began in his adolescence and became worse in his youth. The differences with his parents were so great that at the age of 21, he separated from the family and spent a decade in Greenwich village living off a trust his maternal grandmother had left him in 1949.

The Sandbox is dedicated to his Grandma who died in 1959 at the age of eighty three. According to Albee in contemporary society only Grandmas represent the last valuable link to the ideal American society: a society which is not perverted by the corrupt values of Mommy and Daddy. About his grandmother as Albee recollected, "I could communicate with her. She was at the end of it and I was at the beginning. So both of us were outside the ring" (Anon. 51). In the play Grandma is dumped mercilessly into the Sandbox while Mommy

and Daddy sit on chairs and wait for her dying. In another play, The American Dream, the young man is systematically mutilated by the consumerist minded Mommy.

The Sandbox opens with the meaningless talk of Mommy and Daddy. Mommy considers the stage to be a beach a place where she would like to see the endgame of Grandma. The beach is important for many reasons. It is an open place, surrounded by natural beauty, and a public resort. Here Mommy could show her love which in reality is nothing but cruelty. Her tears are crocodile tears. The place gives her maximum satisfaction as she remarked while Grandma pretends to be dead. "It pays to do things well" (156).

There is no meaningful discourse between Mommy and Daddy because Daddy can't think "anything new" while Mommy herself talks in cliches. There is a remote chance of a dialogue between Grandma and Mommy, when the mommy is waiting impatiently for Grandmas dying. The Grandma complains directly to the audience about her vulnerable condition. Her remarks reveal the vacuity of Americanfamily life. "What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house... stick her in a car... bring her out here from the city... dump her in a pile of sand... and leave her here to set" (149). Grandma also recollects the hardships which she had faced in rearing up Mommy because her husband had died when she was only thirty years old. Grandma remembers how terrible Mommy was in her childhood and she says "I had to raise that Big cow (indicates Mommy) over there all by my lonesome. You can imagine what that was like" (150). The character of Grandma is the very humane. It is in direct contrast to the character of Mommy and Daddy. Critics think that this sympathetic characterisation of old character differentiates Albee from the European absurdists. Albee still believes that all is not lost. In this senseless modern world, there is still some hope. People are dislocated rather than lost. He is optimistic about the recovery.

Like another play The Death of Bessie Smith, this play has also the sky in the background. The time changes fromthe brightest day to the deepest night. Thus the sky and the change of light symbolise continuous decay. Besides this a nameless young Man continues calisthenics throughout the play. Albee has explained the reason for this in the beginning of the play, "these calisthenics, employing the arms only, should suggest the beating and fluttering of wings. The Young Man is, after all, the Angel of Death" (144).

Later in the play Daddy hears an off-stage rumble, which Mommy says, is an indication that Grandma's time has come. The rumbling sound is repeated thrice. Each time it is louder and finally it turns violent. Similarly Mommy's sighs also become louder. The stage becomes dark during this scene but suddenly there is light on the stage as Grandma complains "I am not ready" (154). When Mommy tells her that her mourning time is over, Grandma pretends to be dead. The Mummy utters her most inhuman and consumerist speech. "So it is! well! our long night is over. We must put away our tears, take off our mourning... and face thefuture. It's our duty" (155). After this Mommy and Daddy go away. Grandma tries to come out of the Sandbox but she cannot

move. After much hesitation the Young Man advances and like an amateur artist declares to Grandma "I am the Angel of death. I am... uh... I am come for you" (157). The Young Man bends over and gently kisses the forehead of Grandma who willingly accepts his kiss and thanks him for it.

In an article "continuity and change in the American Family", Tamara K. Hareven has pointed out the transformations which have taken place in American life in the past half of this century. According to her the major change is the replacement of "collective view of the family to one of individualization". She further writes that the separation of individuals which they consider freedom has "eroded the resilience of the family and its ability to withstand crises. Moreover, it has contributed to a greater separation among family members and especially to the isolation of older people" (249). The Sandbox criticizes the idea that institutionalization of old people is the best way of treating them. Mommy considers Grandma as an impediment to her freedom, because Grandma reminds her of the reality of old age which she is trying to forget. Therefore in The American Dream, Mommy constantly frightens Grandma by mentioning the van man who will take her away from the home if she does not sit quiet and obey Mommy. The critic, Paolucci seems to be mistaken in her judgement of the play when she writes, "in moving toward abstraction of this kind, the dramatist is in fact abandoning social themes" (Tension to Tonic, 26). The Sandbox is a sharp criticism of the complacency of the Mommy. The play focuses on the disintegration of the family, an institution which was once considered the backbone of every success. Today family life is in a very bad shape. Intolerance is increasing in alarming proportion, reducing the family to consist merely of a husband and a wife who are also poles apart in their aims and objectives. Debusscher has rightly pointed out, "the family is now but an empty myth, a form without content" (32).

The theme of disintegration of family values in at the core of this play. It focuses on the substitution of appearance for reality. In this society, even love, humanity, and old age is measured by its commodity value. The Mommy's comment goes straight to the heart of the malady when she sees Grandma a little more than half buried in sand and says, "Lovely! it's... it's hard to be sad... She looks... so happy. (With pride and conviction). It pays to do things well" (156). The concept of marriage has also degenerated. Today it is regarded as a means to social upliftment and economic security. Instead of looking for suitable matches girls look for partners who could bring enormous wealth and put it in their possession.

The Sandbox itself is a great symbol. It connotes many layers of meanings. Paolucci has suggested that "the Sandbox stands to a grave, regression, dreams, escape, peace" (27). The most important thing it discloses is the substitution of the sandbox for a grave, as a natural abode for the dead. The Grandma is deprived of natural things even after her death.

The play draws a pattern of decline in many spheres of American society. It criticizes unproductiveness in marriage. Albee shows that marriage is an institution which has been drained of love and affection. William H. Chafe in an article "Women and American Society" has given alarming figures about the deterioration in American family life:

As late as in 1950s more than 70 percent of all American families comprised of a father who worked, and a mother who stayed at home to take care of the children. By 1980 that description applied to only 15 percent of all families. In the same years, birth rates declined precipitously. At the height of the baby boom, the average family had more than three children. By 1980 that figure had fallen to less than 1.6 children, the reproduction level required for zero population growth (265).

Albee's concern in The Sand box is the decline of family values. According to him the substitution of false values for real values are the main cause of alienation, prevailing inertia, lack of communication, cruelty and rigidity of human relationships. Instead of love there is the atmosphere of hatred and terror. The criteria for successful marriage shifts from emotional satisfaction to economic security. Where people of lower echelon are treated as cogs in the machine, the condition of superiors is not far better. They all fit in the picture of Aldous Huxley's description of modern man in Brave New World where he describes them as "well fed, well clad- satisfied sexually, yet without self, without any except the most superficial contact with his fellow men" (qtd. in Fromm, 86). Albee is agonised to see the growing alienation and complacency of the bourgeois classes. His plays presents the inner conscience of modern man. He shows how most of their sufferings are due to a spiritual vacuum in their lives. The hollowness of the their values could not sustain them any longer.

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