

## The Rise of Material Values in the American Society and Its Effects on Family Ties in Edward Albee's The Sandbox

انتشر القيم المادية في المجتمع الأمريكي وتأثيراتها على العلاقات الأسرية في مسرحية أدور البي  
صندوق الرمل

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### Abstract

Edward Albee's one act play The Sandbox reflects his pessimistic and skeptical point of view concerning the American society as the individuals are transformed into machine-like creatures while they are searching for the American Dream. This play presents a pathetic picture of human beings as they grow old and approach death. As the play unfolds, the characters reveal their point of view concerning life and death and how they look at the old people. This paper aims at discussing the theme of family disintegration in the family ties as the family members lose all sense of compassion for their grandmother. The evens of the play show clearly how family members treat the grandmother badly and leave her to live in solitude, therefore, the title of play represents symbolically the bad treatment which she receives by the other member of the family.

Ironically, this disintegration of the moral values is juxtaposed with the rapid progress of the American society which throws a dark shade on family relationships and on the American individual. The play reveals how the children's cruelty and tough dealing with the grandmother reflects the change of values in a society which is rapidly developing and in which people are in pursuit of the American Dream. However, in their pursuit of this dream, they neglect certain moral values and this leads to the disintegration of the family ties. This paper examines in details how Albee's play reveals this change of human values in the society as a result of the spread other values like consumerism and greediness followed by the analyses of selected relevant quotes from the play, and it ends up with conclusions and works cited.

**Keywords: Material values, society, Albee, *The Sandbox*, family**

#### المستخلص

تعكس مسرحية إدوارد ألبى صندوق الرمل وجهة نظره فيما يتعلق بالمجتمع الأمريكي حيث يتم تحويل الأفراد إلى مخلوقات شبيهة بالآلة أثناء بحثهم عن الحلم الأمريكي. تقدم هذه المسرحية صورة مثيرة للشفقة للبشر وهم يشيخون ويقتربون من الموت. ومع تطور أحداث المسرحية، تكشف الشخصيات عن وجهة نظرهم فيما يتعلق بالحياة والموت وكيف ينظرون إلى كبار السن. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى مناقشة موضوع التفكك الأسري والروابط العائلية حيث يفقد أفراد الأسرة كل إحساس بالشفقة تجاه جدتهم. وتظهر أحداث المسرحية بوضوح كيف يتعامل أفراد الأسرة مع الجدة بشكل سيئ ويتركونها تعيش في عزلة، لذلك فإن عنوان المسرحية يمثل رمزياً المعاملة السيئة التي تتلقاها من قبل أفراد الأسرة. تقترن القيم الأخلاقية بالتقدم السريع للمجتمع الأمريكي الذي يلقي بظلال قاتمة على العلاقات الأسرية وعلى الفرد الأمريكي. تكشف المسرحية كيف تعكس قسوة الأطفال وتعاملهم القاسي مع الجدة تغيير القيم في مجتمع يتطور بسرعة ويسعى فيه الناس إلى تحقيق الحلم الأمريكي. ولكنهم في سعيهم لتحقيق هذا الحلم يتجاهلون بعض القيم الأخلاقية وهذا يؤدي إلى تفكك الروابط الأسرية. تدرس هذه الورقة بالتفصيل كيف تكشف مسرحية ألبى هذا التغيير في القيم الإنسانية في المجتمع نتيجة انتشار القيم الأخرى مثل النزعة الاستهلاكية والجشع متبوعاً بتحليلات الاقتباسات المختارة ذات الصلة من المسرحية، وينتهي الأمر باستنتاجات وأعمال مستشهد بها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القيم المادية، المجتمع، البي، صندوق الرمل، العائلة.

Edward Albee is considered as one as one of the leading American playwrights whose plays are controversial. His dramatic style is characterized by being unique because in his drama, he combined techniques and theatrical elements from the past with the inventiveness of the technique which he introduced. Therefore, he is one of the modern American playwrights who contributed to the development of the American theatre until it reaches its maturity after WWII. He worked hard to make a shift in the contemporary American theatre from the psychological drama to a drama that is involved in the social and moral issues. In his plays, he dramatizes the individual's holding of false values at the expense of the withdrawal of the real and genuine values, the pursuit of the American dream and how a "forged familial relation is easily observed in the life of modern American society" (Mesereve, 1965, p. 356). Albee's ideas are naturalistic in the sense that he shed lights on the social forces and how they play an important role in shaping the behaviors and the motives of his characters. Moreover, he tries to prove in his plays that the characters' actions are justified by giving them psychological validity. In Albee's plays, the dialogue is realistic as a result of his ability to imitate the American idioms and speeches. The plots of his plays are usually simple in which the events are presented realistically allowing his characters to develop the dramatic scenes. The salient feature of Albee's plays is a presentation of a true-to-life picture presenting events which seem real and characters who are life-like. Though Albee made use of realistic events and characters, he adopted the techniques of the symbolists to help him to give a better expression. In this respect, Styan points out that Albee's use of the symbolist technique is the result of his belief that the symbolists' plays "create what is a verisimilitude rather than an exact replica of life" (Styan, 1962, p. 65).

Moreover, Albee made use of the absurd techniques which is apparent in some of his plays like The American Dream and The Sandbox in which he tried to explore the

grim reality of man's existence in a world which is devoid of meaning. Besides, Albee was influenced by the surrealists' movement represented by Antonin Artaud who was a member of this movement which was founded in Paris from 1924-1926. Artaud's theatre of cruelty had a great impact on all of his plays. It is noteworthy that Edward Albee was able to blend all of the styles and theatrical tendencies in his drama. Though these theatrical influences emerge in his plays, one can find that Albee tried always to transcend these influences and to create a new theatrical form and vision which characterized his drama.

In his plays, one notices a combination of the comic and the tragic which sometimes produces a contradictory effect on his audience because their feeling of detachment and critical look at the plays is alternating with a feeling of sympathy. However, at other times, both feelings coincide. These contradictory feelings created by the playwright in the audience distinguished his drama and gives it a unique quality.

Moreover, Edward Albee succeeded in writing plays which diagnosed the dilemma of the American individual who lives in a society which is rapidly developing. This rapid scientific and technological development of the American society has its negative sides on the individual in his relationship with others because this development came at the expense of the moral and social values which begun to wane and consequently, led to the degradation of social relationships during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The American individuals begun to adopt a materialistic look at life because while they become increasingly preoccupied with improving their career and in providing themselves with different means of luxury and pleasure, they neglect the essential values of life and they show little concern for social problems and familial relationships. Family members begin to neglect old people and to mistreat them or even to abandon them in private institutions which provide residential accommodations with health care for elderly people because they consider them as a burden in a society in which they are

struggling hard to keep up with the demands of daily life due to the rising inflation and weak government policies. It is clear that this highly competitive life, and the materialistic look which encouraged the independence of man led gradually to the dissolution of family ties which are the backbone of society and to the waning of the old values and ideals of life. This drastic change in the society transforms man's outlook to life and changes his priorities. As he is witnessing the rise of new material values like consumerism and competition, he is transformed into a machine-like creature who believes that happiness depends on material gains. However, this change in society has negative consequence on man and his relationship with others because in the meantime the material values gain prominence and begin to substitute the spiritual and moral values, man begins to feel lonely and miserable.

This dilemma of the modern man is presented by many modern American playwrights. They describe how people seem to have lost the sense of communal life as they become increasingly preoccupied with material values. Therefore, as the social relationships weaken, barriers were created among individuals because they feel unable to establish contacts with each other. Ironically, the only motive for the modern man to maintain a relationship with others is whether this relationship would bring him any material benefits, otherwise they tend to break it.

Edward Albee (1928-2016) is one of the modern playwrights who diagnosed this dilemma of the modern man in his plays, shedding light on the negative consequences of the rise of material values in the society on man's relationships with others including family members. One of these plays in which he delineates subtly this tragic and deplorable situation is his play Sandbox. It is a 15-minute one-act play that was first performed in 1960. It is a companion piece to Albee's other play The American Dream. In The Sandbox, Albee combines elements of the theatre of the absurd as well as elements of the epic theatre to delineate the hypocrisy and emptiness of middle-class

American life and the newly rising values in the society which came as a result of the drastic changes which the American society witnesses. However, these changes in the society which includes scientific and economic progress throw a dark shade on the human relationships and on family ties because as people are trying to keep up with the rapid changes in the society, they begin to feel spiritually and morally lost. As the events of the play unfolds, the superficiality of the American society and the disintegration of moral values appear on the surface.

The stage is set up as a beach in a broad daylight. In the opening scene, a muscular young man appears doing mostly exercises near a sandbox on the beach. In the stage directions of the play, Edward Albee writes that the movements of this character should look like the flapping of wings. Then other characters appear on stage. They are middle-aged man and woman who referred to throughout the play as being Mummy and Daddy. As they enter, they begin to complain about the weather. They look in the direction of the young man who greets them in a friendly manner. Gradually, the attention of the audience is shifting to another character who becomes the center of the attention throughout the remaining part of the play. This character is Grandma, an elderly woman who has been dragged by Mommy and Daddy as they try to figure out where to put her.

As it is clear from this opening scene that the characters of the play don't show any compassion in the way they deal with their grandmother. Through the fragile human and familial ties in the play, Albee is criticizing the human relationships in the American society represented by the hostility which they show in the way they deal with old people represented by the grandmother. In fact, this grandmother is looked at by the other characters of the play as being a person without importance (Pandey, 2016, p. 109). Besides, the play reveals the solitude in which the characters live in the American society and it reveals how they lack a feeling of responsibility towards the elder people, in this respect, Albee point out that the play is "... an examination of the American scene, an

attack on the substitution of artificial for real value in our society... a stand against fiction that everything in this sleeping land of ours is" (Amacher, 1982, p. 61).

It is clear throughout this play that Albee is revealing the dissolution of the human relationships which came as a result of the rapid development in the society. The characters in the play are true representatives of the American individual and they show how the rapid changes in the society affects the mentality of the individual as he becomes increasingly interested in what is superficial and devoid of real significance in the meantime he begins to neglect what is essential in life and what makes the human life worthy to be lived that is why the playwright thinks that the play "is a perfect play. Unfortunately it's short enough so that I can't make any mistakes in it. It's...a very good play ...a damn good play. It's a good fourteen minutes" (Haymen, 1973, p. 27).

It is noteworthy that in this play, Albee does not give his characters names: each one is named according to their position in the family for example, he presented Grandma, Mommy, Daddy and the Young Man who represents the Angel of Death. This is the playwright's way to concentrate on the role that each person takes in the family and the responsibility that it entails which is more important than their names as well as to give the message that he wants to deliver through the play a universality in the sense that this could happen in any American family and not only in one particular family. Albee focuses on the character of the Grandmother because he wants to show how the old people are struggling with their feeling of solitude in the family. Moreover, he describes how the other characters like Mommy and Daddy are preoccupied with the material values to the extent that they neglect the presence of the grandmother. Those characters live in materialistic society where advertisements and consumerism are considered as valuable therefore, the genuine human relationships have no place in their priorities, they disintegrate to give place to the superficial values and that is main reason for the marginalization of the grandmother and the disintegration of the human relationships.

As the play unfolds, Mummy uncovers a cruel aspect in her personality as she brings her mother from the country side to the city to stay with her under the pretext of taking care of her in order to hide her true motive which is to take the grandmother's wealth. The other character is daddy, the middle- aged man who has a high social position and who shares Mommy's opinion concerning the grandmother. In fact, his materialistic ideas made him qualified to marry mommy. Throughout the play, the grandmother looks withered and old but her eyes are glamorous. She is in her eighties and she is the wife of a farmer who died when she was young but she didn't get married and she devoted her life to raise mommy by herself. Therefore, the grandmother's devotion of her family and her refusal to marry after the death of her husband made her a representative of the old moral values which begun to withdraw from society.

Other minor characters are presented: the Young Man who is about twenty-five years old and the musician who looks nice but he has no name given and he does not participate in the dialogue but he plays on a musical instrument and he stops playing music from time to time. The playwright introduces these characters skillfully for the purpose of the presenting the main theme of the play. Grandma is the central character whose presence among the other members of the family acts as an accelerator that lead the family tension to rise to the surface. In fact, she is directing the dialogue of the other characters and She is giving instructions to the musician. The Young Man is standing close to Grandma for a theatrical purpose. In fact, the musicians is standing close grandmother while he is doing some physical exercises so that the attention of audience will be directed to the grandmother who remains half buried in the sand. Beside, the musicians is introduced in order to clarify the changes in the mood which the other character reveal throughout the play.

Throughout the play, the grandmother behaves childishly as she talks with young man because Mommy and Daddy are neglecting her. As the action of the play rises,



Mommy and Daddy behave in a shocking way as they heap sand over the grandmother until she is half buried in the sand and nothing appears from her body except her face and hands. At this moment, Mommy and daddy realize that the grandmother is approaching death and they are looking forward to it. Meanwhile, the grandmother knows that both Mommy and Daddy are waiting for her death because they considers as a useless load. Throughout the play, Albee focuses on the dilemma of this old woman and her deplorable situation as she is carried in a box in the same way animals are carried and her speech reflects "the melancholic inner passions of old member within the American family in the terms of caring and house-keeping in the views of Albee" (Fromm, 1962, p. 88).

As the action of the play rises, the nature of the relationships among characters appears on the surface. It is clear that Daddy's personality seems very weak in comparison with Mommy who is controlling him, the Grandmother is the only person who shows genuine human traits among the family members. The appearance of the young man has dramatic significance because it reflects the characteristic of the typical American personality in the sense that he is superficial and lacks true human values. His presence in the play intensifies the central point of view which Albee is expressing concerning the rising interest of the American Individual in the superficial values.

From the introductory scene and throughout the play, the grandmother is neglected and treated in a dehumanized way by Mommy and Daddy who are waiting anxiously for her death because they consider her as an obstacle which hinders their future plans. What intensifies her pathetic situation is the fact that she is left in a sandbox. In this respect, Stenz argues that leaving her in the sandbox is "a figurative action because the sandbox refers to her grave" (Stenz, 1985, p. 57). The Grandmother is left to die alone because Mommy and Daddy think that this is the suitable time for her to die as she growing old so they think that is better to prepare her for death by putting her in

a sandbox. She is carried to the beach like a child by Mommy and Daddy who forget that she is a human being and that she is should be treated respectfully. The elderly woman tries to accept this humiliating treatment and to justify the bad behavior of Mommy and Daddy.

GRANDMA: "Very old people have perceptions ..... they keep to themselves, because if they expose them to other people...well, you know what ridicule ...neglect are" (Albee, 2004, p. 113).

At these moments, Grandma has contradictory feelings. On one hand, she feels sad and disappointed because of the humiliating treatment which she receives by Mommy and Daddy, but, on the other hand, she welcomes death as a release and as a better choice. She accepts to die peacefully in spite of the humiliating treatment of her family. She finds in her death, a way to avoid a long-term pain and suffering and she accepts death readily, so when the Young man comes closer to her she welcomes him " Grandma: You're....you're welcome....dear " (Albee, 2004, p. 113). In this scene, Mommy shows ingratitude to grandma who cared for her when she was a child but Mommy neglects her and "even burying her living mother in a seaside sandbox and in an airless apartment room" (Solomon, 2010, p. 89). Mommy expresses her sadness when grandma is dying but her feeling are fake and where away rapidly so when the lights come up Mommy ends her mourning. The grandmother understood Mommy's behavior and she knew that family members are waiting for her death. It is evident that through the Sandbox, Albee is condemning the materialistic values which spread widely in the American society side by side with rapid development which happened during that time. Through the play, Albee is presenting a realistic picture of the American society in which the values of consumerism gain importance at the expense of the moral values as it is reflected in the character of the grandmother who feels lonely and neglected by others and who continuously tries to communicate with other member family but her attempts

are futile, therefore the only alternative which is left for her is to die. As she approached death, her body appears half-buried in the sandbox and she feels fear and sadness, is ironic that the Angel of Death is the only one who sympathies with her and tries to communicate with her. What accentuate her pain is the fact that she has been rejected emotionally and this lead her to submit to death and to communicate with death as if it is a member of her family: "Boy, ... oh boy; I'll You're welcome... dear..." (Albee, 2004, p. 156).

The suffering of this old woman is farther revealed in her reaction to the attempts of both Mammy and Daddy to assign date for her death. When she realizes that both of them are waiting to celebrate her death she begins to throw sand at them: "I can't get up. I... I can't move..." (Albee, 2004, p. 157).

In the final scene of the play, the young man reveals his true identity to the grandmother when he leans on her sandbox to tell her that he is the Angel of Death and that he came to take her "I am... uh... come for You" (Albee, 2004, p. 159). She accepts death because of his kind treatment for her and at the end of the play she is led by the Angel of Death to the peace which she is looking for after a life full of humiliation, sadness and loneliness.

As she approaches death, she receives kind treatment by the Angle of Death who kisses her on forehead and leaves her smiling in the final scene of the play. In the final scene of the play, death is presented as a release for the grandmother therefore, "talking with Angel of Death is much more merciful than talking to her family" (Gussow, 2001, pp. 2-3). Thus, she is a representative of many Americans who choose voluntary death as a better substitute of life which is cruel and empty where they could not find a feeling of belonging. In this respect, Amacher points out that "Grandma represents "both the vitality and morality of the old citizens of America: she is what remains of the past, but

is no longer entwined with the present crumbling generation” (Amacher, 1982, p. 58). Because of her feelings of non-belonging, she thinks of death as an escape from this feeling of alienation and cruelty. Therefore, the playwright succeeds in exposing the “shameless organized exploitation which encourages the survivors to buy peace of mind about the deceased, they have abused or ignored while they were alive” (Debusscher, 1969, p. 32).

It is clear from what is presented above, that the play exposes the moral deterioration and the dissolution of family ties which came as a result of the new values of the rapidly developing society. Daddy and Mommy are representatives of the new materialistic society which ignores the basic human values like love and respect. They stand in conflict with Grand mum who represents the old decaying society with its genuine human and moral values. The grandmother is treated like an animal because she is kept in a sandbox. The tragic delineation is complete in the final scene when Grandma welcomes death who kisses her forehead and leaves a smile at her face.

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