

Substitution of Artificial for Real Values: A Study of Edward Albee's *The American Dream*

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Abstract: This paper purports to discuss how the American dream of unlimited progress, human happiness and the freedom of the individual has turned into a kind of nightmare because of the distortions that have crept into these ideals corrupted by such evils as crass materialism, egotism, anarchic individualism and the lack of moral discipline. Albee's ironic treatment of all such false values is a proof of his faith in the necessity of cultivating the right notions of freedom, success and happiness.

Keywords: Obsession, Materialism, Individualism, Artificial, Values, Happiness, Success, Freedom.

Introduction: A strong sense of optimism based on the faith in the powers of man to achieve unlimited success can be described as one of the outstanding features of American outlook. To Merton the goal of success is one of the most important values in American culture for which they all strive and which is largely measured in terms of wealth and material possessions, "A belief in the possibilities of establishing a utopian society with happy and prosperous families, and individuals free to explore and exploit the inexhaustible wealth" (qtd. in Haralambos 403), constitutes the very spirit that animates the American Dream. It recognizes no limits to personal ambition and professes equal opportunity for everyone.

This faith in the values of human freedom and in his powers to achieve happiness, here on earth by realizing his full human potentials can be described as constituting the very soul of humanistic philosophy in its essentials. The hopes of fulfilling this dream of an ideal life seemed to be nearing fruition with rapid strides in the field of science and technology in the 20th century. The Americans believed that all human ills could be cured with magic wand of

science and this earth could be changed into a kind of wonderland. But as they encountered the ugly face of growth of industrialism and materialism they realized how false and deceptive these hopes were. Most of the American writers, such as Miller, O'Neil, George Kelley, Odet and Tennessee Williams have responded sensitively to this phenomenon and their works expose in different ways the naivete at the heart of this illusionary optimism of the Americans. They also satirize the various forms of aberrations which have distorted the face of the American Dream. Albee, too, is keenly aware of how such values as freedom, equality and prosperity have become corrupted in modern times resulting in a false sense of success and happiness.

The play, *The American Dream*, reveals the distorted face of the accepted ideals of success, ambition and material prosperity which were originally meant to create a healthy society of people with moral and spiritual strength. Martin Esslin is right when he tells that Albee "attacks the very foundations of American optimism" (Esslin 302). *The American Dream* is a deliberate attempt on the part of the playwright to examine the society and mirror up its reality to its members. This purpose of the playwright becomes clear from the preface that he wrote to the play:

The play is an examination of American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation and vacuity, it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this land of ours is peachy-keen (Albee 21).

Thus, the dramatist has explicitly stated that the purpose of this play is to 'examine' and 'attack' the artificialities prevalent in the American society.

Albee's treatment of the life of Americans and the ills afflicting them shows that he is a writer with a moral impulse. The way he dramatizes the materialism, complacency and artificiality, and their effects upon his contemporary society indicates the importance Albee attaches to the piety and necessity of human bond based upon human sympathy and understanding. He exposes the self-centeredness of the individuals, their love for illusion and lack of moral discipline in their relationships. To achieve his purpose, Albee pierces through the artificial forms of several key values such as satisfaction, ambition and success attached to the American Dream.

Ambition is life-giving to the success myth of the Americans. They try to achieve without caring for one's efficiency, potentiality and capacity. This ambition for success manifests itself in different ways. It appears most widely in their hunger for social and political status, love for money and obsession for success in every bid of competition. Their craze to achieve social status by means of occupying political offices is revealed by the example of Daddy in the play. He appears to have no outstanding quality of head and heart to justify his ambition for the office of a senator. But even then he is in the rat-race and aspires to be a notable public figure. Mommy tells about the aspirations of Daddy:

All his life Daddy had wanted to be United States senator, but now...why now he's changed his mind, and for the rest of his life he's going to want to be governor... it would be nearer the apartment, you know (*TAD*38).

This aspiration of Daddy is representative of the ambition of the American male who, having failed to find genuine satisfaction and contentment, runs after the false form of success and happiness. This results in his being caught up in a state of tension and inner conflict leading him deeper into the quagmire of frustration. This is apparent when Daddy grumbles: "That's the way things are today, you just can't get satisfaction: you just try" (*TAD* 27). This malady has infected Mommy too who also tries the game of superiority when she tells the hat-seller that the color of the hat is wheat and not beige, but she buys the same one accepting it now, as a beige colored hat. But Mrs. Barker tells her that the color of Mommy's hat is wheat and not beige. Mommy accepts it because Mrs. Barker can impress her as she is the chairman of the women's club. This suggests that Mommy is impressed by the superior status of Mrs. Barker. Thus everybody is intent upon waging an ineffectual war of superiority upon the other whenever one gets a chance to do so. All this shows the stupidity of those Americans who run after the false forms of superiority and ignore the fact that the quality of a person is determined not only by social status but also by his moral character.

To achieve this end, the Americans feel inclined to use every possible means, fair or foul. This is most evident in the case of Mommy, who as a child had faced utter economic hardship. Her mother could not provide for her even the basic needs of life. She admits:

When I was a little girl, I was very poor, and Grandma was very poor, too, because Grandpa was in heaven (*TAD 29-30*).

The tough economic and family conditions coupled with a natural desire for money and success worked on the mind of the immature child and she learnt to decide and choose her life values. And as it happened, money and success came to occupy the top position. Mommy decided to get riches without effort. She chose the most effortless means of getting riches and status, almost a substitute of Grandma's shop made quality cake. She very early in her life resolved to marry a rich old man. Grandma recalls and reminds Mommy:

When she was no more than eight years old she used to climb up to my lap and say in a sickening little voice, when I grow up, I'm going to marry an 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 (*TAD32*).

When Mommy grew up she married Daddy who was economically and socially superior to her. The chief advantage of marriage to a rich man is that Mommy can always go for shopping with her husband's money. It underlines Mommy's obsession with economic security, for which she married not only a man who was 'rich' but was also 'old.' Obviously she was expecting his death to assure her a sound position. Mommy married Daddy to scale up the social ladder by marrying his riches. Marriage and motherhood for Mommy are not means of natural fulfilment of her womanhood, but solutions to the material problem of living. Daddy's importance as a human being depends upon the money he earns. This becomes clear when Mommy says:

I have a right to live off you because I married you, and because I used to let you get on top of me and bump your uglies; and I have a right to all your money (*TAD 31*).

This is not just a new phenomenon. Even elderly people remembered how they, too, were allured by it. This becomes obvious when Grandma tells about her to the young man.

She tells him how she won twenty five thousand smackroles in a baking context buying a store-bought cake and slipping it in unnoticed by anyone. For the sake of success she stoops to foul and illegitimate means. It is an example how the mania for success can force these people to violate the accepted norms and values which are the basis for every social institution and order.

Albee wages a war against this deviation. This is clear from the ironical treatment of the oddities in the behavior of all these characters. His criticism of this deviation is obviated by the comments of Mrs. Barker in the play when she talks of Ambition:

Ambition: that's the ticket. I have a brother who's very much like you,
Daddy...Ambitious.

The irony becomes quite apparent when we come to know that Mrs. Barker's brother whom she boasts of being ambitious, has been written up in many psychiatric journals because of his abnormality.

Another element at the heart of American Dream is the desire and hope for a happy family. But this too has eluded the modern Americans because of the lack of those values and principles which are pre-requisites for meaningful and satisfying family relationships. Marriage to them is no longer a union of two loving minds and a source of mutual fulfilment and joy based upon a sense of respect and companionship for each other. There is no real deep passion between Mommy and Daddy. They often indulge in a quarrel. This is partly because they were drawn to each other by reason other than the feeling of love and concern for each other. As stated earlier, to Mommy it is only money that matters. She uses marriage only as a means to advance her material fortunes. Daddy too married, first, as a mark of social status and second, for the fulfilment of sexual needs. Even sexually their marriage seems to be in an unhealthy state. Grandma tells that Mommy used to want to sleep in her room whenever Daddy got fresh but now Daddy no longer wants to sleep with anyone because he has been sick. Sex for them seems to have become a kind of compulsive obligation leading, therefore, to a feeling of repulsion and sickness rather than to attraction and fulfilment. As a result it does not fulfill its important function of procreation and

dissipates into a state of disappointment and dryness. This signifies the failure of marriage as a means of not only physical and emotional fulfillment of the individuals but also as a social institution of producing healthy children, the promises of the future. Thus, the marriage of Mommy and Daddy can be termed as an arrangement with vested and very limited motives. It was a kind of bargain in which each party insisted upon the satisfaction of personal ends.

This breakdown of relationships is confined not only to the husband-wife relationships but also extends to the area of relationships between parents and children. The “shameful treatment of old people” as Albee describes it, is both actual and symbolic in the play. He exposes the inhumanity inherent in the crudely selfish attitude of the young who try to dump away the old members of the family like empty and used up tins. This marks the disappearance of the elements of piety and duty from this most important and sacred of human relationships. Albee’s concern over this crisis in the child parent relationship appears vividly through a number of examples in the play. Grandma presents the case of old people. Though she is active and completes her duties efficiently and with pleasure; yet Mommy wishes to cart her off. Mommy professes her love for Grandma who’s actually her mother but she provokes Daddy to get rid of her. Mommy, instead of providing emotional support to her mother, tends to treat her shabbily and arrogantly. She shouts at Grandma: “Nonsense Grandma: just wait until I get my hands on you” (*TAD* 48).

Grandma reveals the plight of old persons when she says:

When you get old, you can’t talk to people because people snap at you. When you get so old, people talk to you that way. That’s why you become deaf, so you won’t be able to hear people’s talking to you that way. And that’s why you go and hid under the covers in the big sofa bed, you won’t feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way. That’s why old people die eventually (*TAD* 29).

The innate compassion and insight of old generation is juxtaposed with heartless materialism of new generation. The incidents of Mrs. Barker’s discarding her mother and Mommy’s desire to send Grandma with the ‘van man’ are representative examples of the ruthlessness of the young generation of the old. Grandma is conscious of the fact that she is unwanted in the family which is a kind of death in life. According to Albee:

She departs from a form of life that is a great deal more dead than anything else. I guess, I specifically meant her to die but not in the sense we understand die, to move out of the death with-in-life situation that everybody in the play was (qtd.in Stenz 32).

The play is a caustic comment upon the breakdown of child parent relationships. Obsessed with a selfish notion of freedom, the young try to shake off the old whom they consider irritating interference in their private life. They consider the parents unbearable burdens on their households and therefore try to shun their responsibilities by shifting them off to such institutions as the house for the old.

The play is also unsparing of the American parents who treat the child not as their sacred responsibility but as a commodity to be used for their own ego satisfaction. Usually a child is considered to be a cohesive force of the family but for Mommy and Daddy, child is as dehumanized as a commodity that can be purchased for self-satisfaction. Having failed to produce a baby of their own, Mommy and Daddy adopt a boy from 'bye-bye adoption service.' But their motive behind adoption is not any natural parental instinct but the illusion of happy family. Mommy and Daddy interfere at every step and try to make him a model of their wishes, likes and dislikes. They impose artificial ways on the child just to satisfy their ego. The result is that Mommy and Daddy mutilate the adopted son and destroy his independent self eventually. In this way, the normal human growth- physical and psychological- is meddled with and hindered. The dismal episode is related by Grandma to Mrs. Barker:

Grandma: It turned out the bumble didn't look like either one of its parents. That was enough of a blow, but things got worse. One night, it cried its heart out, if you can imagine such a thing.

Mrs. Barker: Cried its heart out! Well!

Grandma: But that was the only beginning. Then it turned out it only had eyes for its Daddy.

Mrs. Barker: For its father! Why, any self-respecting woman would have gauged those eyes right out of its head.

Grandma: Well, she did. That's exactly what she did. But then, it kept its nose up in the air.

Mrs. Barker: Ufggh! How disgusting!

Grandma: That's what they thought. But then it began to develop an interest in its you-know-what.

Mrs. Barker: In its you- know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hand off at the wrists!

Grandma: Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first, they cut off its you-know-what.

Mrs. Barker: A much better idea!

Grandma: That's what they thought. But after they cut off its you-know-what, it still put its hands under the covers, looking for its you-know-what. So, finally they had to cut off its hands at the wrists.

Mrs. Barker: Naturally!

Grandma: Of course. And then, as it got bigger they found out all bigger things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay...just dreadful things.

Mrs. Barker: Dreadful!

Grandma: So you can understand how they became discouraged.

Mrs. Barker: I certainly can! And what did they do?

Grandma: What did they do? Well, for the last straw, it finally up died (TAD 47-48).

Thus, the concept of individuality which is at the core of the American Dream of happiness and success, is torn to pieces. The child could not grow with his individuality, having respect for Daddy, a sense of self-respect and dignity, trying to live a natural life of instincts and emotions. The process of bringing up the child shows a violent attitude of the parents particularly of the jealous and domineering mother. The child is dismembered, his eyes are gouged out, it is castrated, its hands are cut out, its tongue is cut out and finally it dies. Thus, Albee has given us a fable of his society, where all the capabilities for connection, eyes to see, sexual organs to procreate, hands to touch and tongue to speak are destroyed. This episode makes it clear that the attitude of apathy and indifference, and the feeling of isolation is deliberately developed in individuals by the very process of bringing up. This is because the American society has reduced the human being to a manipulable 'it' or just a 'pathetic vegetable.' It becomes clear from the play that instead of giving ample chance for individuality to flourish, the American society tends to demand rapid conformism.

The youngman, the second adopted son, almost an identical twin of the bumble of joy further illustrates the mutilation and surrender of individuality to the oppressive force of conformity for money; "I'll do almost anything for money." Money stands for body and hence the youngman presents the dichotomy between body and soul, personal need and social demands:

A fall from grace...a departure of innocence...loss...loss.How can I put it to you?All right; like this: once...it was as if all at once my heart...became numb...almost as though I...almost as though...just like that...it had be wrenched from my body....And from that time I have been unable to laugh. Once...I was asleep at the time...I awoke, and my eyes were burning. And since that time I have been unable to see anything, anything, with pity, with affection... with anything but...cool disinterest (TAD 54).

The youngman is, thus, the dehumanized personification of the American dream that tempts with its external voluptuous glow of material welfare (body), but has nothing human (soul), inside it to sustain man's faith in the value of emotional and moral relationships and hence of society. According to Anne Poalucci "He (Albee) has probed deeper than most other American playwrights for the implications of our moral and spiritual exhaustion" (Poalucci 5).

The play, thus, is a virulent attack upon the weakening of humanistic values in the American society as a result of which the dream of achieving unlimited happiness and progress by strength of human efforts has turned into a mere illusion. The Americans have been taken in by false forms of liberty, success, material prosperity and happiness. They have been the victims of a distorted sense of right and wrong – driving them to use the immoral, sometimes inhuman means for achieving the professed goals of their life. The play, in short, is not a denial of the possibility of achieving the real American dream, but an attack upon the corruptions which have crept into this concept and also on the means employed to achieve it.

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