

FAMILY DISINTEGRATION IN ALBEE'S *THE SANDBOX*

Kadhim Hatem Kaibr and Guo Jingjing

School of Foreign Languages, English Dept, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Hubei Province, Wuhan City, China, Dept of English

ABSTRACT: *In most of Albee's plays, human relationships, in one form or another, are the final cost paid for a person's emotional detachment from humanity. So, the absence of a human relationship with his family leads to desperation, hidden behind the emotional detachment of the modern man. Therefore, symbolic suicide, murder, and death are the results of these plays. Through Albee's The Sandbox, this study strives to cast a matter of style on the family relationship in order to prove that losing of humanity values and the negative attitude of younger generation towards the older generation, led to dramatic effects in the American society specifically after the Second World War.*

KEYWORDS: Albee, Elderly Care, Frustration, Ingratitude, Cruelty.

INTRODUCTION

The Sandbox (1959) is Albee's shortest and favourite play. Albee declares that "*The Sandbox* is a perfect play. Fortunately, it is short enough so that I can't make any mistakes.... A very good play" (11). Albee describes this work as an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in their society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction in which everything in this slipping land of theirs is peachy-keen (Amacher 61).

This play has three main characters. Mommy a fifty-five years old Mommy who is strict, sadistic, and a tyrannical woman is Grandma's daughter bring her mother from the farm to her house in the city. She gave her an army blanket and her own dish. Daddy a sixty- years old daddy is small and thin but well to do and that is why mommy married him. Grandma who is wilted, skinny with glaucous eyes, and eighty- six is married to a farmer in her seventieth. Her husband died when she was in thirties, and thus she raised Mommy alone. The play also has two minor characters: the Young Man, good looking, up to twenty-five years old (he symbolizes the Angel of Death); and the musician, who is a nice guy with no name given or a dialogue to share, merely plays and holds playing music according to the instructions of the other characters in the play.

Albee created these five characters carefully, from both a literary and an artistic standpoint in order to employ them to achieve his aims in this play. Grandma is the central figure that reflects the nature of the conflict. She represents the stage manager who runs the dialogue of the other characters. She instructs the musician how to play his music—"keep it nice and soft" (135). In locating the Young Man on stage, a theatrical purpose is intended: Albee is keen to place the Young Man close to Grandma as he continues his sports training in order to draw the attention of the audience to Grandma, who is half-buried in the sand. Also, Albee places the musical character in redundant only to highlight the changes in the mood of the other characters according to the events of the play.

In building the characters of this play, Albee is careful to make all Grandma's dialogue be through her presence in the sandbox because this box symbolises both the coffin in which any person lies in death from one hand and the cradle in where to avoid redundancy the newborn child is placed from the other. So, Grandma's voice is a mixture of the child's behaviour in his cradle and an elderly person upon his death. And in this context, Gussow states that Grandma's voice is a "cross between a baby's laugh and cry" (11).

In this drama, Albee presents his characters without giving specifying personal names: each one is named according to his position, such as Grandma, Mommy, Daddy and the Angel of Death. He focuses on Grandma as being the main character to expose her conflict with loneliness within the family. The playwright then spotlights Mommy and Daddy, as they continue fighting for their existence through greediness. Both are ready to bury Grandma in the sandbox to gain her wealth. It is really a figurative action because the sandbox refers to her grave.

This one-act play opens on a sunny day. The Young Man performs calisthenics on the beach; Daddy and Mommy enter the stage holding Grandma between their hands and put her on the sand, sit then on chairs nearby. The musician plays his music from time to time as directed by the other characters like Mommy and Grandma. Through the action of the play, the Young Man looks nice and welcomes the characters with a smile. With her childish behaviour, Grandma starts a conversation directly with the Young Man in front of the audience. Then, Mommy and Daddy begin to put sand on Grandma till she becomes half-buried, only her face and hands are visible showing. Mommy realises that Grandma is dying. With her husband, Mommy waits for grandma last moment. Grandma knows what Mommy and Daddy are weaving, but she is motionless due to the sand.

Both Mommy and Daddy become aware that this is a suitable time for Grandma to die, as she has become advanced in age. So, they decide to put her in the children's sandbox. They carry her to the beach just like a child, holding her under her armpits, forgetting all about the essential need of human self-respect. In a clear manner, they display the act of humiliating the elderly. Grandma tries to forget a private relationship with the audience and attract their interest; she also tries to justify her real feelings about the ill treatment of her daughter and son-in-law by saying:

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. (113)

Clearly, Grandma has views about growing old, and she knows what others say about old people. Many people believe that when they become advanced in age, they are headed directly to the grave, but in fact, it is others who begin to disgrace one's dignity in designating her/him useless. For this reason, most people become deaf so as not to be able to hear others' bad comments, and they wish they would die as quick as wink. In fact, Grandma feels a sense of isolation and loneliness, which widens the gap of communication between Mommy and Daddy. Her struggle against the injustice and the harsh treatment they dispense is greater than the struggle against the Young Man who comes to put an end to her life. As "a tiny, wizened woman with bright eyes" (Albee 167), she guesses that both Mommy and Daddy have arranged to dump her in the sandbox; her body becomes totally stiff but her face reflects fear and confusion (171). This pathetic situation brings to her current existence a sense of separation: no one in her family shares any conversation or pays any attention to her; the Angel of Death is the only one who communicates with her and understands what the old woman needs. He

inspires in her the feeling of a mother talking to her son, where she says: “Boy,... oh boy; I’ll say...Pretty good” (150) And “You’re welcome... dear ...” (158)

Stenz says that “Albee deliberately parodies theatrical conventions in order to satirize the vacuity and hypocrisy of a death watch” (34). Thus, this play focuses on the disintegration of the family and the lack of passion among its members, because each family represents a basic unit in any society which can lead an individual to perform his role in society perfectly. Through the bad treatment of Grandma, Albee gives an example of the empty relations which lead ultimately to the disintegration of the family.

GRANDMA: Honestly! 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... I’m eighty-six years old! (149)

Grandma tends to describe her own condition with her daughter’s family just like that of the naughty child: they want him gone, and then treat her like a domestic animal. Grandma rejects Mommy’s desire to specify both the time and place of her death. Suddenly, she throws sand at Mommy and Daddy when she recognises that they start celebrate her occasion of death, and she prepares herself to wait the moment of death: “I can’t get up. I... I can’t move...” (156). The Young Man interrupts her gently:

YOUNG MAN: Uh...ma’am; I ... I have a line here. (157)

At this moment, Young Man stops his training and leans on Grandma’s sandbox, whispering in her ear that he is the Angel of Death and he has come for her. “I am ... uh ... come for you” (159). In fact, Grandma needs such treatment, because she has not it for a long time. In the honesty of her death at the end of the play, Grandma creates peace with an extensive life occupied with uncertainty, displeasure and loss (Stanza 36). When her eyes close, Young Man rests upon her and kisses her on the forehead, leaving her with a smile on her face. Most importantly, the angel of death is presented as almost a savior who comes to help those in need, so, Grandma shows that talking with Angel of Death, and even death itself, is more merciful than the cruelty of her family (Gussow 2–3). That cruelty leads to the death and destruction of any sense of emotional connection among family members.

When Grandma is placed in the sand by her relatives, she rejects such cruelty and continues in her derision and ridicule of Mommy and Daddy, saying what she feels about her rejection of the ill treatment that they have given her. The difficulty of this event lies in the emotional impact on Grandma because her feelings are a cocktail of irony and sadness. Despite the cruelty of her family, she surrenders and accepts her death peacefully. She finds in death her salvation: sometimes one feels that death is the best way to get rid of this miserable life while the general idea is that life and escape from death is the main purpose for all those who come into this world.

In all of Albee’s plays the moral imperative is the obligation for everyone to live with awareness. The demands of institutions and the barriers people build around themselves prevent them from seeing the realities of their condition and foster the creation of self-destructive illusions (Stenz 132). Albee presents the torment of the elderly to criticise the value of the fabric of society and how they behave towards the elderly. Elderly’s desire in death as an escape to get rid of this bad treatment by their family members reflects the state of emotional

detachment between this group of people and their community, where the lack of any emotional association linking them with the nearest people makes them lose the desire to live.

Voluntary death is common among many individuals in American society in order to put an end to their empty life and save their dignity from family humiliation. Thus, *The Sandbox* carries an implied message which relates to the principle of elderly care. Amacher asserts that “Grandma is one of the important characters of his works because she indicates 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” (58). Actually, Albee aims at finding a harmony between the oldest and the youngest within the family, as we know both need careful treatment, and especially the elderly. The play is deeply concerned with 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 32).

Grandma is always a mother who is caring and affectionate to her daughter. But Mommy never returned any kind of love or care for her aged mother. Instead, she buries her mother in the sandbox on a seaside. The instinctive emotion is the link whereby family members unite with each other, so the loss of this association and presence of emotional detachment between parents and children, is the main reason behind the family disintegration, which causes the cruelty in dealings between family members as in the case of Mommy’s bad dealing with Grandma. As mentioned earlier, the issues that lead to the emotional detachment carries multiple aspects, including the absence of emotion between members of the same family.

In *The Sandbox*, Grandma faces difficult conditions: she shoulders the responsibility of raising her daughter, because her husband dies when she is at the age of thirties. In return for this sacrifice, she received ingratitude and maltreatment from her family members. So, the feeling of refraction, frustration, and ill-treatment creates a state of psychological conflict. She sacrificed so much for them, but they don’t give her the passion or kindness that she needs in her late age. Through the play, Grandma finds it attractive to talk with Angel of death, knowing that he is the Angel of death and comes to take her soul. To accept death reflects the state of emotional drought that she experienced, which pushed her to accept death as a salvation from this sufferance.

In this play, Albee makes clear that the main causes for emotional detachment lie in the deteriorating situation in America, where family members adopt cruelty and inhumanity in their treatment of each other especially the elderly. Albee represents the unity of the family and asserts that the care of the elderly is a moral duty. When elderly prefers death to the miserable life that he/she lives, here, he gives a clear indication to the state of emotional detachment from the world around him, because he is shocked by the bad treatment from his family members. All this produces an emotional detachment. This makes a person find in the death his salvation from this life which has become meaningless.

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