



## CONSUMERISM IN EDWARD ALBEE'S "THE AMERICAN DREAM"

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### ABSTRACT

People in the consumer society live under the influence of the advertisements. They buy things they cannot afford. Some critics believe that the products people buy act as substitutes for the healthy human relationships. These things lead to disparity between the human relationships. The American Dream is that dream of a land in which people should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with the opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. Edward Albee's play, *The American Dream* had brought him recognition and earned him fame. The plot involves an adoption of a child in the family. Mommy, Daddy and Grandma are the main characters in the play. Mommy and Daddy cannot conceive a child, so they decide to adopt one. The character Mommy is presented as an unsatisfied person who demands satisfaction all the time. Daddy seems to be playing a puppet in the hands of Mommy. Grandma seems to be the only sane person in the family. Appearance of a young man at the end of the play who seemingly appears to be the American Idol but emotionally he is empty and is a clear vision of American superficiality.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, American Dream, adoption, satisfaction.

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Critics of consumerism include Peter Stearns who in *Consumers in World History* remarks that, "Life in America is exclusively economic in structure and lacks depth." (31) Capitalists key to the current economic decline is the circulation of the capital; in other words, supplement in the consumerism, a system of economy driven by consumer spending. However, the consumerism leads to materialism; the requirement for extra. People in the consumerist society live under the influence of advertisements and often buy things that they don't need, and mostly cannot afford. This further leads to greater economic disparity. Regardless of having the latest products, the consumerists have a feeling of

dissatisfaction due to the wastage of money and yet not achieving anything of personal importance.

The play *The American Dream* (1960) was Edward Albee's second play which brought him recognition as a playwright. The plot involves a story about an adoption in the family, where the adoption family is murderous. Mommy is presented as an unsatisfied consumer who demands satisfaction all the time. Daddy plays only a puppet to Mommy. Grandma seems to be the only sane person in the family who further recounts the whole story of the murdered child to Mrs. Barker. The child Bumble does not meet their demands, so he is mutilated. Eventually he dies for each mistake caused by him.

Appearance of a young man at the end of the play who seemingly appears to be the American Idol but emotionally he is empty and is a clear vision of American superficiality.

Albee was himself adopted by a millionaire couple namely Reed and Francis Albee; he did not meet up to their expectations as he struggled through various institutes and colleges until finally he eventually turned to writing plays. *The American Dream* though labeled as the absurd drama has come across as a satire on the consumer society of the American post World War II that is from 1950 to 1960. Albee's own experience as an adopted child who did not meet his parent's expectations and his keen observation of the conspicuous consumption of Americans at large led him to produce this notorious play which brought recognition. This play has mocked the "American Dream" and the modern trend of the consumerism which the American phenomenon grips the world today.

Coming across the meaning of the phrase "American Dream", it was coined by James Truslow, a famous writer and historian in 1931. The American Dream is that dream of a land in which people should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with a chance for each according to ability or achievement. It is not easy for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. Mainly the American Dream is a land that in which people should be rich and life should be full for everyone. Everyone should have a possibility and a chance. It is hard for the citizens of higher class America to achieve this dream. This dream does not engross the fondness for cars and high wages, but a dream for the social order where each individual can accomplish the full importance. They want to be recognized by others regardless of their birth and position.

James Truslow in *Epic of America*:

It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man

and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (28)

He further wrote:

The American dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (29)

The American Dream that drew the original colonists and has drawn every wave of immigrants throughout American history is the dream of freedom first of all. This dream consists of finding work, working hard and advancing oneself economically, and having one's children with all the advantages. Following the revolution, countless number of Americans had followed the American Dream and had succeeded to a large extent. As there was a high demand for labour; the wages were relatively high in the United States; land was available for the establishment of farms and the American economy was flourishing. The people did work hard; they did advance their economic and social position and gave their children a better start in life than they had themselves. For Americans who attained the American Dream, the dream had been reduced to less importance. Once a determined quantity of wealth was achieved, the requirement for hard labor and progression was not significant, and prominent expenditure and a longing for little strenuous work became more vital. The next generation which followed, the craving for the instant accomplishment of the supplementary freedom and pleasing life their ancestors had produced without making money by themselves.

This dream further took a different meaning when the American population slowly fell into the trap of conspicuous utilization and started contrasting the success and well being with mindless attainments of the consumer goods and ignoring the finer things of life like human relations, quality time and constructive occupation. Everything could be bought, once you got wearied out with your achievements, throw it away and buy a better one. Attaining the so called "American Dream" is often a measure of "success" in consumerism in the American society. The American Dream is not a measure of the one's quality character, but the measure of the value of material goods they have accumulated. Americans tend to be self indulgent and accumulate. The human identity in America is no longer known by what one does but by what one owns. An expedition for better material goods defines this dream and as these goods improve, people hurry ensuing in a rat race to get hold of the better product, hence disposing off the older one without thinking. The accomplishment gives one an impermanent relief or satisfaction until a new one is launched in the market. Edward Albee in his responsive feeling has realized that these imperfections in the American Dream and has distinguished the baby Bumble in the play *The American Dream* to some invention the buyer was exhausted of and wanted to throw away or have a substitute in his play.

The other side of this theory is treating one's children as a product that has to be properly shaped and finished according to the parent's ambitions. Albee probably compared his childhood and the fact that his own parents tried to shape him up as a perfect prototype male child, in other words the "American Dream" like the young man in the play *The American Dream*. His mother Francis was his father's third wife. She tried to raise Albee in a way so that he could fit into the social circle she lived. Albee led a frustrated life which led him to be expelled from various colleges and institutes. He was a child who was sensitive to the pressure his parents exercised on him. His homosexuality was also questioned by his parents and eventually caused him to part ways with his parents. This is probably the cause for him for

projecting the American parents as negative whose only desire is to possess the perfect product which includes the desire for a perfect offspring.

Edward Albee's *The American Dream* is known to be futuristic because the consumerism is an important issue in the whole wide world. The disintegration of values is due to the materialistic yearnings by the individuals which cause harm to the family and community. Hence, it is not difficulty to conclude in Albee's work that the local aspects are considered to be less important than the universal. The subject of the American Dream has been concreted in the minds of the Americans and the aliens as well. It is criticized by people but Albee has given it a different look. The sardonic way of mourning over the false impression that surrounds the American Dream makes Albee's work masterpiece. Henry Popkins in *Edward Albee* believes that, "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen." (26) Albee's work is loaded with fundamentals of fiction including, themes and imagery.

The play serves as an apologue of the way the American life has turned away under the ruse of the American dream. Mommy here serves as a sadistic and a cruel character, Daddy on the other hand is a weak character, whereas Grandma is always bitter. This play reveals what the American Dream left behind after its 'timely' death. Albee points straightly to the Young Man who represents the American Dream. The Young Man seems to be physically fit but he is inept. The reason behind this is losing his twin brother from whom he got separated at birth. The Young Man that Mommy and Daddy is spineless and headless among other deformities. a lot of Americans had the consideration that the American Dream would bring happiness and pleasure but it brought them unhappiness. Mommy and Daddy saw the Young Man as their "Bumble of Joy" as they expected pleasure and satisfaction from him. But he did not come up to their expectations and failed them miserably. He seems to be physically fit but he

cannot perform well. Finally, he finds an alternative of doing anything and everything that comes his way until he gets money. At this point he becomes a sign of 'satisfaction' for both Mommy and Daddy. The Americans however could not recall what the dream was about; corrupted it with materialism; mutilated and killed it before it could mature. Albee knew the reason behind the death of this American Dream; he believed the dream was just perfect like the Young Man; however those who were supposed to rear it became entangled up in the material world.

The American Dream is not an ideology; rather it is seen as a person and an entity. The Americans interpreted the idea of the American Dream in a wrong way. They thought the dream to be something that lived on its own. They forgot that they were the one to give it life. The twins in this play represent the real American Dream and the ideological one. The Young Man is like a mask without someone behind it. The murder of the twin brother of the Young Man represents the death of this person, that remains the 'lifeless' mask. Americans were actually the people who were supposed to drive this dream; unfortunately they withdrew to pursue the material things forgetting their responsibilities in realizing their dream. In core of his heart, Albee realizes that without this individual behind the mask, the mask is useless.

Albee brings forth the issue of the powerlessness in the play. Here the character of the Daddy is an emasculated one and this gives an opportunity to Mommy to strongly dominate him who assaults him. Martin Esslin in *Theatre of the Absurd* believes that "As with many of Albee's female characters-Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* perhaps being the most memorable-Mommy is the consummate "bad mother": sadistic, jealous, greedy, and onward." (45) Daddy is the prey of Mommy's hostility and violence. An example can be taken from the play when Daddy wakes up to answer the door call and Mommy laughs at him with exaggeration for she knows that would hurt his masculinity. Further in the play, Mommy hurts the 'Bumble of Joy' that is the Young Man. This is also the powerlessness or emasculation. In most of Albee's plays, he has viewed woman as a threat to

the society especially who try to gain power in the society.

Distortion and deformity are quite dominant in this play. Grandma in this play remarks, "this age is an age an deformity." (16) Almost everyone in the play is distorted. During her birth Mommy had a cone-shaped head, Daddy is weakened due to emasculation by Mommy, and Grandma also claims that the old people are becoming persistently 'twisted'. Albee calls America 'slipping land' by showing these deformities. Bob Mayberry in *Theatre of Discord: Dissonance in Beckett, Albee and Pinter* believes that, "these corporeal disfigurements involve a disfigurement of language as well." (69) Mommy tropes the 'Bumble of Joy' after realizing that it "only had eyes for Daddy."(26)

Martin Esslin believes that, "Psychically, the logic of much of The American Dream's touted 'absurdity' is that of defense." (69) This is very apparent in the case of Mommy, Daddy and Grandma's reaction towards Mrs. Barker's visit. For example, Daddy seems to be confused whether to open the door for Mrs. Barker or not. Though Mrs. Barker has paid a visit to this family before and they have known each other for a long time; however during her recent visit, she appears new to this family. On the other hand Grandma hints to Mrs. Barker about the history they have shared, but Mrs. Barker refuses to understand anything and this thus gives the impression that she does not want to remember the past events. Foster Hirsch in *Who is afraid of Edward Albee?* states that, "These supposedly absurd dodges are due to the traumatic nature of the party's shared past, the memory of the 'Bumble of Joy'. Though no one has forgotten this past . . . the characters keep it from immediate consciousness nevertheless."(46) These characters seem to be protective for they do not want to remember the better days because they appear to be disturbing as compared to the present days.

Grandma's boxes and their contents prove to be a revelation in the play. Mommy and Daddy help Grandma to wrap the boxes but they are least concerned about the contents which are in them. Mommy does not show even the slightest curiosity of knowing the contents, and when Grandma makes

an effort to expose the contents of the boxes, Mommy stops her. At last, Grandma reveals the contents of the boxes, they consist long list of items she had owned once in her life. Bob Mayberry believes that, "In a play where an outwardly perfect Young Man becomes the son who provides satisfaction, it is perhaps easiest to consider Mom and Dad's patronizing emphasis on the box's wrapping as indicative of their satisfaction with surfaces." (184) Further Mel Gussow in *Edward Albee: a Singular Journey* adds that, "they allegorize the composition of the play, which largely consists of apparent and perpetually surprising diversions that keep the audience from the gist of the matter." (63) The boxes in the play act as an imagery.

Many things are said about the American Dream. With the use of satire, Albee has managed to give the play a very different look. He has shown the consequences of the American Dream. Majority of the Americans did not comprehend the fact that the American Dream could live on its own. It was in need of a 'life' or an 'entity' from the Americans. Americans were themselves mutilating this dream, but this dream became a mask without any 'life'. Albee has portrayed women as a negative character by showing Mommy's character emasculating Daddy character. All the characters in the play seem to be defensive as they have no knowledge of the past.

Going through the history it seems that the women were more prone to consumerism, but they are also the primary targets of the advertising. The play shows an example of marketing when Mommy's hat is replaced by a similar one after the shopkeeper admits his mistake. Historically looking back, the primary consumer in the United States was the women. They stayed at home, raised the children, and managed the house and hence watched television. Similarly men were mostly outside for their work. But this doesn't prove that men weren't affected by advertising. America has been moving into an equal society where both men and women live their lives independently in their physiological order. It is quite clear from the characters of Mommy, Daddy and Mrs. Barker. As earlier mentioned above Daddy lacks masculinity and at the same time Mommy and Mrs. Barker gain it, one by being dominant and other by being a

chairman. Mommy projects a dominant character in the play who symbolizes the changing female from a homemaker to a heartless conspicuous consumer. Mommy a typical sadist, runs down Grandma and treats Daddy like an infant. It is pointed out earlier in the play that she has married Daddy only for his money. Her sadistic behavior remains unchecked by Daddy while Grandma does make an attempt to face her but she still has her way in all the things. Grandma stands for the older values and sensibility. She is somebody who can relate directly with the audience ultimately exiting the frame of the action to become its director. Grandma calls herself of the pioneer stock and she represents the "American Dream" of the nineteenth century. This had been the actual dream of the immigrant pioneer couples who had worked together in the fields in the newly tamed lands. They had worked together to improve the impoverished lives they had left behind in their native lands. Grandma's statement that she was much like "an old man as like an old woman" (68) refers to the fact that the earlier Americans had toiled together on the soil side by side irrespective of sex to build the earlier American Dream.

Sigmund Freud has advocated a theory in his Psychoanalysis surrounding the three main things called the Id, ego and super-ego. The Id comprises of the personality that makes up our impulses and desires. D. Hothersall in his work *History of Psychology* remarks that. "id is the completely unconscious, impulsive, childlike portion of the psyche that operates on the 'pleasure principle' and is the source of basic impulses and drives; it seeks immediate pleasure and gratification." (290) Both Mommy and Daddy are not able to conceive a child; hence they opt for adopting a child. Their 'Id' is stirred when they realize that the child's viewpoint and attitude is different and it is completely different from their viewpoint. Hence they decide to imprison it and then end up giving it an atrocious death. Mommy and Daddy always wanted to have a child who would set out an example for the ideal American Dream. They sought after this joy and pleasure by eventually assassinating the child. Distinct from the character Nina in *Strange Interlude* (1928), who took up the decision to terminate the child by aborting it owing



to a curse of the insanity running in a family, Mommy and Daddy do not seem to have a suitable motive behind killing the child. Their so called "pleasure principle" comprises of money that they claim as a refund. Grandma comments:

GRANDMA: What did they do? Well, for the last straw, it finally up and died; and you can imagine how that made them feel, their having paid for it, and all. So, they called up the lady who sold them the bumble in the first place and told her to come right over to their apartment. They wanted satisfaction, they wanted their money back. That's what they wanted. (100)

Grandma's surprising exit also indicates her marginal position in the family. Albee offers allegory in this play to represent the corrupted "American Dream". Her exit actually signifies the exit of the old order of hard working and sensible American generation which had worked hard to develop a prosperous America. It also heralds the coming of age of Mommy and Daddy who as the new generation of consumers treat anything they think to be bad and dispose it as they feel like. The irony of this play is that Grandma as a parent is also treated as a disposable good who is often threatened to be sent away to an old age home. In many of her witty critical comments, she positions herself as an old person, at the margins of the human existence, a non entity.

MRS. BARKER: When you are old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you, when you get old, people talk to you that way. That's why you become deaf so that you won't be able to hear people talk to you that way, old people die as a result of the way people talk to them. (65)

Grandma's marginality necessarily sets her apart from the spectacle before her. Notably, she is the only character to underline the fact that she is staging a masquerade, what she describes as her 'act'.

Daddy is a part that signifies the American male role in this new consumerist satisfaction society. Under Mommy's reign of terror, Daddy is an entity of zero value, indeed early in this play

Mommy reduces his speech to the carbon copy of hers. Bent to Mommy's will, he relies on her entirely for the confirmation of his masculinity; thus the prolonged scene at the door when Mrs. Barker rings, which Mommy poses as a test for his manliness. Like Mommy, Daddy also displays a disturbing preference for the childish behavior. For instance, when Mrs. Barker removes her dress, Daddy mumbles, "I just blushed and giggled and went sticky wet." (79) While Mommy becomes is a sadist, Daddy characteristically becomes the child who needs punishment. Daddy's masochism is apparent when he opens the door and submits to the demonstration of manliness that Mommy demands.

MOMMY: Open the door.

DADDY: Was I firm about it?

MOMMY: Oh, so firm; so firm.

DADDY: And was I decisive?

MOMMY: SO decisive! I shivered.

DADDY: And masculine? Was I really masculine?

MOMMY: Oh, Daddy, you were so masculine; I shivered and fainted.

GRANDMA: Shivered and fainted, did she. Humf!

MOMMY: You be quiet! (74)

It has been noted that through such ritual demonstrations, and the public humiliation that ensues, are typical of masochistic fantasy. Daddy's character could be at observation and not of generalization of the American male. Perhaps the role of running the house and dominating the purchases and acquisitions has made the female in consumerist America take a more dominant and masculine role.

The Young Man is actually important when the American Dream is discussed. He is called the 'Bumble of Joy' as he represents the both sides of this dream. He represents the symbol of the American consumerism and the emotional emptiness connected with it. The Young Man or what others he may be called the American Dream is like a façade without anybody or anything behind it. The murder of the twin brother of the Young Man represents the destruction of whatever or whoever was behind the façade. After the destruction of the background, what remains is the useless face or an

image. Albee here has shown how wrong the Americans were concerning the American Dream. Americans were people who were supposed to push and attain the American Dream; they instead chose to chase the material things not realizing that it was work and values which would make this dream a reality. Like the Young Man; this dream would be like a mask without a person behind it. A mask can never achieve anything. Sadly, the American Dream has remains of a mask today, without a living being behind it.

This perfect handsome blonde Young Man describes himself as a 'type'; upon his introduction. This is a comparison to any product where more of the same are available. He represents the perfect product or the ideal product which America's consumerism projects and all Americans including Daddy and Mommy also crave to possess. He is the product of the decimation of his lost identical twin and his kind who exist as opposites to him in physical perfection. He actually appears as a product replacement to the disposed off Bumble.

The Young Man recounts his progressive loss of feeling and desire, losses unknown to him, correspond to the mutilations Mommy inflicted on Bumble. Both Bumble and the Young Man in this play symbolize the real American Dream and the ideological one. There is another symbolic inference in the comparison between Bumble and the Young Man. The Young Man is the dream that the Americans pursue to mutilate to the Bumble. They are the pain and the sorrow they bring upon themselves to achieve this particular dream. The dream of the perfect product may eventually lead to the hollowness and emptiness like the Young Man's emotions. Many Americans had earlier believed that the American Dream would bring them joy and satisfaction; however it brought them misery. Mommy and Daddy see the Young Man as 'Bumble of Joy' because joy and satisfaction is what they expected from him. Unfortunately, the Young Man fails miserably.

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