



SOCIAL REALISM AND FRAGILITY OF AGING IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE SANDBOX*

Dr. Anshu Pandey

Department of English

College of Computer Science, Pune, Maharashtra.

Abstract

My aim through this article is to propagate that Realism in literature is the theory of fidelity to real life and to correct representation without glorification of everyday life. Realism' in art or literature refers to the appearance of things exactly in real life. Dramatists use their own style in presenting things that happen exactly in art and add ethical values to their presentation. The paper focuses on the impact of ageing in Edward Albee's plays *The Sandbox*. The play focuses on how ageing impose pain on the couples in the home area; home becomes an arena for renegotiation of spatial area and individual status in the family. In this play, Grandma is treated as useless, imperceptible, and expendable because she is an old woman.

Key words: Realism, Fragility, American family, loss of identity

Literature has thousands of threads which can interlace the dramatic piece of art. Realism, a style of writing that gives the feeling of footage loyally an authentic way of life. Realism established itself as an important custom in the theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Realism in literature is the theory of fidelity to real life and to correct representation without glorification of everyday life. Realism' in art or literature refers to the appearance of things exactly in real life. Dramatists use their own style in presenting things that happen exactly in art and add ethical values to their presentation. Social realism is a word that derives





from Russian inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a revolutionary socialist society.

According to Dictionary of Literary terms by Coles:

Realism, in literature, is a manner and method of picturing life as it really is, untouched by idealism or romanticism. As a manner of writing, realism relies on the use of specific details to interpret life faithfully and objectively. In contrast to romance, this concerned with the bizarre and psychological in its approach to character, presenting the individual rather than the type. Often, fate plays a major role in the action. 1

Socialist realism had its roots in neoclassicism and the traditions of realism in Russian literature of the 19th century that described the life of simple people. A realistic play is more or less not for the sake of art but for the sake of life of an individual. As literature is mirror of life which can be rationalize through realism only. Edward Albee is one of the significant writers of the 20th century American contemporary dramatists. Albee became perceived as a leader of a new theatrical movement in America. Edward Albee, who appears onto the American theatrical stage, is one of leading dramatists of his generation after Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

In a great piece of his work, Albee condemns the emptied relationships within American family. The family hostilities devoid of any true feeling provide a rich source for his satire. Among the ills of family that Albee attacks is the cruel treatment of those who are euphemistically called "senior citizens". Albee is concerned with the difficulty of the denial of the aged especially in his play *The Sandbox* (1959). The paper focuses on the impact of ageing in Edward Albee's plays *The Sandbox*. The play focuses on how ageing impose pain on the couples in the home area; home becomes an arena for renegotiation of spatial area and individual status in the family. In this play, Grandma is treated as useless, imperceptible, and expendable because she is an old woman.

The Sandbox by Edward Albee peers into the life of a family by using irony through an unsophisticated view of how life is sensibly. Mommy and Daddy are the two main characters





take on non-humanlike emotions and roles. Albee puts the nuclear family construction of the 1950's on the hot seat by showing externally what the characters are possible emotion on the inside. Life's social expectations for marriage and being a caretaker in Albee's transcription and the present day pose challenges even for the nicest individuals. The action of the character Grandmother was an unkind, gross hyperbole of the lack of flexibility that caregivers have when supporting the elderly through their last years of life. The actual sandbox itself was get away from Mommy and Daddy's responsibly to Grandma just as the sandbox is a way for children to escape reality when they are modest.

Albee's characters experience inner and outer pressures, which make their own sense of identity blurred. Although he generally creates realistic characters in realistic settings and gives personal data about their backgrounds, his characters suffer from identity problems. Albee presents a character of Grandma who is full of vitality and who is the only sympathetic character in the cast. The plot of *The Sandbox* deals with Mommy's and Daddy's attempt at getting rid of Grandma. It is evident in *The Sandbox* that the characters Mommy and Daddy are living in a disinfected like marriage judging from the way they converse with each other. Daddy repeatedly answers Mommy belligerently by saying:

Whatever you say, Mommy. Mommy shows her outward dislike of Daddy when he asks if he should talk she says, " Well, you can talk, if you want to...if you can think of anything to say...if you can think of anything new. (*The Sandbox*) 2

The stage direction states that Mommy and Daddy together carry Grandma over to the sandbox and more or less dump her in. The lack of respect constitutes elder neglect. The young man reveals himself as the angel of death he reveals to the audience that death can be a quiet experience judging by his actions towards Grandma. He shows her the true act of love as a caregiver should. Grandma takes gratitude of this when she says:





“No: I mean it. You’ve got that...you’ve got a quality.” (*The Sandbox*)³

This is the gratitude of respect and sympathy. Realism’ is widely accepted according to need and time. Realism in literature and the illustration art used to describe a diversity of approach in which correct portrayal of reality .Socialist realism means the portrayal of the social reality not as it is but as it should be: idealized. Socialist Realism demanded that all art must portray some aspect of man's fight toward socialist development for a better life. It stressed the need for the creative artist to serve the grassroots by being reasonable, optimistic and heroic. Grandma complains sarcastically of her bad treatment:

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!

(*The Sandbox* 149).⁴

Albee’s characters can be categorized as inauthentic and authentic, and the criterion will be whether they live illusory lives or choose to confront the reality of their condition. Realism in art and literature is an attempt to portray life as it is. It shows life with reality, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful, and idealizing zero. It is a greater triumph for a work of art to symbolize the normal life truly than the strange life incompletely. George Eliot declares:

I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing indeed but falsity which, in spite of one’s best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. 2, 5





In *The Sandbox*, Mommy and Daddy decide that it is time for Grandma to die and they accurately dispose of her in a children's sandbox. They arrive at the beach, examine the place. They conclude that it is suitable, and then carry Grandma in, holding her under her armpits like a child. Overlooking basic needs of human self-respect, they expose her to embarrassing conditions. With an astounding hypocrisy, Mommy and Daddy congratulate each other on their courage. Mommy, directly responsible for pushing Grandma out of the house, begins crying. Grandma nobly tries to assure her daughter saying:

"I'm fine! I'm all right! It hasn't happened yet!" (*The Sandbox* 154).⁶

Grandma plays dead but continues to make references to the actions, particularly to Mommy's euphemistic dual talk:

"That's right, kid; be brave. You bear up; you'll get over it (154) [...] take of your mourning... face the future... Lordy!" (*The Sandbox* 155).⁷

This family is so dysfunctional that the family members treat their mother, Grandma, like a dog, but she is mentally strong enough not to let it disturb her too much. The only thing that Grandma can do is to actively participate in her own destruction. Even though the end is near, she manages to chat with the Young Man who is the part of death ritual:

YOUNG MAN: (*Prepares, delivers line like a real amateur.*) I am the Angel of Death. I am...uh...I am come for you.

GRANDMA: [...] Well...that was very nice, dear.

YOUNG MAN: Shhhhhh...be still...

GRANDMA: What I meant was...You did that very well, dear...

YOUNG MAN: (*Blushing.*) ...oh...

GRANDMA: You've got that...You've got a quality.

YOUNG MAN: (*With his endearing smile.*) Oh...thank you; thank you very much, ma'am.





GRANDMA: (*Slowly, softly--as the Young Man puts his hands on top of Grandma's.*) You're very welcome, dear. (*The Sandbox* 54)8

In the latter play Mommy and Daddy get rid of Grandma by burying her in sand. Here they plot their drastic solution:

MOMMY: (*Looking about.*) This will do perfectly...don't you think so, Daddy? There's sand there...and the water beyond. What do you think, Daddy?

DADDY: (*Vaguely*) Whatever you say, Mommy.

MOMMY: (*With the same little laugh*) Well. of course...Whatever I say. Then, it's settled, is it?

DADDY: (*Shrugs.*) She's your mother, not mine.

MOMMY: *I* know she's my mother. What do you take me for? (*A pause.*) All right, now; let's get on with it. [...] (*The Sandbox* 49-50)9

However, Grandma is not ready to die; it is Mommy and Daddy who decided that she has lived long sufficient. Nevertheless, she helps things along by half-burying herself with sand and thus digging her own grave. Her moving herself with sand is a prefiguration of a real funeral. In fact, the sandbox is made to keep in whoever is placed there much like an oversized tomb. She has only half-buried her, signifying that she is only half-way gone. Mommy and Daddy are convinced of her death.

They remark on how happy she looks, complement each other on their mutual bravery and exit. Throughout the play Grandma is conscious of her role in a ceremony, but suddenly she realizes that her part is real:

“I can't get up. I ... I can't move...” (156). The Young Man interrupts her, “Uh...ma'am; I ... I have a line here” (157). In an





amateurish way he announces that he is the Angel of Death: "I am ... uh ... come for you" (*The Sandbox* 157).¹⁰

Albee's characters are mostly alienated. He explores this theme in two different states. One is the inner or self-imposed alienation and the other is the disaffection caused by the society or leaving out from the society. The characters, who yearn for non-consciousness and try to avoid taking responsibilities in their lives, become strangers to themselves.

Albee has the claims of friendship and family conflict and suggests that neither rests upon a secure moral base" (McCarthy 81).¹¹

A realistic Play deals with credible ordinary events and authentic people and it presents horrible and even distasteful subject-matter. Social realism is concerned with active interpretations of life with the reason of changing the existing reality. In the play *The Sandbox* the names "Mommy" and "Daddy" are appealing terms of blank affection and point up the pre-senility and blankness of the characters. The Grandma character in *The Sandbox* complains to the audience about her fate before she dies:

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! I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died while I was thirty. [...] They took me off the farm...which was very decent of them...and they moved me into them...a big townhouse with them fixed a nice place for me under the stove...gave me an army blanket...and my own dish...my very own dish! So, what have I got to complain about? Nothing, of course. I'm not complaining. (*The Sandbox* 51-52)¹²

It is clear that Mommy and Daddy can only demolish Grandma bodily. They cannot defeat her spirit. The Young Man in this play, incidentally, is no relation to the family. He is just playing a





part of the Angel of Death. Grandma winds up delighting him gently, even going so far as to praise how he assists with her end.

Home is not a sweet home for the headmaster, either. For man, he builds a home in order to settle down a fixed identity about his gender role as a master of the house.⁷ (Iris Marion Young)¹³

Albee represents that as a result of greed and loss of values, human relationships are fuzzy. He handles especially familial relationships and friendships to reveal how people cannot cope with each other:

Albee focuses on the twisted human relationships, which can evolve within the society as the results of materialism and parasitism, and on the deceptive nature of ambition. Moreover, he demonstrates the consequences of such a society in which institutions become more important than their individual members. Secondly, he sees the institution of the family as his principal area of Inquiry, since it is here where human relationships are most complex (Stenz129).¹⁴

Albee dramatizes the wrecked human relationships in the social groups such as neighbors, family and friends. His characters do not have any kind of authentic interaction in any one of these groups. They do not care for each other's sufferings.

They do not bother themselves with the problems of other people relatives suffer from this state. Thus, they are doomed to suffer more and more in their lost divide bombs.

In his plays the names of his characters are not familiar, and they change during the play. They do not have a sequential background. The reader does not know anything about their past lives as the characters disprove each other when they talk about an event that both of them experienced. Albee's characters live in an illusionary world, too. His characters conform to the society





and become inauthentic beings. They try to build a peaceful life, which is just so in appearance. (McCarthy)¹⁵

Albee's plays aim to shock the audience out of satisfaction; his plays are a confront to believe the human condition as it is, in all its secrecy and absurdity. Albee remains hopeful about being clever to challenge the theatrical status. The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd present a disappointed, cruel, and harsh picture of the world.

Albee's characters, like the playwright himself, suffer from arrested development; they are the people who have had to create a "beanbag," who have had to hide their own insufficiencies and failures and now they are left to find their own way (Biggsby 67).¹⁶

The realism of the plays is a psychological and inner realism; the plays discover the human subconscious in deepness rather than trying to explain the external look of human survival. The characters of Albee inescapably find themselves within a sense of trap; even though they struggle hard in order to get out of this turmoil of an uncertain life, they cannot manage to do it. The concept of Existentialism goes hand in hand with certain human feelings like fear, insecurity and hopelessness. These human characteristics are idiosyncratic Albee subjects elaborated in his plays. The unfair system and its persecutors find their complement in Albee's plays of uncertainty, violence, loneliness and loss of identity, all caused by an unidentifiable menace in their world, and these lonely characters, with their destroyed identities and with no support, trying to survive but failing in a hostile world close to the realm of The Theatre of the Absurd. Albee's plays, with their strength, their struggling with modern themes, and their trials in form, worried critics and audiences alike while changing the landscape of American drama.





Work- Cited

1. Coles Editorial Board, *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New Delhi: Rama Brothers Educational Publishers, 2001), p.163.1
2. Edward Albee. *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
3. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
4. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
5. Quoted by Lilian R. Furst, *Realism* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), p.37. 2
6. Edward Albee. *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
7. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
8. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
9. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
10. ----- . *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
11. McCarthy, Gerry. *Edward Albee*. Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1987.
12. Edward Albee. *The Sandbox*, Paperback published by Dutton Books January 1st 1959.
13. Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme,' in *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 124.
14. Stenz, Anita, Maria. *Edward Albee: The Poet of Loss*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978.
15. McCarthy, Gerry. *Edward Albee*. Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1987.
16. Bigsby, C.W.E. *Edward Albee - Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

