

## **Edward Albee and His Mother Characters: An Analysis of Selected Plays**

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**Abstract:** *One of the most acclaimed dramatists of America, Edward Albee is a genius in his career. His plays always focus on the family life of Americans. Almost all his characters represent the people's attitude to life - his mother characters especially. His real mother characters and illusory mother characters, that is, childless mothers, represent the women whom he faced in his own life. The adoption theme in his plays itself is an example of that. This paper attempts to make a study of the mother characters of Albee and the selected works are: **The American Dream, The Sandbox and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

**Key Words:** *American Dream, Adoption Theme, Edward Albee, Illusion, Motherhood.*

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The word "MOTHER" has great significance. When we think of mother, she appears before us as a soft, mild, submissive, angel like character, who always provides life and nourishes one's whole life. When somebody speaks about mothers, the very picture which comes to our mind may be our own mothers'. However lovable or hateful she is, do not matter. There is no single meaning for mother; the meaning of mother is entirely universal. This is because we all have a mother and each of us has our own individual thought of what mothers are. Each notion is different from the other. Because of this immensely changeable notion she has enough symbols in this world according to the perceiver's point of view. In Literature 'mother' is an archetypal symbol. Sometimes symbols of embodiment of virtues like love, affection, kindness, etc. or she is an epitome of cruelties as step mother. Anyway in literature and art, motherhood is a frequent topic across cultures.

Edward Albee is a premier playwright and gifted director of America who portrayed the motherhood or non-motherhood of the characters in his plays. He portrays real mothers who have children or unreal mothers who do not have children that is childless, illusory mothers. He appeared on the stage of American drama in the late 1950s with a variety of plays recording the agonies and disillusionment of his contemporary period. He came into popularity with his most famous works like *The Zoo Story (1958), The Sandbox (1960), The American Dream (1961) and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962)*. His plays with the intensity, attractive modern themes and their experiments in form shocked the critics and audiences alike.

Edward Albee's mother characters are different from the age old concept of a typical mother who is an embodiment of all virtues. Among them we can see mothers who have children and childless mothers who live in illusion that they have children. Reality versus illusion is a great theme of American drama and Albee makes use of this theme in many of his works. The term childless mothers may seem quite confusing. Sometimes a woman can become a good mother, though she doesn't give birth to a child. Through her care and affection to a child she can become a good mother, a symbol of real motherhood. But Albee's mother characters in *The Sandbox, The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are different from this concept. When we watch or go through the plays we can understand the image of some mothers in his contemporary society. Some critics have the opinion that some of his mother characters resemble his foster mother.

Edward Franklin Albee was born on March 12, 1928, to Louise Harvey in Washington D.C. But he was abandoned by his natural parents. It is said that his mother had been abandoned by the father and felt unable to raise Albee. So he was given up for adoption. Two weeks after his birth he was adopted by Edward and Frances Albee of Larchmont, New York, a wealthy childless couple. They gave him the title of Albee's and his name became Edward Albee. He was prohibited by law from discovering his original parents. This couple was very wealthy. Reed Albee was the owner of Keith Albee Theatre Circuit started by his father Edward Franklin Albee II. So Reed and Frances Cotter raised their adopted son among luxury. Their Tudor house was full of servants to look after him. Tutors, horses, pets, toys, plenty of culture and travel, etc were another attraction. He was sent to watch performances in the city frequently. But still he felt uneasiness there. The reason behind it was as a child and afterward he felt loathed by his parents. His father kept a distance from him and his mother was a domineering woman. She tried to rear up him as she wishes. But Albee was not able to tolerate her teachings.

Reed Albee was a silent and different person. He was dominated by Frances, who was physically much larger than him. Both of them neglected Albee loving him as a child. According to Albee, his mother was "an excellent horse woman and saddle horse judge . . . . I was riding from the time I was able to

walk.”(MacNicholas4). Any way Albee never felt any bitterness towards them. He has acknowledged “a deep seated resentment against my natural parents for abandoning me.” (MacNicholas4) Albee felt a discomfort among the luxuries; may be because of their loveless attitude and seeing himself as an outsider in the family. The only consolation he had there was his nanny and loving grandma. He preferred his grandma’s company. He was very much attached to this old lady and she always loved and helped him by giving money too. This helped him to leave the house and pursue his career. He dedicated the play *The Sandbox* to this Grandma, which portrayed the family’s callous reaction to the death of a grandmother. He said “I could communicate with her.....she was at the end of it and I was at the beginning; so both were outside the ring.”(Mishra11)

One can watch Albee’s foster parents’ traces in the characters of his plays. He satirized their small minded prejudices through his characters. We can understand the ineffectual father is presented as DADDY in *The Sandbox* and in *The American Dream*, GEORGE in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*. (1966). His manipulative mother is presented as MOMMY in *The Sandbox* (1960) and in *The American Dream* and as MARTHA in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and THE WOMEN in *Three Tall Women* (1994). His loving grandma’s presence is felt in *The Sandbox* and in *The American Dream*. Then the themes like the fear of abandonment, unfaithfulness, the role of truth and illusion, the function of anger, deep desire for love, adoption, family life all comes from his own life.

The mother characters in the plays *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* are the same. The first play is an elaboration of the second work. Both of them share similar characters and themes and portray the symbolic dysfunctional family of America.

“Albee composed *The Sandbox* in 1959 while writing *The American Dream*:  
“I extracted several characters from *The American Dream* and placed them in a situation different than, but related to, their predicament in the longer play”  
Albee himself said. (Solomon89)

Mommy, Daddy, Grandma and the Young Man are the same characters in both the plays. Mommy is the dominating wife and Daddy is the submissive, weak-willed husband. Grandma is the antic wisdom and embarrassment of age in a culture greedy of appearance and youth; the Young Man/ Angel of Death is that thoughtless, history-less innocence of appearance that is so winning and so destructive(Serafin26) In *The American Dream* the childless couple Mommy and Daddy adopted a boy child from an adoption agency. They tried to rear him up according to their wish. But that was a failure. The boy cannot fulfill their American Dream of Success. They had plenty of dreams about the child. But the things happened there in the family is unimaginable to a natural mother because *motherhood* is considered as the most sacred, ideal, sacrificial and cheerful thing in a woman’s life. It is an experience that is said to be intensely moulded by society and culture. It makes a moral transformation in woman, because of her attachment to her baby. But in Albee’s plays we can see mothers who are depraved and selfish. Mommy is such a kind of lady and even her behavior to her own mother is very callous and it is sure that she cannot love a baby as her own.

When the play *The American Dream* opens Mommy and Daddy are waiting Mrs. Barker. At the beginning we are not aware the purpose of the visit of Mrs. Barker. Meanwhile Mommy’s exchanges with Daddy reveals her dominating attitude over him and also her cruel dealing of Grandma, her eighty-six-year-old mother. She threatens Grandma that she will send her to a nursing home by a “van man”. Grandma is living as a silent person afraid of her own daughter because she has been relegated in the family to a sandbox. The idea and value of love between parents and children are destroyed here. It is from Grandma’s words we understand what happened to the adopted child. She explains the purpose of the visit to Mrs. Barker that Mommy and Daddy have called her to come because she is an agent of the Bye Bye Adoption Service from which they adopted a boy child “a bumble of joy” (126) before twenty years. But the boy failed to live up to their expectations and so they had mutilated it part by part up to “it finally up and died” (129) and now they “wanted their money back”.

The boy was mutilated by the parents part by part, organ by organ. At last the child got killed. Now they want to get back the money. This is the world. A kind of consumerism and materialistic attitude is prevailing. A child is considered as a bond between husband and wife. The relationship between the parents is strengthened by children. But in Albee’s plays we can see the nature of parents like Mommy and Daddy. Mommy’s attitude is more important to note. As a mother she is a failure. Her dream of Success is different from a common woman. She behaves callously to the child. She only is responsible for the massacre of the adopted son. Daddy is always silent under her. She herself declares that she married him for money and security. Now she acquired both and she does not want any further contact with him. Even their sexual life is devoid of love. She usually says to him that his money is rightfully hers because “I used to let you get on top of me” (106). At the end of the play a Young Man arrives in their apartment in search of a work. Grandma thinks, he is the “van man” to take her. But Mommy is ready to accept him in place of Grandma because this Young Man is a caricature of the American Dream. He is,

“a clean-cut mid-west farm boy type, almost insultingly good looking in a

typically American way, Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile...".(137)

Ironically he turned out to be the identical twin of the adopted son murdered by the couple. The Young Man is a symbol of the modern American man. He has all the superficial qualities of a modern man as Mommy demands. But from his own words it is clear that he is devoid of any sympathy or human compassion. He admits:

"Unable to see anything... with pity, with affection ... with anything but ... cool disinterest ... I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have no emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder... disemboweled. I have only my person... My body, my face." (138-139)

Mommy decides to throw away Grandma and accept the Young Man. Daddy has no voice there. It is clear that everything is under the control of Mommy. Daddy was not allowed to show concern even towards the old Grandma. Poonam Mishra in her *The Art of Edward Albee* (2004) says:

"Beginning with the trivial problems of getting her school mates to part with their snacks through sharing "rich old" Daddy and ending with the savage destruction of their adopted son, Mommy has always been in command. This is Albee's comment on Momism- the exaggerated cult of the mother guardian of the hearth."(55)

In the sequel play *The Sandbox* which is dedicated to his own Grandma Cotter, seems to be a revenge of the playwright on his own adoptive parents. When the play opens we can see a handsome Young Man is performing calisthenics on a beach. He is later considered as the agent of Death. Mommy and Daddy are giving instructions for the burial of Grandma. In both the plays Grandma is forced into a living burial and the Young Man helps Grandma depart to another world. The couple leaves her on the beach to die, and when she has apparently died Mommy says, "She looks ... so happy. It pays to do things well."(93) When the couple leaves the beach the Young Man approaches and tells Grandma, "I am ... uh ... I am come for you." (94)

Grandma is the only sensible woman character who lives in the present and reminisces about the past and hopes for the future. She spends twenty years of widowhood as a servant in her own daughter's apartment. Micky Pearlman in her essay entitled "*What's New at the Zoo? Rereading Edward Albee's American Dream(s) and Nightmares,*" says that

"She is buried alive in *The Sandbox* and is immured in a sea of boxes in *The American dream*. Grandma is a pitiful figure. ....She is waiting for the arrival of the imaginary "van people" for a journey to an unnamed oblivion, the natural repository of the aged in Albee's U.S.A. They are expendable, dispensable, and disposable." (Pearlman48)

Grandma was always a mother who was caring and affectionate to her daughter. But Mommy the evil emasculator never returned any kind of love or care to her aged mother. Instead she is even burying her living mother in a seaside sandbox in one play and in a stuffy apartment room in the other. (Solomon89). She always demands satisfaction. For this she punishes her adoptive child who failed to give satisfaction. She derives a kind of sadistic pleasure, it seems. The child was not up to their standard. When it "put its hands under the covers, looking for it's you-know what," they "had to cut of f its hands at the wrists."(128) they blind the child because "it only had eyes for its Daddy". (127) Thus she gradually mutilates the child and destroys his humanity and at last kills the child. She always insists others to do something, only for her own satisfaction. She is accommodating The Young Man in place of her own mother and by doing so she is going to live in an illusion of The American Dream. "She represents the discontented American woman and she belongs to the gallery of destructive women in Albee's plays." (Mishra58)

Another *childless mother* is Martha. She is the central character in Albee's first full length play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. It is a masterpiece play which has international fame. Its 644 performances on Broadway show its immense popularity. It shows the life of a middle-aged, warring couple named George and Martha and their interaction with another younger couple Nick and Honey. The play is set in George and Martha's apartment during a late night and continues till morning. It has three acts which contain many psychological games filled with some illusions. George is a history professor in a small New England college located in New Carthage and Martha's father is the president of this college. Martha is a domineering wife. But she is not a callous woman as Mommy in *The American Dream*. Her wish is George would become her father's heir. But he is not able to impress her father. So she is unhappy and she always taunts him and describes him as "an old bog in the History Department, that's what George is. A bog.... A fen... A G.D. swamp"(187).

The first act is entitled as "Fun and Games," in which Martha and George try to battle and insult each other in many ways. As they proceed with this verbal duel, Honey and Nick arrive. They convert their guests into spectators to witness humiliation, and generate a kind of embarrassment and jealousy in them by expressing their private story. The second act is "Walpurgisnacht," in which their games become crueler. The evening turns

into a nightmarish one. George and Martha even attack Honey and Nick, attempting to force them to reveal their dirty secrets and true selves. In the final act, "The Exorcism," everyone's secrets have been exposed. Honey and Nick go home, leaving Martha and George to try to rebuild their shattered illusion.

Albee makes use of the theme Truth versus Illusion to develop the plot. The older couple George and Martha possesses a private fantasy. Being childless they want to avoid the emptiness in their life. They invented an imaginary son whom they have raised for twenty-one years and become parents. Hence Martha becomes a *childless mother*. They made an agreement too that they should not disclose this secret to anybody. At the end of the play this illusion is shattered and Martha is forced to admit the reality because she made a breach in the agreement.

Martha is a good mother to her imaginative child. Her happiness in bringing up the child is clear in her explanation of the child. She accounts how they celebrate every birthdays of him, she describes his early years in a loving manner, pictures his colour of eyes, his pranks, his toys, the banana boat made for him on Saturday nights. Unlike Mommy in *The American Dream*, her love and attachment to the child, though he doesn't exist in real, is too much.

"Martha's dedication to the child is apparent: She is almost lyrical in describing the child: "And I had wanted the child." George sparks her memory: "A son? A daughter?" Martha responds deliberately, "A child! (Quieter) A child. And I had a child" (298). When she describes him as "beautiful", George comments, "There is a real mother talking" (298). (Dircks89)

Mommy in *The American Dream* mutilates the child. But Martha is nurturing her imaginative child. She strongly desired for a child, because she wanted to escape from the reality. She was afraid to face the reality of their sterility. And from this fear the fantasy child was created. But she loves him very much. At the beginning of the play Nick and Honey believed that the child really existed. All through the play, illusion seems impossible to differentiate from reality. But finally George understands that Martha can't escape from that illusion and he kills their imaginative child.

At the outset of the play George warns Martha not to disclose their secret about the kid. This part is entirely omitted from the latest edition of the play. Toby Zinman in his work *Edward Albee* says that "Albee revised *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for the Broadway revival in 2005."... "Early on, in the original act 1, as Nick and Honey arrive, ringing the doorbell, but before they enter, George warns Martha; what follows has been entirely omitted from the new version.

George: (Moves a little toward the door, *smiling slightly*) All right, love . . . whatever love wants. (*Stops*) Just don't start on the bit, that's all.

Martha: The bit? The bit? What kind of language is that? What are you talking about?

George: The bit. Just don't start on the bit.

Again Martha is asking what he means and his reply is:

George: Just don't start on the bit about the kid. That's all.

That time Martha feel angry and she replies:

Martha: (Really angered) yeah? Well, I'll start on the kid if I want to.

George: Just leave the kid out of this.

Martha: (Threatening) He's mine as much as he is yours. I'll talk about him if I want to. (Signet ed., 18-19) (49)

Martha broke the rule and reveals the secret to Honey. She describes how she delivered the boy, how she reared him up etc in a real manner,

Martha: All right. Our son. Our son was born in a September night, a night not unlike tonight, though tomorrow, and twenty . . . one . . . years ago.

She adds "it was an easy birth. . ." "and I was young, and he was a healthy child, a red bawling child, with slippery firm limbs . . ." (295)

George also joins her. Hearing all these Honey desperately cries out that she needs a child.

Honey : (Suddenly; almost tearfully) I want a child.(298)

Up to that time she feared bearing a child. She kept a secret from Nick that she has been taking pills to avoid pregnancy. She was afraid of the pain of the childbirth but when Martha speaks about the beauty of parentage she says she wants a baby. Actually Nick married Honey to avoid a scandal, because of her hysterical pregnancy. This is a parallel. Martha wanted children and hasn't any and Honey avoided pregnancy. Both live in illusion. At this time George announces the death of their son. Martha is shocked and says he has no right to kill him. "You have no right . . . you have no right at all" But George says, "I have the right Martha. We never spoke of it; that's all. I could kill him any time I wanted to. Martha asks him "But why? But why?" and George said "You broke the rule, baby. You mentioned him . . . You mentioned him to someone else." (307) It is clear that he has the right because Martha exposed the secret to the outside world and moreover, it was he, who

created the child to alleviate Martha's sorrow of being childless. Martha is broken. Her image as the Earth-mother is destroyed. She became infertile. She is forced to face the reality. Thus the unfulfilled mother Martha is attempting to face the unknown future and George is there to console her.

In Albee's plays we can see this type of real and unreal Mother characters as Mommy, Martha, and Grandma Etc. Through these types of characters he mocks the dysfunctional American families which show no concern to the values of marriage, family, parentage, familial love, affection to children etc. Sadistic, selfish mothers and hen-pecked husbands are caricatured here. A repeated theme in his plays is somehow a child comes into a family and one way or another it is ruined as in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Men are dominated by wives and infants and children are at threat. They are living under fear of loss or dismemberment. Old people also are in danger. They are considered as waste. Through comic situations and implied satire Albee entertains the audience and at the same time he creates a new thinking that is to live with a sense of responsibility and public commitment. He demands his characters and audience to surpass the illusion and be prepared to face the reality.

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