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Dysfunctional American Family and Spiritual Decay in Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I*

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1. Abstract:

This research is an attempt to present a complete explanation of Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I* through applying the deconstructive theory in order to generate a better understanding of its text and thoughtful themes. According to this theory, language as a significant means of interaction does not embrace merely one meaning. This multiplicity of meanings strengthens the importance of language in Albee's theater of the absurd. For Jacques Derrida as a French deconstructionist, the concept of "différance" plays an imperative role in the language's multiple explanations and implications. Also, binary opposition is proven to be a significant concept, which regards such differences as central to the language, human attitude, and culture. It is shown in this study that language of Albee's play does not have a fixed meaning. In fact, it is found that language in Albee's *Me, Myself and I* is a highly significant feature which assists the readers to comprehend the absurd, vague, and formless lives of his American characters. Thus, benefitting from différance discloses the absurdities, roughness, and messiness of American society.

Key Terms: Binary Opposition, Deconstruction, Derrida, Différance, Edward Albee, *Me, Myself and I*

2. Introduction:

Edward Franklin Albee III (1928–2016) was a well-known American dramatist, adopted by a rich family from Larchmont, New York. When Albee was young, he struggled against the dominant culture in this part, as it was dull and disappointing for him. Thus, at age twenty, the young Albee decided to go to Greenwich Village in order to join the avant-garde art scene. Kolin (2005) states that:

"Edward Albee launched his career with a series of one-act plays. As he records in the 1960 preface to one of them, *The American Dream*: "I have, in my brief three years, five plays, two of them but fifteen minutes long."1 With these five plays – *The Zoo Story* (1959), *The American Dream* (1961), and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), plus the shorter *The Sandbox* (1960) and *FAM and YAM* (1960) – Albee is credited with changing the course of American theatre history". (p. 16)

His first play, *The Zoo Story*, which was performed in 1959 became really successful, and paved the way for Albee to come up with some of the most famous plays of modern theater, such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), and *Three Tall Women* (1994). Most of Albee's reputation is due to being one of the forerunners of "The Theatre of the Absurd". During his life, Albee received numerous significant awards for his great plays in literature, in which he focused mainly on the futility and absurdity of the human life.

“Edward Albee believes that despite the material richness of the American society, the American civilization is essentially empty . This idea is reflected through the sterility of the characters in the play”. (Farhood, 2009)

According to lots of critics, his plays show his efforts to demonstrate that religious, moral, spiritual, political, and social structures of American society and family have been decayed. Kolin (2005) has stated that Albee destabilized the dramatic realism that was remarkably noticeable in the American theatre back then. Although he benefitted from the techniques and concepts from the “absurdist” plays of such European dramatists as Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco, Albee’s voice was also idiosyncratically American, showing his struggles to achieve social transformations (p. 17).

3. Review of Related Literature:

This part can be classified into two main parts. In the first part, the sources related to this study's methodology are discussed, and then the researcher is going to provide the readers with some sources related to Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I*.

3.1. On Deconstruction Theory:

Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (2002) by Norris is a useful book for those who wish to learn about the theory of deconstruction. As stated in this book, this theory started where structuralism finished. Deconstruction let go of those structures, because they were restricted. According to Norris, deconstruction represents the tracking of the meaning of a text to the point of revealing the hypothetical illogicalities and interior obstructions upon which it is created. It is so important that it can be used as a methodology in philosophy, in literary analysis, and even in the examination of scientific texts.

Deconstruction: A Reader (2001) by Martin McQuillan starts with an introduction that is a detailed outline of this theory. Then, McQuillan presents a number of essays within his book in which deconstruction has been discussed in diverse fields such as philosophy, literature, and culture. While many of the essays are extremely deep, many are easy to understand. In general, this volume provides a great overview of the deconstructive project and its inferences.

Deconstruction and Critical Theory (2002) by Zima investigates the key schools and philosophers of deconstruction, their theoretical backgrounds and academic advances. It also presents adequate information regarding their influence and help to understand the relationship between literature and ideology. In fact, a detailed account of Derrida’s contributions to deconstruction is the reason why this book is really useful.

3.2. On Edward Albee’s *Me, Myself and I*:

Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction (2017) by Roudané is a helpful book which analyzes the subjects that impressed Albee’s attitude in writing such plays as *The Zoo Story* (1959) and *Me, Myself,*

& *I* (2008). Roudané discusses almost all of Albee's important works in an inclusive, clearly organized, and informed way. This volume also provides its readers with an imperative indication of all of Albee's plays, in ten chapters along with vital historical and sociological context for Albee's theatre on and off Broadway.

Similar to the previously mentioned book, *Edward Albee: A Literary Companion* (2010) addresses some of the most important information regarding Edward Albee. Furthermore, it delivers other features such as Albee's biographical background and artistic beliefs, and his understanding of the playwright's accountability.

"Discourses of the I: The Panic of Identity in Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I*" (2016) reflects the methods that Albee has used so as to change the stage into a "meta- and intertextual "space" by subverting and troublesome any belief in identity and language as permanent, static, and practical units. In this article, it has been illustrated that the idea of the "doppelganger and doubling" which is a recurrent subject in literature from folklore to works by Shakespeare, Poe, Dickens, Wilde, Borges, and many others, can be also perceived in Albee's plays" (p. 30).

3.3. Theater of the Absurd:

In *Edward Albee and Absurdism* (2017), Bennett has discussed Albee's association with Martin Esslin's theatre of the absurd. It is stated that Edward Albee is an absurd playwright because his plays like *Me, Myself and I* generally portray the existential issues in life of humans. Furthermore, his exploration of such themes as loneliness, solitude, dehumanization, and real meaning of man in American society is the reason why he is such a distinguished figure in this domain.

Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter (2011) is another useful source regarding the theater of the absurd. Although Albee is absent in this book, it can provide the readers with comparable information concerning Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter. Bennett refers to some plays and argues that these plays can be interpreted in a novel light through a re-investigation and re-application of Camus's attitudes. Bennett also states that Esslin would claim that theater of the absurd is not a self-conscious movement. In fact, it is a tendency from a group of dramatists who felt "cut off and isolated in [their] private world[s]" (p. 4). Furthermore,

"these plays of the Absurd, . . . [tend] toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The elements of language still plays an important, yet subordinate, part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters". (p. 6)

Cardullo's "Experimental Theatre in the Twentieth Century: Avant-Gardism, the Absurd, and the Postmodern" (2015) calls for a revisionist account of modern drama that would recognize the groundbreaking and unrealistic contributions of modernism. According to this study, from the beginning of the absurd, avant-garde drama has definitely not stopped to thrive. Moreover, the most substantial attempts of the avant-garde linger to include the examination of the nature, restrictions, and potentials of drama and theater in modern society.

4. Statement of the Problem:

Family has been always an important theme in Albee's plays. Gong (2018) Yuanlei remarks that in modern drama, there are plenty of outstanding dramatic pieces with family background. This type of drama is mostly dedicated to emphasizing the manifestation of family inconsistencies, and the association between family members. Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I* is one remarkable example of such plays

Although this play has been the subject of so many researches so far, there still remain a gap which this study intends to fill. In order to address this gap, the deconstruction theory which signifies the realization of the association between text and its meaning will form this paper's main framework. This concept was chiefly recognized by Derrida (1930-2004). As stated by Derrida, language is an arrangement of signs and thus, words are meaningful just as the result of the divergence between these signs.

Parents in Albee's plays presented in bad view such as a sterile couple or bearers of wrong principles, accordingly, Albee explores the destructive powers that may be source of the descent of the families and their members. (Alkhazali, 2000).

5. Significance of the Study:

Benefitting from the deconstruction theory plays a significant role in a more detailed interpretation of a text. In fact, it enables the researchers to distinguish how the text plays around with the presumptions that the readers may make based on the implications of the words and the imageries that they generate. Thus, this theory suggests an undecidability of meaning for *Me, Myself and I*. This play has entangled and clashing discourses and incoherencies, since language itself is unbalanced and uninformed.

6. Methodology:

This study is an attempt to have a fresh look at *Me, Myself and I* through the Derridean world of deconstruction. Derrida introduced and advanced deconstruction theory. Derrida presented his philosophy in three books which were published in 1967, including *Speech of Phenomena, Writing and Difference* and also *Of Grammatology*.

Derrida claims that in Western culture, people have a tendency to contemplate and reflect their views in terms of binary oppositions (white / black, masculine / feminine, cause /effect, conscious /unconscious, presence / absence, speech writing). Derrida says that these binary oppositions are actually hierarchies, and thus, deconstruction of Derrida seeks to eradicate them.

Deconstruction signifies going through a text in order to challenge and destabilize its "logo-centric claims and metaphysical assumptions" (Johnson, 1981, pp. xiv).

"This theory is an examination of a text which violently inscribe[es] within the text that which attempted to govern it from without putting into question the major determination of the meaning of Being as presence, and, by identifying symptoms [though Derrida is suspicious of this word] of something that could not be presented ..., and which, moreover, is nowhere present, tries to show what has been dissimulate[d] and forbid[den] inside it, and inside the history of western way of thinking" (Derrida, 1981, pp. 6-7).

Miller (1976) who is a distinguished deconstructionist, has described in his essay *Steven's Rock and Criticism as Cure* that, "deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself, its apparently solid ground no rock but thin air" (p. 67).

As stated already, Derrida decides to erase the binary oppositions of boundaries. Still, he has admitted that he is himself functioning in the domain of the Western metaphysical tradition, and this is why he is powerless to completely reject this way of thinking that he condemns. Consequently, a deconstructive interpretation of a text means to stop presenting a text as being wholly present or expressive.

7. Discussion:

This article aims at performing a study of Derrida's binary oppositions and difference theory in *Me, Myself and I*. *Me, Myself and I* is a play by Edward Albee. Performed in 2007, it is an absurdist family drama which revolves around Mother, who has a close relationship with Doctor, and also difficulty distinguishing her 28-year-old sons because both her sons are named "OTTO" and "otto". At the beginning of the play, OTTO tells his mother that he is about to leave home in order to become Chinese and that his brother does not exist anymore. This issue bothers otto, who has been looking for proof that he is alive. Maureen as otto's girlfriend also gets involved in this problem.

This play is an example of the theater of the absurd that established after World War II. Such plays mainly concentrate on existentialism in order to discuss what occurs when human existence does not have any meaning or resolution, leading to the failure of communication and family. As a matter of fact, Albee attempted to show the absurdity of an American family in this two-act play. This is why in the commencement of *Me, Myself and I*, one of the twin brothers talks to the audience and says that he is on the stage so as to make troubles and to make everything even more complex so that he can chuck out his family. As noticed, the first act starts with OTTO in front of the red curtain while talking to the spectators:

OTTO: (Out, entering from left, moving center.) Hello, there! My name is OTTO. I'm on my way to see my mother. (Indicates red curtain.) She's back there. I'm going to see her because I want to make trouble, because I want to make things even more complicated than they are around here, and then maybe I can get out of this whole mess – this family and everything. Let's see: my name is OTTO. I have an identical twin brother. I'm trying to get rid of him – so I can get rid of him, rid of all of them – but it's not easy: you know how twins are; well, maybe you don't. [...] They're so hard to get rid of – these twins! (Albee, 2011, P. 11)

The second act which has seven scenes involves the play's conclusion. In this part, we see the two brothers who are struggling to come to terms with a new Otto:

"otto: (Almost crying.) And how are we going to deal with that [Otto]!?"

OTTO: (Thinks about it.) Well ... I guess we'll just have to think of ourselves as triplets. (Pause; they laugh, embrace.)

otto: What do we do now, huh?

OTTO: (Indicates the curtain.) Well, I think the play's over. Let's go join the curtain call" (Albee, 2011, P. 17).

Derrida would claim that language is based on differences; this statement implies that language is not a static arrangement of words. Thus, each word epitomizes manifold explanations. *Me, Myself and I* is also a play which "indulges its language and visual illustrations, and in its fundamental theme, subjectivity and the connotation between reality and the imagination, the reality of and in a literary work, deconstructing and subverting them, tackling with one against the other, and showcasing their unpredictability and obscurity" (Prohászka-Rád, 2016, p. 32).

the dramatist employs language to produce and destabilize meaning. Look at the quotation "THE MOTHER: "I want things to make sense! Why can't they make sense?"(Albee, 2011, P. 17), shows how the dialogue and interactions between characters challenge traditional ideas of character and selfhood. Deconstruction would expose how the meaning is unstable and unsolidified within the play. Furthermore, this meaning can be seen through this quotation is said by another character, DOCTOR: "Names are just convenient labels. They don't define us."(Albee, 2011, P. 2)

the play continuously undermines this desire by presenting situations that defy logical consistency. This conflict between the search for meaning and the inherent vagueness of language mirrors the central principles of deconstruction.

These quotes and justifications show how Edward Albee uses language in his play "*Me, Myself and I*" to reveal and challenge traditional notions of identity and meaning, which supports the deconstructive principles.

Dysfunctional American family and spiritual decay have been the central points of many American plays. Edward Albee as one of the most renowned dramatists has a substantial status in this respect, especially because in the last few years family and spirituality have become important themes in postmodern literature which is known for its instability. Also, this sort of literature questions the objectivity of human rationalism, and accordingly most people doubt a normative explanation of reality.

Me, Myself and I's most pivotal conflict is related to the theme of language and communication breakdown. This is why the family cannot function as a normal one and we notice a sort of decay within in. Bigsby (1967) has stated that "Albee is concerned with demonstrating the vacuity underlying the social façade and with stressing the need for courage and truth" (p. 258).

Albee is also believed to be as "a deeply serious, highly erudite figure, very much a member of the literary establishment..., a writer of many faces, many moods" (Bottoms, 2005, p. 1). The reason is that his plays like *Me, Myself and I* which regularly happen in domestic locations, mock the American society and its perception of family by criticizing the unkindness and emptiness of the American man in an absurd way that is according to Roudane (2017):

an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense – which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to illusion" himself have collapsed.

The purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd is to make a man face up to the human condition as it really is. As such, it is the Realistic theater of our time. (p. 58)

This concept is quite evidence in the theater Albee's theater, especially in his play *Me, Myself and I* which depicts the ambiguity of identity and shows the instability of the dull existence of human beings. His figures are lacking; their sexuality has been damaged, their morals deceived, their hopes abandoned, their relationships reduced. Thus, they have become hollow men and women, revealing signs of their own spiritual emptiness" (Bigsby, 1967, p. 147).

The play reveals the themes of identity and duality, along with explanations of how they can be deconstructed to highlight the instability and diversity of identity: This meaning can be seen when ATTO says: "Am I me, or am I him? And if I am him, who is he?"(Albee, 2011, P. 30). This quote directly challenges the confusion surrounding the twins' identities. The questions focus the variability and overlap between their identities, challenging the idea of a stable, singular self. By obscuring the boundaries between "me" and "him," Albee stresses the instability and constructed nature of identity.

Therefore, Albee represents one of the most provocative dramatists because of the absurdity in his plays and his revolt against the established traditions. The family in *Me, Myself and I* is a dysfunctional family due to its problems. Benefitting from Derrida's deconstruction helps to disclose the construction of the family in this play as an undecided and unpredictable one.

Binary oppositions are amid the most leading features of the world. Unquestionably, such oppositions are highly echoed in literature, particularly plays and novels in order to disclose inconsistencies. Binary oppositions are rooted in a belief that assumes the basis of existence originating from binary oppositions. Derrida has made important transformations in this respect (Pourmahmoud & Mousavilar, 2021, p. 14).

One of these oppositions belongs to illusion versus reality. In fact, Edward Albee's aptitude to present a vivid picture of illusion and reality is one of his most significant talents through which he accentuates the disparaging aspect of the postmodern life. Thus, this American playwright offers the dilemma between misapprehension and truth. *Me, Myself and I* is one of his best plays that reveals the opposition between illusion and reality. It is about the interface between its two main characters playing up one's disenchantment by the other. Roberts (1979) has stated that, "In Edward Albee's plays, each character is existing in his own private ego" (p. 11).

Also, Miller (1986) writes, "Isolated from their environments, their families and themselves, [Edward Albee's characters] prefer to live in a vacuum so sterile that nothing can touch them" (p. 149). Illusion is hence the mere tool by which the characters are capable of finding fulfilment in real life. That is the reason why they are dependent on it and cannot be separated from their unreal world. Being haunted by illusions, the different characters in this play are isolated from one another and the rest of the world because they plagued by illusions In other words, the opposite and differing viewpoints of the major characters lead them not to be able to psychologically and expressively relate to each other.

Kingsley (1973) has also noted that most of Albee's plays can be considered as "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a

condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; they are a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of our is peachy-keen" (p. 71).

The analysis of *Me, Myself and I* shows that Albee inspected a disinfected world with no sense of sympathy and affection in this play. This perspective which is noticed in all his plays signifies how such concepts as family and marriage have been degraded to a great extent. The next binary opposition in *Me, Myself and I* is about male versus female.

Male and female are assumed as binary oppositional concepts due to the male-controlled society. This binary has been addressed frequently by such literary figures as Edward Albee since most of Albee's plays concentrate on the American families' goings-on. In *Me, Myself and I*, Albee has attempted to demonstrate the brawls that are imposed upon the male and female characters based on their gender, signifying the deep-rooted clash between the opposite sexes.

The importance of sex and gender in this play lies in the fact that they can contribute to the truth and thus, they can be seen as essential and interior of the self. This truth then produces identity categories symmetrical to gender and sexual desire. Furthermore, according to Malik (2016), Albee's one of the most plausible purposes in writing such plays is to criticize the current standards and roles that have been given to each gender (p. 238).

Actually, Edward Albee's play "*Me, Myself and I*" complicatedly exposes themes of identity and the variability of self, often through a lens that challenges traditional binary positions, comprising those of gender. In this article, Albee critiques the concept of a fixed identity by concentrating on the characters' psychological and existential scuffles. Thus, revealing the multifarious interaction of male and female roles.

The play focuses on twin brothers, OTTO and otto, who are contending with their identities and their relationship to their mother, Mother. Albee employs these characters to query the unbending binaries of male and female, self and other. The twins, equal in entrance yet separate in personality, emphasize the instability of static identities. Their relations and struggles expose how traditional notions of masculinity and femininity can be performative and substitutable rather than inherent.

Mother, a crucial female character, hesitates between traditional maternal roles and more multifaceted, complex dimensions of her character. Her interface with her sons emphasize the expectations placed on women and the ways these expectations can be undermined. Through Mother's character, Albee criticizes the societal nuisance of gender roles and the binary understanding of male and female.

The play's title, "*Me, Myself and I*," additionally reveals Albee's thematic investigation of identity's variety. By distorting the lines between the characters' individual selves, Albee proposes that identity, including gender identity, is not a static binary but a variety. The characters' overlapping dialogues and the play's surreal principles challenge the audience to reevaluate their defined ideas about individuality.

8. Conclusion:

Edward Albee is one of the greatest dramatists in American drama. Many critics have referred to him as one of the most distinguished playwrights of the theatre of the absurd, because the methods which are noticed in Albee's works are typical of this sort of theater. In this research, it was attempted

to analyze Edward Albee's *Me, Myself and I* through Derrida's deconstruction theory. It was stated that Albee's language plays a momentous role in disclosing and demonstrating the failure of American society. In fact, language does not have a fixed meaning and can be interpreted differently by different readers.

To achieve the purpose of the study, such deconstructive concepts as "différance" and binary opposition were used so as to depict the decay and sluggishness of American characters who are living in the postmodern era. In this play *Me, Myself and I*, Albee attempted to depict a world in which people are constantly trying to search for their identities in chaotic situations. That is why his plays are viewed as an investigation of human beings and their mental, sexual, ethical, and dogmatic faults which form the very foundation of their life.

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