CHAPTER III
Devaluation of Language: THE AMERICAN DREAM

As has been suggested in the opening Chapter, Albee is the chief writer of America within the general framework of theatre of the absurd which he has modified in American ways. "The play American Drama is an examination of American scene, an attack on the substitution for real values in American society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity."¹

The play American Dream is Albee's incursion into the Theatre of Absurd in the manner of the French avant-garde.² In this play Albee comes down very heavily on family relationships, on mother-daughter relationships, on human relationships in general. It is a bitter satire on American society in which relationships between human beings in general and members of the family in particular is tenuous. The arrogant and domineering wife, the emasculated and helpless husband accusing each other and quarrelling with each other have strong psychological basis for their behaviour. The play American Dream dramatizes the disappointments and despairs which are at the root of familial disintegration.
Richard E. Amacher gives a neat gist of the play in the following words:

ALTHOUGH Albee's subtitle to The American Dream is A Play in One scene, the play really has eleven scenes or regrouping of characters. These scenes fall into three major parts: One to four, inclusively, deal with the conflict between Mommy and Grandma (Mommy wants to put Grandma away, presumably in a nursing home); five to seven present the visit of Mrs. Barker, a Colleague club lady of Mommy's who had once worked for the Bye-Bye Adoption Service, from whom Mommy and Daddy had acquired an "unsatisfactory" child; eight to eleven describe the arrival of the handsome young man, "The American Dream" as he is called, and tell how Grandma uses him to foil Mommy's plan to have her placed in a nursing home.

The action of the play takes place in the living room of Mommy and Daddy. The play begins with Mommy and Daddy sitting in the chairs on either side of the stage. They begin to complain about the house they have occupied, because it lacks so many facilities. The landlord was quick enough to collect the two months' rent in advance
and one month's security but has not provided for the ice-box, for the door bell and has not got the leak in the wall repaired. Now Mommy and Daddy are awaiting the landlord to come and attend to their homeneeds. From the discussion of the attitude of the landlord conversation turns to Mommy's buying a new hat the previous day. Mommy is the typical heroine in the play. Mommy rethinks about the colour of her hat which she bought and then exchanged it with another in the shopping which is her most lovely colour. But Daddy is seen worrying about lack of facilities in the apartment. From the incident which involved Mommy to buy a hat it becomes clear that the buyer doesn't know what she is buying. She is conditioned by the society which has a certain taste and seller who has a way of dealing with the customer. The individual does not seem to exercise any choice. He or she cannot trust his own or her own instincts. So even in the incident of this type Albee suggests how absurd life has become.

The next person to appear on the scene is Grandma, Mommy's mother. She is the most interesting character in the play. When she appears on the stage first time she is seen carrying a large and small neatly wrapped and tied boxes which she throws down carelessly and recklessly at Daddy's feet and again leaves for carrying
remaining boxes. Really Grandma wraps the boxes very neatly. As an artisan she is impressed a lot by Mommy and Daddy. Daddy and Mommy begin to nag, tease and illtreat her. Grandma says:

... I suppose I deserve being talked to that way. I have gotten so old. Most people think that when you get so old, you either freeze to death, or you burn up. But you don't. When you get so old, all that happens is that people talk to you that way. (p. 19)

Grandma is a very pathetic character uncared for and neglected by everyone in the family. She realizes that old age is a curse. She tells:

... When you're old you gotta do something. When you get old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you. When you get so old, people talk to you that way. That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way. And that's why you go and hide under the covers in the big soft bed, so you won't feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way ... (p. 20).

The old people died eventually having no comparisons. Again she goes out to bring the rest of the boxes.
Here Mommy goes back to her childhood and tells Daddy how kind and nice Grandma had been when she was young. She says that they were poor in the beginning. Grandma used to pack lunch box so well that Mommy would not open it in the school. At lunchtime Mommy never opens her lunch box. She tells to her friends:

... Oh, look at my lovely lunch box; it's so nicely wrapped it would break my heart to open it. And so, I wouldn't open it. (p. 21).

Mommy would share lunch from her friends and classmates. She used to bring the lunch box back carefully which was wrapped so tightly to her Grandma without opening it. Grandma likes to eat the day old cake and chicken legs much. She eats yesterday's food from Mommy's lunch box regularly. In the school the remaining little angels thought that Mommy's lunch box was empty and Mommy would suffer from the sin of pride. But Mommy has been married to Daddy who is a rich business man. Daddy understands that Mommy was cheated by her own mother. After Mommy's marriage instead of giving care for Grandma Mommy begins to illtreat her. This is the kind of mother-daughter relationship that Albee shows in the play realistically.
At first Grandma asked Daddy not to marry her daughter Mommy. She exposed Mommy who was "a tramp and a trollop and trull to boot, and she's no better now." (p.25). In the vision of Grandma Mommy was a prostitute and an arrogant woman of loose habits. Had Daddy really known about her character he would not have married her. Unfortunately he got unkind and unfavourable wife. Grandma further says that Mommy even while she was eight years old was dreaming of marriage with a rich man "When I gwo up, I'm going to mahwy a which old man." (p. 25) While talking about the weaknesses of Mommy, she warns her mother Grandma and asks her to remember that she is her daughter: "You stop that! you're my mother, not his!" (p. 25). Here it shows that Mommy could not bear the words of her mother Grandma. So that, Grandma is forced to bed by Mommy but she never leaves the place. Meanwhile door bell rings. Grandma is afraid that it is a van man who has come to carry her away to a nursing home. Mommy forces Daddy to open the door. He opens the door and Mrs. Barker steps into the room. In fact Mommy and Daddy have been expecting the landlord and while Grandma expects the van man but instead of their expectations Mrs. Barker appears.

It is Mrs. Barker who has been invited by the wonderful couple Mommy and Daddy previously. But when she
has come to them they no longer remember why she has come. This is the common element in absurd plays. Grandma however knows that Mrs. Barker represents the Bye-Bye-Adoption Agency. Mrs. Barker is introduced to all in the house. She moves in a shaky way at Mommy, Daddy and Grandma. Brian Way draws parallel between Ionesco and Albee and Quotes passages from the latter:

In *The American Dream* 1961, Albee is closer to Ionesco than to any other dramatist. Like Ionesco, he sees the absurd localized most sharply in conventions of social behaviour. For both dramatists, the normal currency or social intercourse - of hospitality, or courtesy, or desultory chat - has lost its meaning, and this "devaluation of language," to use Martin Esslin's invaluable phrase, is an index for them of the vacuity of the Social life represented. The inane civilities exchange by the Smiths and the Martins in *The Bald Prima Donna* enact the complete absence of human contact which is the reality beneath the appearance of communication. We see similar effects in *The American Dream*, in the opening exchanges:

DADDY: Uh... Mrs. Barker, is it? Won't you sit down?
MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do.

MOMMY: Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs?

MRS. BARKER: You forget yourself, Mommy; I'm a professional woman. But I will cross my legs.

DADDY: Yes, make yourself comfortable.

MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do

(pp. 34-35).

After the introduction she takes off her dress and then feels a great deal more comfortable. Mommy had bought a bumble some twenty years ago but was disappointed. Now she wants to buy another. In the course of conversation Daddy and Mommy betray their indifference to Grandma. Grandma tells that normally old people are concerned with mobs, hanged down unevenly, and they make all sorts of noises, half of them cannot sleep, they whimper, cry and belch. They make a deep heavy continuous sound at the table, they wake up in the middle of the night sharply crying and find out that they have not even been asleep. These are problems of the old people. They are nothing but children in some cases. This is the description of Grandma about old people in the society.
What we come to know about Daddy is that he wanted to become a United States Senator but then he changed his mind and decided to be a Governor for the rest of his life time. Mrs. Barker begins to tell the story of her dear brother who is very much like Daddy. Mrs. Barker says that he is younger to her:

.... He runs a little newspaper. Just a little newspaper ... but he runs it. He's chief cook and bottle washer of that little newspaper, which he calls The Village Idiot. He has such a sense of humour, he's so self-deprecating, so modest. And he'd never admit it himself, but he is the Village Idiot.

(p. 42).

Mrs. Barker adds more things about her brother:

My brother's a dear man, and he has a dear little wife, whom he loves, dearly. He loves her so much he just can't get a sentence out without mentioning her. He wants everybody to know he's married. He's really a stickler on that point; he can't be introduced to anybody and say hello without adding. "Of course, I'm married." As far as I'm concerned, he's the Chief exponent of Woman Love in this whole country; he's even been written up in psychiatric journals because of it.

(p. 43).
Mommy foolishly thinks that old people do not have anything to say, and if they had something to say, nobody would listen to them. But Grandma criticizes that middle aged people have got the rhythm but they do not have really the quality in their thinking. She says that middle aged people think that they can do anything, but the truth is that the middle aged people cannot do most of things as well as they used to. Middle aged people think that they are special because they are like anybody else. She suggests that middle aged people have to be taught the rhythm and content. Grandma says that they are living in the age of deformity in American society. Here we can find that it is not the relation between mother and daughter but may be mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Mommy never loves Grandma though she is her mother. Grandma is no better. Harold Clurman remarks that:

She says all the right things at the wrong time and the wrong things at the right time. No one listens to anyone else or cares about what is said when they do listen. There is total spiritual, intellectual stasis.

The recklessness and hatred are going on between mother and daughter. This kind of relation is abnormal and unnatural.
between mother and daughter. Mommy asks Daddy to call the
van man for putting Grandma in the nursing home. She
herself says that the room is fully crowded and there is no
vacancy for Grandma to live in the apartment. Mommy feels
uneasy. Their room is very crowded thanks to Grandma's
boxes, and enema bottles and pikinese have occupied much
place in the room. Grandma has become a burden to her
daughter at home. Mommy is unable to bear even the
presence of her mother because of her loose talk. Now
Grandma is the most unwanted member at home. But Mommy
and Daddy want to put Grandma in a nursing home. But she
is interested to go neither put place nor taken place. She
does not want to go any where losing her daugher and
son-in-law. No wife can bear if she is blamed or insulted
infront of her husband, least of all by her own mother. Of
course Mommy is no better. Both are guilty of indecency.

Grandma again goes back and talks about Mommy's industrious
delivery, that Mommy "had a head shaped like banana"(p.47)
Now Mommy cannot bear being insulted by her mother infront
of husband and the guest. She says emotionally, "One of
these days you're going away in a van; that's what's what's
going to happen to you!" (p. 48). Grandma used to call
Mommy "a hedgehog." (p. 48) It is a kind of thorns pig.
She got that word on the television. Mommy feels ashamed
by that word hedgehog. Mommy asks Daddy:
You see? I told you. It's all those television shows. Daddy, you go right into Grandma's room and take her television and shake all the tubes loose.

(p. 49)

Mommy and Daddy have forgotten that they had invited Mrs. Barker Home. It is an unfortunate thing that both Mommy and Daddy wonder why Mrs. Barker has come. More interesting thing is that Mrs. Barker also forgets why she has come and then realizes that she has been invited. Daddy is a hen-pecked husband. He does not have liberty. He cannot dictate to his wife. He does not have independence of his own in and out. Mommy feels happy that she could have such a husband in her life. Really Daddy is emasculated by Mommy. Whatever Mommy says Daddy will do without thinking. She says that she is a fortunate woman to have such a husband. She tells that "I could have a husband who was poor, or argumentative, or a husband who sat in a wheelchair all day ..." (p.53). Both Mommy and Mrs. Barker want to have some girl talk in the absence of her husband Daddy. Grandma is asked to bring a glass of water for Mrs. Barker. She is forced and frightened to do it. "Grandma, go get Mrs. Barker a glass of water" (p. 54). If Grandma does not bring water she knows what will happen to her later. She will be taken away in a van. But Mommy leaves through
the archway to the left side of the stage. With Mommy's departure only Mrs. Barker and Grandma are there on the stage. Hence Mrs. Barker does not know why she is staying there. Then Grandma says that Mrs. Barker is not there exactly because they have moved around a lot, from one apartment to another, up and down the social ladder like mice. Still Mrs. Barker is not aware of the reason why she is called there. Mrs. Barker requests, implores, begs, asks, entreats and beseeches Grandma to get the information for her visit to Mommy and Daddy. Grandma is satisfied with her request and starts to give a hint.

Grandma is rural from older way of life. Mommy and Daddy want to put Grandma in a nursing home. But Grandma refuses to go to anywhere because old people cannot go anywhere. They need protection and affectionate care from their children. Since leaving the stage both Mommy and Daddy have been searching for Grandma's television. But they cannot find her television, pekinese, even water. Grandma says that everything is hidden. And Daddy even cannot find Grandma's room. Grandma laughs at them. In fact Grandma is troubling them -- because she is a trouble maker. Mommy says that Daddy has planned to send her away for a long-time but she has not given the green signal.
Meanwhile the door bell rings a second time and really a young man enters the room and Grandma asks him whether he is a van man who has come to take her away. Actually the young man is confused. Grandma realizes that he is not a van man. Now they have begun to talk about lusty people who had lived one hundred and fifty years back. The young man has really good personality and she asks why doesn't he act in movies? He replies that he may have a career that yet he has lived out on the West coast almost all his life and he met a few people who might be able to help him. The boy seems to be mid west farm type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes and wonderful smile. Grandma tells that the boy knows what he is, that he is an American Dream that is what he is. All those other people, they do not know what they are telling about. Since Grandma knows that the young man is not the van man, she asks him if he is not a van man why he has come there. The young man answers that he is searching for a job and he will do anything for money. He needs money. Grandma says that she has got more money of her own. Old people quite often have lots of money, more often than most people expect.

Now the young man begins to explain his own pathetic story. He says:
My mother died in the night that I was born, and I never knew my father; I doubt my mother did. But, I wasn't alone, because lying with me ... in the placenta ... there was someone else ... my brother ... my twin. (p. 77)

They were identical twins. They were fraternal but identical. They were derived from the same ovum and in this, in that they were twins not, from separate ova but from the same one. They had kinship such as Grandma cannot imagine. He says that his brother's heartbeats thunder in his temples and his heartbeats in the temple of his twin. Their stomachs ached and they cried for feeding at the same time. The young man still continues his tearful story and separation from his brother:

... We were separated when we were still very young, my brother, my twin and I ... inasmuch as you can separate one being. We were torn apart ... thrown to opposite ends of the continent. I don't know what became of my brother ... to the rest of myself ... except that, from time to time, in the years that have passed, I have suffered losses ... that I can't explain. A fall from grace ... a departure of innocence ... loss ... loss. How can I put it to you?
All right; like this: Once ... it was as if all at once my heart ... became numb ... almost as though I ... almost as though ... just like that ... it had been wrenched from my body ... and from that time I have been unable to love. Once ... I was asleep at the time ... I awoke, and my eyes were burning. And since that time I have been unable to see anything, anything, with pity, with affection ... with anything but ... Cool disinterest. And my groin ... even there ... since one time ... one specific agony ... since then I have not been able to love anyone with my body. And even my hands ... I cannot touch another person and feel love. And there is more ... there are more losses, but it all comes down to this: I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have to emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder ... disemboweled. I have, now, only my person ... my body, my face. I use what I have ... I let people love me ... I accept the syntax around me, for while I know I cannot relate ... I know I must be related to. I let people love me ... I let people touch me ... I let them draw pleasure from my groin ... from my presence ... from the fact of me ... but, that is all it comes to. As I told you, I am incomplete ... I can feel nothing. I can
feel nothing. I can feel nothing. And so ... here I am ... as you see me.
I am ... but this ... what you see.
And it will always be thus. (pp. 78-79)

Commenting on the above passage Amacher makes the following observation: According to Grandma, "Mommy and Daddy had killed the child, dismembering it little by little in the most gruesome fashion for everything it did that was natural; in short, they had killed it for its failure to develop according to their own artificial values."

From the beginning mommy and Daddy do not have children. The unfertilized parents want to adopt a child. About twenty years back they called on Mrs. Barker, who is a professional social worker now, was working as a representative for the Bye-Bye Adoption Society then. She had once sold Mommy and Daddy a young boy called "bumble." They bought and adopted a child but were unsatisfied with that child, first of all because it did not look like either of them and then because the child only had eyes for its Daddy. When he had failed to give "satisfaction," Mommy had systematically mutilated him, destroying everything which signified his humanity. Grandma explains the brutal and dramatic murder of "bumble" to Mrs. Barker:
Mrs. BARKER: For its Daddy! Why, any self-respecting woman would have gouged those eyes right out of its head.

GRANDMA: Well, she did. That's exactly what she did. But then, it kept its nose up in the air.

MRS. BARKER: Ufggh! How disgusting!

GRANDMA: That's what they thought. But then, it began to develop an interest in its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER: In its you-know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hands off at the wrists!

GRANDMA: Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first, they cut off its you-know-what.... And then, as it got bigger, they found out all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had not guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay ... just dreadful things. (pp. 01-02).

In fact the young man and the adopted child are the twins. "To punish its endless "misbehaviour," they had had to put its eyes out, castrate it, cut off its hands and finally cut its tongue out. Now that it has capped its unsatisfactoriness by dying, they want compensation."
Toby Tompkins as Young Man and Barbara Bryne as Grandma in the Meadow Brook Theatre's 1969-1970 production of *The American Dream.* (Meadow Brook Theatre, Rochester, Mich.)

Edward Albee.
[William Morris Agency]
The young man continues to add that he is sure that whatever he says may not be true. Mrs. Barker again enters into the room. She too cannot find Mommy and Daddy. She thinks that the young man is the van man. Mrs. Barker asks the young man how dare he carts the poor old woman away and young man replies that he does what he has been paid to do and he does not ask any questions. The young man takes up half of the boxes and exits through the front door. And again he comes and takes the rest of the boxes out. The young man having kept all the boxes out now comes to Grandma again. Grandma feels that boxes are not inevitable to her. Because they are filled with old letters, a couple of regrets, pikinese, the television, her Sunday teeth, eighty six year of living, some sounds, a few images etcetera. After Grandma leaves with her boxes, Mommy and Daddy enter. Both wife and husband find that Grandma has left the home with luggage. Mrs. Barker tells that van man has come and taken away the old woman. And she says that she has found the van man with her own eyes.

Mommy is unable to believe it. Actually Mommy does not know about the van man. She had called the van man to frighten her mother. She cries a lot for seconds. Grandma has disappeared to watch the people from outside. Mommy's sorrow turns into delight with the arrival of her
mother again. The young man is introduced to Mommy and Daddy by Mrs. Barker. For enjoying the pleasant moment they plan to take drink. The young man brings a bottle of wine and five glasses. Every one takes a glass and begins to drink. They celebrate the happiest moment for satisfaction. The play ends with Grandma addressing the audience directly.

"...So, let's leave things as they are right now ... while everybody's happy ... while everybody's got what he wants ... everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears." (p. 93).

The American Dream or the substitute son or physically faultless youth is the personification of modern sickness, depression and disappointment.

"The play is a comedy of laughter and flays the skin and chills the bone. Mommy is a raging harpy who has emasculated her own husband. She might have seduced her substitute son, or physically faultless youth who is emptied of emotion and ready to do anything for money. The substitute son is the personification of modern sickness of the American Dream." It is an absurd play, fantastic and incongruous action is coupled with familiar idiomatic language and there is a suggesting death effect in Albee's American brand of surrealism.
The American Dream provoked a good deal of critical reaction in the New York press. Most of the critics found it nihilistic and immoral. One was so incensed by it that he refused to review Albee's next play. Generally there was so much misunderstanding that Albee though it necessary to declare his intentions in a preface he wrote in May 1961 for the Published playscript:

...it is stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy - keen ... The American Dream is a picture of our time -- as I see it, of course. Every honest work is personal, private yowl, a statement of one individual's pleasure or pain; but I hope that The American Dream ... transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of Us all.¹⁰

Social complacency is, as has already been indicated, in some of his plays, surely one of Albee's main targets. He himself tells about the play:

Is the play offensive (he asks of his satire The American Dream): I certainly hope so; it is my intention to offend - as well as to amuse and entertain.
Is it nihilistic, immoral, defeatist? ...
... let me answer that (it) is a picture of our time— as I see it, of course. Every honest work is a personal, private Yowl, a statement of one's individual pleasure and pain; but I hope that The American Dream is something more than that. I hope it transcends the personal and private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all.
NOTES


7. Amacher, Richard E. Edward Albee, p. 78. Albee's technique in describing this dismemberment of the child may be interpreted as somewhat supernaturalistic or expressionistic. (Cf. Buchner's Woyzeck, O'Casey's Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy, etc.).


