

APORIA IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE AMERICAN DREAM*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to focus and analyze Edward Albee's American Dream by applying Derridean Deconstructive Term Aporia. American Dream has been a source of inspiration for American People as it promised equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness thereby leading them towards prosperity, contentment and self awareness. Regrettably, in twentieth century, the concept of this dream has been reduced to destabilization, confusion, and chaos. Celebration of American Dream has been turned into bewilderment and approach towards this dream has been changed. Spirit of self awareness and self realization has a decaying condition. In this paper, with the help of Derridean Term Aporia, deterioration, disorder, chaos and disorientation in American Dream will be analyzed and explored. Keeping in view the different facets of American Dream, three Aporias have been discussed in this paper. First Aporia deals with justice while second Aporia focuses on undecidability and the third Aporia focuses on human knowledge and its limitations. Edward Albee's the American Dream has been discussed while keeping in view these three Aporias to reveal the controversy within American Dream developed by its own harbingers and its lasting effects on post modern and post war American Society.

Keywords: Aporia, American Dream, undecidability, confusion, chaos

INTRODUCTION

In American history, American Dream has been celebrated a lot as it revitalized American spirit of self awareness, self dependence and self exploration. However, in twentieth century, American Dream has been turned into a nightmare leaving American society in confusion and chaos. Regrettably, both significance of and approach towards American Dream has been changed. This dream has lost its charisma, strength and attraction as it has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by its own harbingers. American society developed suspicions, confusions, uncertainty and greed for materialism. In this paper I have applied Derridean Deconstructive term *Aporia* (my Italics) to explore, reveal and analyze the ambiguity, degeneration, disintegration and gap between post modern American society and American Dream. According to Derrida (1979), Deconstruction is:

Destabilization is required for 'progress' as well. And the 'de-'of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is construction itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme (p.77).

What Derrida believes is that destabilization leads to stabilization as "de" of deconstruction represents construction and progress not demolition. Deconstruction makes a text challenging as reader refuses to accept the previously set norms and fixations and shows his determination to understand the text by using different lens. For Derrida, Deconstruction makes text fluid and open to any arguments and it also provides reader a position to explore the instability in meaning within the text. In order to explore the flux in meaning, Aporia is

one of the important terms in Derridean Deconstruction that unlocks the paradox to make it more complicated. It reveals the undecidability within the text as Malpas and Wake explores this undecidability in their article (2006), “Aporia is a Greek term that denotes an insoluble problem or paradox; etymologically it comes from *aporos* meaning impassable “(p.14)

Derrida wants to project the undecidability in the text in which meaning is explored, re-explored, analyzed, destructed, reconstructed and deconstructed. This undecidability makes a reader responsible to understand the indeterminacy and plurality of the text which can be refurbished according to the understanding of the reader. As Barthes emphasizes in his essay *Death of the Author* (1967), “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination can any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology.... (p.3). This seems to be quite closer to Aporia where impermanence, fluidity and variability of meaning are the important factors and which make text challenging as well as demanding. Meaning itself changes its form and it makes reader responsible to scrutinize the different interpretations. This seems to be followed by Aporia where indeterminacy and impermanence of language and its various expressions is turning the text into a challenging task. Undecidability involves interrogation which helps reader to understand and investigate the text. According to Derrida, Aporia is “an interrogation of all that which is more than interrogation (Malpas & Wake, 2006, p.10), which puts reader in a position to make a connection between the text and the surrounding.

American Dream and the First Aporia

“.....Derrida calls the **first** aporia, “the **epoche** of the rule” Our most common axiom in ethical or political thought is that to be just or unjust and to exercise justice, one must be free and responsible for one's actions and decisions” (Stanford, 2014, p.320).

This definition of first *Aporia* might be used in the context of deconstruction of American Dream. This is what American Dream is that all Americans must be free to make choices in their life and they must have lot of opportunities in their life to make their life happy, prosperous and flourishing. This is the dream which believes in equality, fraternity and justice but it has turned out in inequality, disparity, discrimination, injustice, thoughtlessness, discontent and despondency. The purity of American Dream has been contaminated during 20th Century due to materialism, greed, selfishness and insensitivity of American people. One can easily observe all these features in the plays of Edward Albee and other American Playwrights of his time. If one observes *The American Dream* (1961), one can find that Youngman, Mommy and Daddy in *American Dream* are lost characters and they expose nothingness, emptiness and shallowness in their behavior. The conversations of Mommy and Daddy are quite meaningless and irrational yet they are sure of what they talk about. Daddy needs confirmation of his manliness from Mommy and Mommy gets quite happy by insulting Daddy. They talk about trivial things in an overtly serious manner. For Daddy, opening the door is something daring and this will also prove his masculinity. ‘Daddy: I shall open the door. Mommy: What a masculine daddy! Isn’t he a masculine Daddy?’ (p.48). Masculinity, firmness, and decisiveness are all about opening the door which is a common and repeated action. Daddy is so unsure and uncertain about himself that he needs assurance and assertion all the time from Mommy. Grandma is a burden as old American Dream has become a burden for American people and she is no more wanted just like old values and morality. This is what American people are doing; showing discontentment and disgust towards old values and are quite uncertain and indecisive about their present and future. Youngman in *The American Dream* has excellent physical health which might help him to seek opportunities to get some work yet he wants to be dependent and not very sure about whatever he says. As after narrating the story of his twin to Grandma he warns Grandma, ‘Be careful, be very

careful. What I have told you may not be true' (p.55). American Dream seems shaky, uncertain, unstable and insecure. People say something yet they are not sure about the reality and the truth of their conversations.

American Dream and Second Aporia

Derrida calls the **second** aporia "the ghost of the undecidable:

.....one must first of all experience what Derrida calls "undecidability." One must experience that the case, being unique and singular, does not fit the established codes and therefore a decision about it seems to be impossible. The undecidable, for Derrida, is not mere oscillation between two significations. (*Stanford*, para2)

Undecidability in text makes the text more challenging and exigent and as far as Albee's *The American Dream* is concerned, characters are indecisive and uncertain as they are not sure of their actions, behaviors and conducts. They are leading their life like a jelly and the lost ones as Youngman in *The American Dream* is not sure about himself as well as his talents. According to Grandma he is the American Dream but according to Youngman American Dream is materialistic, selfish and cruel. In Edward Albee's *American Dream*, Aporia can be easily traced within the text and individuals by finding the undecidability and impermanence in the suppressed feeling of hate, distrust and revulsion towards the concept of American Dream and old generation. Characters in *The American Dream* are indecisive, uncertain and vacillating. They are not sure of their weaknesses and strengths. Mommy and Daddy don't have names rather they have been given the identity of relationship which represents family, love, care and affection. Regrettably, they are void of all these feeling, emotions, sentiments and devotion. They are divulging their shallowness, superficiality and triviality by calling each other "Mommy" and "Daddy", by forgetting what they want to do, by asking for money return for the dead twin. Moreover, they need assurance and assertion from other characters about their decisiveness and manliness. As Daddy asks Mommy about his manliness:

Daddy

Was I firm about it? Mommy: Oh, so firm; so firm.

Daddy: And was I decisive? Mommy: SO decisive! Oh, I shivered.

Daddy: And Masculine? Was I really masculine?

Mommy: Oh, Daddy, you were so masculine; I shivered and fainted. (p.21)

The uncertainty and undecidability can be easily found in Albee's *American Dream* which has lost its real meaning and interpretation. Relationships, conversations, dialogues, fake and artificial assurance and assertions; all are demonstrating the misapprehension of American Dream and American Society. Daddy wants to get assurance from Mommy about his will power, masculinity and strength as he himself is not sure.

This is quite ironic that American Dream during 2nd world War and post war period has been taken as a nightmare and outlandish. Albee in *The American Dream* presents Mommy, Daddy, Grandma and Young Man who are not fighting with each other but there is certain stress in their behavior towards themselves and each other as well.

Aporia and Edward Albee's *The American Dream*

When Aporia is applied to Albee's *American Dream* one can find a false sense of security, suppressed resentment and aggression within the individuals and towards each other. As Daddy tries to find this why Mrs. Barker is here: "Mrs. Barker: La! But that still leaves me puzzled. I know I'm here because you called us, but I am such a busy girl, with this

committee and with that committee, and the Responsible Citizens Activities I indulge in” (p.37).

In the above mentioned lines why characters are so much puzzled and bewildered; they don't know why they are with each other as they face a sense of displacement and dislocation. This dislocation has made their life not only perplexed but also absurd. Mrs. Barker is busy in various committees along with Responsible Citizens Activities that projects a contradiction within American people that they are busy in lot of activities with a belief that they are showing a sense of responsibility towards society yet in reality they escape from the bitter truth of existence. American people are puzzled and perplexed regarding their responsibilities as it seems that responsibilities are burden to them. One more important thing in Edward Albee's *American Dream* is that the language has got minimized and is being reduced to nothingness. This minimization and reduction of language exposes the semantic barrier in understanding American Dream. Characters are saying very few words which could not be called proper statements in true sense of the word and they are not sure what are they saying yet they know one thing that every word coming from their mouth is dripping with disdain for American Dream. Language has lost its meaning and it is also exposes the man's ultimate realities regarding existence. Language exposes the reality that the human existence has no rational meaning and order. Communication between Mommy and Daddy is meaningless and it also projects the irrationality, illogicality and futility of language and circumstances:

Mommy:....I went to buy a new hat yesterday

Daddy: Oh! Yes....yes.

Mommy: Pay attention

Daddy: I am paying attention, Mommy.

Mommy: Well, be sure you do.

Daddy: Oh, I am.... (p.65)

The absurdity of language and failure of the communication is quite evident from the conversation of Mommy and Daddy. They are talking to each other yet their conversations are meaningless. In Albee's *American Dream*, Daddy needs confirmation from Mommy about his masculinity. This confirmation, uncertainty and superfluous conversation and communication project the hopelessness and haplessness of the situation.

Albee's *The American Dream* and the Instability of Language

Albee in *The American Dream* shows the essential precariousness and instability of language; language seems more absurd and sounds hollower than the absurd play itself. Characters have not been given any names rather they are shown in superficial bond of familial relationships: Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and Young Man. Except Mrs. Barker, no other character has been given proper name. Quite ironically, Albee's plays are based on the family unit yet that family is the first indication of social, moral, psychological and ethical collapse and disintegration. Limitations of language could easily be seen when these characters call each other by their familial identities no matter they are husband, wife, or mother, daughter, or mother in law, daughter in law. Names have not been given to these characters; it seems that language is usurping the significance of social and individual identities. It seems that through language American Dream has been caricatured. Everything is perfect apparently yet there is something rotten in the state of American Dream. Henry Goodman has explored this issue of language in his article (1962):

.....When the film studio of Angel of Death causes Grandma to 'pass on' to the accompaniment of an offstage rumble ('you know what that means') and appropriate soft

music, Mommy disposes of her grief bravely: Our long night is over. We must put away our tears; take off our mourning....and face the future. It's our duty.' (p.78)

What Goodman seems to prove is that naming has become something weird and bizarre and language is failing its meaningfulness and potential rather it has become 'bumble' in the words of Grandma when she reveals the story of an adopted child of Mommy and Daddy. This 'bumble' is American Dream which has been mutilated and castrated by following the gothic tradition of blood bath and disproportion as Albee confirms this in *Tiny Alice*, "Every monster was a man first" (Albee, 1965, p.42)

Another major issue is the intimidating and shocking aspect of language which turns American Dream into a harsh reality rather than somewhat flowery in words of James Truslow Adams from *The Epic of America*(1931) who originated the term American Dream:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (p.65)

For Adams American dream will bring order, competence, self realization and recognition but this aspiration could not sustain for a long period of time. Birth itself has become an indictment and this disintegration, degeneration and menace is the sad predicament of American Dream.

Charles Thomas Samuels in his Article "The Theatre of Edward Albee" calls Albee's plays "Social Gothic" (1964, p.23). He further mentions, "Its confusions are accidental rather than, as in absurdist theatre, willed" (p.23). According to Samuels, characters are confused, events are full of confusions and these confusions are not by choice but by chance. Every existence is shapeless, formless, and meaningless.

Derrida's Third Aporia and American Dream

The third aspect of Aporia is related to the urgency and the horizon of knowledge as this has been mentioned in Stanford Encyclopedia:

The *third* is called "the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge" (*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, pp. 26-28). Derrida stresses the Greek etymology of the word "horizon": "As its Greek name suggests, a horizon is both the opening and limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting." (para,7)

In Albee's *The American Dream*, life is just like a big question mark and characters are trying to solve this question without having a clue and sometimes Albee gets much closer to the naturalistic themes which are survival, determinism, violence, lust desire, greed, taboo and more important is "brute within". In *The American Dream*, *The Sandbox*, *Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* These themes are quite prevalent in these plays when Mommy shows her dominance over Daddy by declaring that she could leave him in *The American Dream* and by exposing the brute act in dumping Grandma in the sand in *The Sandbox* and when Jerry finds all the animalistic behaviors in human beings and form him human beings have been turned in to 'being' only; and George and Martha's pleasure in torturing Nick and Honey just to get some fake satisfaction. Dr. R Kannan points out in his Article regarding Albee that Albee focuses on three metaphors: "Tradition is a cage; society is a prison; man has become a machine" (1971, p. 40). If one applies these metaphors to *The American Dream* they are quite common in a way that Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker and Young Man in *The American Dream* have become machines; whereas Grandma wants to live

with both past and tradition and her sarcasm towards Mommy and Daddy is just because they are the prisoners and the escapist of past, present and the tradition. Dr. R. Kannan points out, "A complete absence of human dimension together with a thought of this want of human element is Albee's primary concern" (p.44). If we apply this concern of Albee to this play *The American Dream* this seems quite true as characters have lost dimension, belief in values and within themselves. Their conversation is without any dimension and direction. They are just like people lost in the labyrinth as they aimlessly and blindly run after some mumble which they don't where that is. In *American Dream* (1961) Young Man is indecisive and irresolute:

No, no. It's the part of the interviews. I'll be happy to tell you. It's that I have no talents at all, except what you see....my person, my body, my face. In every other way I am incomplete, and I must therefore.....must compensate. (p.76)

This is where he does not know what to do yet the only sole purpose of his life is to get money not to earn money. He is unsure and uncertain what to do yet he has to be materialistic as he expresses his notion about money in front of Grandma and that is, "Money Talks." This is the delusion regarding American Dream that money matters a lot or money is everything. Grandma is a bit shocked when she listens from Youngman that he is incomplete.

GRANDMA: What do you mean, incomplete? You look pretty complete to me.

YOUNG MAN: I think I can explain it to you, partially because you're very old, and very old people have perceptions they keep to themselves, because if they expose them to other peoplewell, you know what ridicule and neglect are.(p.33)

These statements explicate the inner *confusion* (my italics) as well as apathy towards past. According to Youngman old people's perceptions are useless, futile and obscure and there is nothing important they say. Ironically Youngman points out the futility and ineffectiveness of American Dream in post modern American Society.

Albee and the Conflict between Old and New American Dream

In American society, only money talks everywhere and only this language is understood. These remind us of Mommy's dialogue when she expresses her views about old people and their conversation, "DADDY: May be Grandma has something to say. Mommy: Nonsense. Old people have nothing to say; and old people did have something to say, nobody would listen to them" (p.24). This is what Mommy, Daddy and Youngman believe that old people are just like debris; one should not pay attention to them or to whatever they are saying. The relationship and bond between old and new has been broken. Grandma, Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker and Youngman are aliens in the post modern American society, they know each other yet they are strangers to each other. They are wandering in the apartment without having a sense of belonging both to each other and to the place. New Generation is lost, confused, perplexed and befuddled and their confusion is making them pathetic as well as useless. They are becoming a bad premonition for the future of American society. Youth presented in Post modern American Drama by different American playwrights is void of all reasons and logic as Youngman explains his existence to Grandma in Albee's *The American Dream*, "Well, I am a type"(p.38). This is what American youth of 1960's is as it is without any reason, judgment and common sense. They only understand materialism and avariciousness, and if they are not materialistic then they are psychologically and emotionally impotent and powerless.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this paper, Albee's *The American Dream* and the language used by him has been analyzed in the perspective of Deconstructive term Aporia. American Dream which was supposed to guide American people towards liberty, equality and fraternity, regrettably, it has been tainted by its own people who used and exhausted this for their own vested interest. Albee in his play *The American Dream* makes an effort to portray and reveal the real and true status of American Dream and American society. He has tried to prove the ugliness of post modern American society by exposing the bitter truth of American people to whom American Dream is nothing but a shaggy dog story. Language of Albee's plays and purpose of American Dream has been analyzed with three different types of Aporia yet all the types denote one point that American Dream has lost its importance and vigor and due to this loss American society got fragmented and degenerated. Albee believes that the American Dream is a picture of our time and that is the reason which has made post modern and post war American society a confused and lost one.

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