

## Commodification and Alienation in Edward Albee's Play The Sandbox

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into the themes of alienation and commodification in American culture as depicted in Edward Albee's one-act drama, *The Sandbox*. Albee, known for his cynical observations of American society and the illusory American Dream, uses the play to explore the complexities of modern life through the perspectives and interactions of its characters. Through a close examination of the family members' dialogues and the symbol of the sandbox, this study aims to reveal the various ways in which the characters experience alienation and commodification. The significance of this research lies in its ability to shed light on the ways in which these behaviours manifest in contemporary society and how they are portrayed in literature.

**Key Words:** Edward Albee, The Sandbox, Alienation, Commodification, Karl Marx

## Introduction

Edward Albee, one of America's most renowned playwrights, wrote *The Sandbox*, a one-act play that explores the issues of modern life, alienated relations, and commodification. Albee, personally went through the act of being abandoned and harboured a profound grudge towards his biological parents for forsaking him. (MacNicholas<sup>4</sup>), used his plays to highlight the disillusionment and complacency of

modern society, particularly in relation to the American Dream. His plays, such as *The Sandbox* (1960), *The American Dream* (1961), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), delve into the complexities of family divisions and the fabricated familial ties in modern American culture (Meserve 356).

*The Sandbox* is set in a city home where Grandma, a withered and emaciated woman of eighty-six, is brought by her daughter, Mommy, a harsh and tyrannical woman of

fifty-five. The play also features Daddy, a frail but well-off man of sixty, and Two supporting figures, namely the Young Man and the musician, who symbolize the embodiment of the Angel of Death and perform musical compositions as instructed by the remaining characters. The play is a commentary on the loss of identity and the commodification of human relations in the modern world, and it is analysed through the lens of Marxist theory.

Karl Marx, one of the greatest critics of modernism, used dialectical materialism as an approach to analyse and deconstruct Capitalism and its lasting effects on modernism, such as alienation, commodification, rugged individualism, class conflict, and exploitation. This research paper aims to reveal the elements of alienation and commodification in *The Sandbox* through a Marxist analysis of the play's characters, dialogues, and symbols. The significance of this study lies in its ability to shed light on the ways in which these concepts manifest in contemporary society and how they are portrayed in literature. This paper will answer two research questions:

1. How does Albee's play *The Sandbox* use the concepts of commodification and alienation to comment on the detrimental effects of capitalist society on human relationships and emotions?
2. How does the character of Grandma serve as a symbol of resistance against alienation and commodification in the play, and what does this say about the importance of preserving one's sense of self-worth and dignity in the face of these societal pressures?

## Literature Review

The study of Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* has been a topic of interest among literary critics and researchers for many years. While there have been several studies conducted on this play, most of them have focused on different aspects of the play such as the portrayal of

maternal figures, the use of epic theatre elements, and the theme of family disintegration.

Mrudula, in her study, emphasizes the portrayal of real and imaginary mother figures such as Mommy, Martha, and Grandma in Albee's plays, who mock dysfunctional American families that have no regard for the principles of marriage, family, parenthood, familial love, and affection for children (Mrudula 6). Saeed, in another study, focuses on the use of epic theatre elements in *The Sandbox*, and how Albee employs these components to create an atmosphere where the spectators perceive themselves as witnessing a theatrical production rather than an authentic slice of life. The characters directly engage with the audience and intertwine moments of both tragedy and comedy simultaneously. (Saeed 2).

PURBASARI states that the play is more of a rehearsal than a live performance, where the audience is encouraged to interpret the world they inhabit, fostering an invitation for personal analysis and understanding by generating illogical events in the play. The purpose of incorporating realism and surrealism elements is to provide the audience with a better grasp of existence beyond the senses (PURBASARI 79).

Kabir in his study emphasises the theme of family disintegration and how the main causes of emotional estrangement, according to Albee, are the worsening conditions in America, characterized by instances of severe and inhumane abuse among family members, particularly targeting the elderly. Albee symbolizes family togetherness and places significant emphasis on the notion that tending to the elderly carries a moral duty. When an elderly individual expresses a preference for death over the miserable existence they endure, it indicates a state of emotional disconnection from their surrounding world, as they find themselves taken aback by their family's treatment. All of

this leads to a sense of emotional detachment (Kabir 12).

Babashekh in his study focuses on the dehumanized scenes and feelings depicted in the play through dialogues, and the sandbox itself, which the study elucidates Granma's encounter with the unyielding mistreatment and callous dealings inflicted upon her by her own offspring. This transpired during the zenith of the American Dream's prosperity, shedding light on the adverse ramifications it had on contemporary life within the American community (Babashekh 342).

Despite the wealth of critical analysis and research conducted on Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, there remains a significant gap in the literature when it comes to examining the play through a Marxist lens, specifically in terms of the concepts of alienation and commodification. While other studies have explored themes such as family dynamics, epic theatre elements, and societal decay, none have specifically delved into how these themes are reflected in the alienation and commodification of human relations in the play. This study aims to address this gap by providing an in-depth examination of these concepts within the context of *The Sandbox*. Through this analysis, we will gain a deeper understanding of the play's commentary on modern society and its exploration of the human condition in the face of societal and cultural decay. This new perspective will enhance our understanding of the themes explored in the play and contribute to the ongoing critical discourse surrounding Albee's work.

### Theoretical Framework

This study will use Karl Marx's concepts of Commodification and Social Alienation to analyze and understand the behaviour and emotions depicted in Edward Albee's play *The Sandbox* through the examination of the dialogues. Marx's theories on the detrimental effects of capitalism on human psychology

and relationships with commodities provide a lens through which to examine the characters' interactions and motivations.

Marx posits that the value of a commodity, as outlined in his theory, does not reside in its usefulness, known as use-value. Instead, it derives from its capacity to be exchanged for money or other commodities, referred to as exchange value, or from the social status it bestows upon its possessor, termed sign-exchange value. This notion is supported by Tyson, who asserts that an object assumes the status of a commodity when it possesses either exchange value or sign-exchange value, both of which are contingent upon the societal context within which the object is traded (Tyson 62).

In *The Sandbox*, the characters may be seen to assign value to objects and relationships based on their exchange or sign-exchange value, rather than their inherent worth.

Marx's concept of alienated labour also plays a crucial role in this analysis.

In his seminal work, Marx articulates the concept of alienated labour, highlighting how it transforms the essential nature of humanity and diminishes the connection between individuals and their inherent species-being, encompassing both their natural inclinations and intellectual capacities (Marx 26).

This alienation from one's own humanity, nature, and the production of one's labour leads to estrangement from others in society and ultimately from oneself. As Sahu states, "Man's alienation implies his estrangement from his family, his community, his society, and eventually from his own self" (Sahu 107). This estrangement is evident in the characters' relationships with each other and their understanding of themselves in *The Sandbox*.

Furthermore, the concept of commodification of human beings, as

described by Marx, may also be observed in the characters' interactions with each other in the play. When individuals structure their relationships with others to advance themselves financially or socially, they treat the other person as a means to an end rather than a human being. This dehumanization of others is evident in the relationships between the characters in the play, and how they use and manipulate each other for their own gain.

Overall, by using Marx's concepts of Commodification and Social Alienation, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the behaviours and emotions depicted in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* and how they are shaped by capitalist society.

## Discussion

In Albee's play, *The Sandbox*, the characters are presented without names and are referred to by their relations, highlighting the loss of identity as a feature of alienation, a concept central to Karl Marx's theory of social alienation. Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, expounds upon the notion of alienated labour, illustrating how it estranges mankind from its fundamental essence. According to Marx, this estrangement manifests as a separation between individuals and their species-being, which encompasses both their innate inclinations and intellectual faculties, effectively reducing them to mere instruments for their individual survival (Marx 26). This loss of identity and sense of self is evident in the characters of the play who are referred to only by their relations and not by their names.

The play is also centred around the theme of commodified relationships, with the characters being treated as such by their loved ones, another key concept in Marx's theory of commodification. According to Tyson's elucidation, the classification of an

object as a commodity is contingent upon the presence of either exchange value or sign-exchange value, with both forms of value being dictated by the societal context in which the object undergoes transactions (Tyson 62). In *The Sandbox*, the characters may be seen to assign value to objects and relationships based on their exchange or sign-exchange value, rather than their inherent worth.

Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, The Young Man (as Angel of Death) and The Musician are the characters in the play. The play begins with The Young Man performing callisthenics on the beach. Mommy and Daddy then drag Grandma to the stage and throw her in a sandbox, and then sit down to wait for her to die. The Young Man greets all characters with a smile and appears as a good person, however, his role as the Angel of Death implies that he is also a symbol of the alienation and commodification of death as a natural process.

Grandma initiates dialogues with The Young Man from the sandbox, half-buried, with only hands and faces visible. Grandma has grown old and is treated as a useless commodity by Mommy and Daddy, her isolation and rejection by her own family highlights the alienation of man from man as described by Marx, The initial manifestation and articulation of human alienation, as well as the broader estrangement from any relationship in which individuals find themselves, find their primary expression in the interconnections individuals establish with their fellow human beings (Marx 27).

Grandma reflects on her past and the commodification of her daughter's relationship with Daddy, Grandma turned towards the audience once more, expressing a self-assured tone. She proudly mentioned her resourcefulness, highlighting the fact that she single-handedly raised her daughter, on stage. Pointing to another figure nearby, Grandma alluded to their marital connection. She emphasized the significance

of wealth in this relationship, emphasizing its overwhelming presence by repeatedly mentioning the word "money" (Albee, 4). This highlights the predicament of modern society where people are valued in relation to "what they have" and not "who they are," as described by Sahu, "For Karl Marx, alienation means man's dehumanisation... man's alienation implies his estrangement from his family, his community, his society, and eventually from his own self" (Sahu 107).

Mommy and Daddy's alienation from each other are also evident in their lack of communication and their relationship is based on capital interest. Their relationship is commodified and they are estranged from one another, as Daddy states, The conversation between them unfolded with a hint of reluctance. The mother posed the question, suggesting the possibility of engaging in a dialogue. In response, the father weighed his thoughts before realizing he had nothing new to contribute. He concluded that there was no need for conversation, echoing a sense of resignation. (Albee 3).

Grandma's acceptance of her death is a powerful commentary on the dehumanizing effects of alienation and commodification. Despite being isolated and treated as a commodity by her family, Grandma accepts her death peacefully when The Young Man puts his hands on top of Grandma's hands (Mishra 173). She shows her gratitude and welcomes him (Albee 6) as her last words, showing that despite the alienation she faced from her family, she still had a sense of self-worth and dignity.

Mommy's reaction to Grandma's death is a further commentary on the superficiality of human emotions in an alienated and commodified society. Mommy pretends to mourn the death of Grandma and having understood her own state of being commodified and alienated Grandma mocks Mommy by saying that she needs to be brave and she'll get over it. Albee purposefully

employs theatrical conventions in a parodic manner to mock and expose the emptiness and hypocrisy inherent in a situation centred around impending death (Stenz 34) that is, it depicts how alienated modern human is that he/she doesn't feel anything and therefore has to pretend to be sad over death.

Grandma serves as a symbol of resistance against alienation and commodification. Despite being isolated and treated as a commodity by her family, Grandma accepts her death peacefully and with self-worth and dignity. This is evident in her last words, "You're....you're welcome...dear" (Albee 6) as she accepts the role of the Angel of death. This illustrates the importance of preserving one's sense of self-worth and dignity in the face of societal pressures to commodify and alienate individuals. As Marx writes that through alienated labour, the essence of humanity, encompassing both their natural state and intellectual capacities as a species, undergoes a transformation into a foreign entity, reduced to a mere instrument serving individual survival

(Marx 26) and Grandma's acceptance of her death serves as a resistance to this alienation. Furthermore, as Mishra points out, in "Death and Alienation in Albee's *The Sandbox*" (Mishra 173) Grandma's passive acceptance of death is a reflection of the alienation and commodification of death in modern society, where death is seen as a burden rather than a natural process.

## Conclusion

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Albee's play *The Sandbox* uses the concepts of commodification and alienation, as theorized by Karl Marx, to comment on the detrimental effects of capitalist society on human relationships and emotions. Through the use of characters that are referred to only by their relations, the play highlights the dehumanizing effects of treating people and emotions as commodities. The characters, Mommy, Daddy, Grandma and The Young

Man, and their relationships, serve as a commentary on the alienation and commodification of death, relationships, and emotions in modern society. The character of Grandma serves as a symbol of resistance against this alienation, accepting her death with dignity and self-worth despite being treated as a commodity by her own family. The play also illustrates how the commodification of death and the alienation of man from man creates a superficial and emotionally vacuous society, where people

are forced to pretend emotions they do not feel. The sandbox serves as a powerful commentary on the negative effects of capitalist society on human relationships and emotions, and the importance of preserving one's sense of self-worth and dignity in the face of alienation and commodification. The play's message is that preserving human relationships, emotions and death in their natural state is vital for the preservation of one's dignity and self-worth in a society that is inclined to commodify and alienate.

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