

# A Study of Edward Albee's Play, *A Delicate Balance*

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**Abstract – Albee's play which deals with the troubled and hollow family ties, is *A Delicate Balance*. This play concerns with the family of four – a passive husband, an imperious wife, an alcoholic sister-in-law and a much divorced daughter – their problems are exacerbated when they are visited by their friends (a couple named Harry and Edna), who have experienced a nameless terror. The balance of security, happiness and comfort is so delicate, in this family, that it gets upset when the friends move in the family with their terror because terror, for them, is infectious like plague. The play is set in the living room of a suburban house, and the action is centered on six characters. C.W.E. Bigsby comments, "These characters are linked either by familial ties or by the familiarity of long association, which they falsely confuse with "love". Against this setting they act out a ritual which, like those in Eliot's play and Albee's own earlier work, forces them to face the specters of their own fears". (Albee 97)**

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The relationships in this play, too, are not based on emotions and love, but on need. Agnes and Tobias (the central couple) are approaching sixty, and they have evolved a workable relationship. This relationship has left them fundamentally estranged from one-another; while protecting them from loneliness and solitude Agnes's sister, Claire, also lives in their house. Claire is another reason of the frustration in the family. She is alcoholic and once upon a time, she and Tobias were having sexual intimacy. Agnes comments on this in the very beginning of the play: "the one thing sharper than a serpent's tooth is a sister's ingratitude" (DB 21). In order to upset this "delicately" balanced home, Julian – the daughter of the house – intrudes because she is "having another divorce" and "it is come home time" (DB 26). She is coming home after the failure of her fourth marriage and Claire remarks "Right on schedule, once every three years." Julian, unable to manage her life and marriage bonds, gives various futile reasons for these troubled marriages, which Claire shares with us:

Philip loved to gamble.

Charlie loved the boys,

Tom went after women,

Douglas . . . (DB 37)

Agnes and Tobias's son, Teddy, had died in childhood. After the death of this son, and facing this "unreal time" (DB 80), Tobias was so frustrated and scared that he ceased to have sexual relations with

his wife. Tobias with fear of responsibility and potential loss of another child, moved into a separate room.

In this house the roles of the husband and wife are imbalanced. Agnes puts the light upon the roles of man and woman in a family. She says: "We follow. We let our . . . men decide the moral issues [. . .] whatever you decide . . . I'll make it work; I'll run it for you so you'll never know there's been a change in anything" (DB 97). She wants to be alone with her husband, and desires for a contented life but when her husband takes no initiative she gets frustrated. As she contemplates the few remaining years of her marriage, the situation becomes mentally and physically unlivable and she feels as if she will "lose" her mind "one day". She has been kind and understanding too long and let the things go as they are supposed to. But ultimately she wants Tobias to do something, she makes him understand how Julian comes back home every time from a failed marriage and he, being a father, should have suggested her to try. She makes him realize that his "house is not in order, sir. It's full to bursting" (DB 96). She, also, points out to Julian that for men there are only two problems in life – money and death – even though there are so many things in this world to have their attention. Tobias, a successful businessman during the years he spent in the city, was non-committal on the home front; and the death of his son bothered him so much that he just ignored the home. Thus, this play which "is a drama about marriage" has "little shouting and no breaking of bottles – just a modicum of hysterics" (Stenz 71). But in a healthy

husband-wife relationship a little shouting and breaking of bottles is required. Tobias and Agnes' incapability to complaint, to fight turns their relationship tasteless and this passivity becomes the root cause of their problematic familial ties.

Tobias, is in the center of the circle formed by his family and friends in which everyone appeals to him for something which he finds himself inadequate to provide them. Julia wants her room back, Agnes desires to maintain the stability in her household, Claire appeals for the love they once shared, and his "best-friends" (Harry and Edna) want "comfort". Tobias' helplessness is the basic reason of the frustration. Gilbert M. Porter points out:

Since every appeal can be granted only at the expense of some other appeal, and since Tobias genuinely desires not to hurt anyone, or to be unfair, he practices his characteristic habit of circumspection. His house is full, a crisis is building, he is unable to avert it, but he thinks he at least can defer it, hoping that somehow everything will resolve itself miraculously. (173)

But this inaction makes the situation worst.

This is why when Harry and Edna - their "frightened friends" - come for comfort and security, Tobias is unable to ask them anything and these "intruders" enter in the house. With their arrival the terror threatens to destroy Agnes and Tobias's world. Later on the frightened couple explains the reason of being terrified:

HARRY (Looks at Edna). I . . . I don't know quite what happened then; we . . . we were . . . it was all very quiet, and we were all alone . . .

[. . .] and then . . . nothing happened but, but . . .

[. . .] . . . nothing at all happened , but . . .

EDNA (Open weeping, loud). WE GOT . . . FRIGHTENED.

(Open sobbing no one moves)

HARRY (Quiet wonder. Confusion). We got scared.

EDNA (Through her sobbing). WE WERE . . . FRIGHTENED.

HARRY. There was nothing . . . but we were very scared. [. . .]

EDNA. We . . . were. . . terrified. (DB46)

What this explains is crucial to understand playwright's overall intention. The terror which Harry and Edna drag with them into Tobias and Agnes's house is a "plague" because having disturbed their own placidity, now they are disturbing others' life. It is

the failure of love and fear of isolation which is disturbing them. Harry and Edna's emphasis on "nothing" depicts the emptiness that is pervading in their relationships and household. John M. Clum says: "The 'nothing' that terrifies Harry and Edna is in great part their marriage, the spiritually empty household, the result of their failed marriage" (69). It seems as if, in the journey of their lives, these two characters are face to face with the absurdity and the hollowness of the world they have created around themselves. Harry's heart-attack is imminent, and we know that the death and separation is close. So, now they have nothing to look forward, nothing to hope for, and in this situation they break-out. Under the logo of "best friends" they enter the house of Tobias and Agnes, because they just need a family which can support them in the hour of need. But no one is able to support others, as Tobias has failed to provide this to Agnes, Agnes to her sister, Tobias and Agnes to their daughter and now to their friends as well.

Albee advocates that the lie of their life is their futile wish to maintain a delicate balance without doing anything in order to maintain that balance. They are escaping from sex if a miscarriage has taken place, they are unable to communicate if there is some problem between them, they want to get rid of their friends if the friends are suffering from a psychological fear. Thus their 'Life-Lie' is escapism and passivity. Albee believes that family ties are crumbling as the husband and wife have gone to their respective shell which is perturbing the family. Albee advocates that all the members of family need to interact with each other which will bring unity and happiness. Albee again and again depicts that lack of dialogue creates the distance which will lead to separation. *A Delicate Balance* portrays optimistic attitude of Albee that if a proper action is taken in time it can restore the familial unity and thus save the marriage of the couple. Albee further confirms this belief in the play *Counting the Ways*.

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