

ALIENATION, SECLUSION, AND DEGRADATION OF CHARACTERS IN ELIOT'S *THE FAMILY REUNION*

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**Abstract:**

*Prominently, The Family Reunion has been acknowledged as one of the important plays that contributed to the revival of poetic drama in England. It was the first-ever attempt on the part of the playwright to employ contemporary settings and speech in drama. However, the play is also important for its contemporaneity of the themes and subsequent moralizing on the part of the writer. The play has been reviewed by literary scholars from a philosophical, psychological, and religious point of view. Although the Christian theme of sin and its expiation, crime, and final punishment hold the ground throughout the play, it touches upon various common, day-to-day issues of the modern world. Alienation, loneliness identity crisis, and survival are some of the other themes that have been highlighted by the dramatist here. The present research paper explores the psychological ailment of the play's prominent characters which they represent in their separation in the relationship. Simultaneously, it touches upon the other issues that are extremely experienced by the people of England in the twentieth century like degeneration, disbelief, selfishness, cunningness, and deterioration in human feelings and sentiments.*

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Seclusion, psychological, Survival, contemporaneity, Absurd Spiritual, etc.*

The theme of man's alienation has been dominantly expressed by the playwright. The characters in the play fail to establish a social and familial relationship. The novel strikingly showcases man's alienation from himself as well. It is only the main characters that face the issue of alienation in the play; the minor characters have not been portrayed showing any separation or disintegration from society. All the central characters of the play feel alienated some or other time in the play. Some characters felt it acutely and desperately while others felt it on a moderate level. Self-alienation is the biggest issue, a problem, or a plight for many characters in the play. K.S. Mishra in his book *The Plays of T. S. Eliot: A Critical Study* analyzes Eliot's plays as: "Ultimates of the human situation—sin, loneliness, failure, despair, death."(168) The play revolves around two major characters Amy and Harry. Amy is the mother of Harry and they are meeting after a gap of eight years. Amy is the old school in the play who confirmedly sticks to the old beliefs, traditions, and customs of English society. Moreover, she loves the

rustic life of Wishwood and is determined to keep it intact and alive. She wanted to sustain the kind of life she led at a young age. In her youth she was very happy, there was positivity and hope for every action. Every new day had hope and aspiration for her. But in old age everything is changed drastically, now she neither can trust any clock, nor her tomorrow is assured in any way. Nothing is certain and predictable for her at this age. Philip Heading in his *T. S. Eliot* observes: “ She lives in a pattern of timed moments, by the clock. She is a machine.” (198)The only wish she expresses throughout this play is the safety and the maintenance of her family.

Her sixtieth birth-day was a special occasion in which her family and the relatives would come together. But they come with their private world and their reservations. She is the domineering figure who reduces all other characters, who are closely related to her, to nothingness. She dominated her family members and kept them all under her complete dominance. Amy dictated the family; she was fear and command for her children. Her mother’s role is reflected in Harry’s speech:

“Mother never punished us, but made us feel guilty.  
I think that the things that are taken for granted  
At home, make a deeper impression upon children  
Than what they are told.” (318)

She enacted the perfect role of a mother, in all other cases she was the pleasing mother and in misconduct, she was the unkind mother. There was no emotional bond between Amy and her husband for they did not love each other. Her emotional separation from her husband led to the search for a company which she got in the form of Agatha, her sister. Although she knew Agatha’s affair with her husband she kept it secret. Thus all members were physically, psychologically, and emotionally separated from one other. Regardless of her domination and pressure on her children, throughout she struggled for the name of her family. Her genuine efforts for inculcating good habits in her children stand as a dominant force in the family. But when she acknowledges that she is unable to keep her family united, she contemplates and realizes that her outdated ways and typical behavior are the reason for her aloofness. Amy held her family together and tact because of her domineering attitude in the family. However, she attempts to maintain unity and solidarity within her family. She repents: “I always wanted too much for my children/more than life can give. And now I am punished for it.”(30) Despite her loyal efforts for the well being of her children, she, ultimately, meets with frustration and disappointment of graver kind. She is greatly disappointed by the behavior of her sons particularly John and Arthur who are careless, irresponsible, and indifferent towards her and her expectations. She is not happy even with Harry because of his incredible and weird behavior. His spiritual dilemma takes him away from all family members. Thus, Amy is alienated from not just her sons but all other relatives.

The play is enacted on two levels: physical and psychological, on a physical level it is the Wishwood which is the center of attraction and at the psychological level it is Harry’s inner soul that has been constantly reflected throughout the play. It is Harry’s inner conflict that takes him away from his

family members. Virendra Roy in his *T. S. Eliot: Quest for Belief* writes that the play deals with, “ the absurdities of life without belief in the other world of spiritual values and dramatizes the struggle of a penitent to cross the boundary-line of the filthy world of disbelief and enter into the rose-garden of his soul’s dream.”(308) Being the eldest son in the family, he is expected to expiate the family curse. According to the present ritual, the elder son in the family should become a scapegoat to redeem the curse of the family. The psychological conflict spiritual redemption and the requirements of the physical world tore the psyche Harry. Eliot records in his *Introduction to Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem*: “ Using myth...is simply a way of controlling of the ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” (483)

Amy’s birthday is a special event that is bringing the whole family together after a gap of eight years. The gap of eight years itself is indicative of Harry’s social alienation and seclusion from the family. The gap of eight years had completely changed Harry from what he was as a boy to what he is as a young man. His changed behavior surprises everyone in the family. His aunts and uncles' various schemes fail to bind him back to Wishwood. The family members compare Harry to a young man who has lost taste and smell for almost everything whereas Harry has his ideology towards life. He thinks that man is the lonely traveler in a crowded desert enveloped by thick smoke with many persons moving about round and round without direction.

“The sudden solitude in a crowded desert  
 In a thick smoke, many creatures moving  
 Without direction. For no direction  
 Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour—  
 Without purpose, and without principle of conduct.  
 In flickering intervals of light and darkness;  
 I talk in general terms  
 Because the particular has no language. One thinks to escape  
 By violence, but one is still alone  
 In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.” (294)

His psychological journey, make-belief, and fanciful way of life alienate him from society and his own family. The incredible thing about Harry is that he takes real to be imaginary and imaginary to be real. For the past eight years, he has undergone the pain of loneliness, and now with society, he experiences the pain of liberty. Sin is the dominant theme in Eliot’s plays it becomes Original Sin, or A. D. Moody thinks in his Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet as: “all men after Adam (have been) born outside divine love.” (176) He adds further that, “this absence of love.... (was) the essence of evil.” (180) Amy thinks that it is Agatha, wife of Harry who has changed him. But soon she realizes that Agatha is also the sufferer of Harry’s strange and weird behavior. Harry leaves Wishwood once for all for he thinks that the world of Amy is

subjective, meaningless, and cold. The last words of Harry are really important from the point of view of alienation and isolation theme:

“Oh! Yes I’m taking Downing.  
 You need not fear that I am in any danger  
 Of such accidents as happen to Arthur and John:  
 Take care of them. My address, mother,  
 Will be care of the bank in London until you hear from me.  
 Good-by, mother.” (288)

Mary also doesn’t feel happy with Wishwood life. She cannot tolerate the dominant behavior of Amy. Amy’s old school dictates that the daughter-in-law should not possess money or means of livelihood. She expects Mary to be a tame daughter-in-law, submissive, responsive, and without voice. On the other hand, Mary is a neutral woman secluded from everything pain and pleasure. Therefore, she places herself to no generation: I don’t belong to any generation.”(11) She is alienated from the young and old generation due to which she cannot withhold with Amy’s dictation. In the beginning, she thought that she could adjust herself with Harry, but unfortunately enough she soon acknowledges that due to his spiritual loneliness and complete disregard of materialistic life, she can’t do it.

### **Conclusion:**

Charles, one of the choruses in the play, brilliantly observes the mentality of the young generation and the reasons for their self-alienation. He quotes:

“It’s the cocktail  
 There’s nothing on earth so bad for the young.  
 All that a civilized person needs  
 Is a glass of dry sherry or two before dinner.  
 The modern young people don’t know what they’re drinking  
 Modern young people don’t care what they’re eating;  
 They’ve lost their sense of taste and smell  
 Because of their sense of taste and smell.  
 Because of their cocktails and cigarettes  
 That’s what it comes to.” (286)

Harry is the most self-alienated of all characters in the play. The Family Reunion mediates upon the modern ways of life that created so many problems of physical and psychological sort. The characters in the play are devoid of love and emotional bond for other characters. There is the atmosphere of distrust and insecurity for the characters. They have their own priorities and reservations in life and they don’t want them to be broken by anybody. Amy’s world is her regular chores in Wishwood, she adheres to the old customs and rituals of the society. Her disciplined life and adherence to the traditions within the English society takes her away from her children and family members. She is alienated because of her

dominant and disciplined ways of life which was intolerable for her children. However, in this negative atmosphere also she attempted to instill good habits among her children. But she fails as her children were torn between modernity and tradition. Almost all of the characters of *The Family Reunion* are alienated from the other characters and have lost with the social bonds. Harry, and his wife Mary also suffer the pangs of isolation while the other characters also face same kind of situation. Although, the characters in the play underwent all contemporary issues like sin, expiation, purgation, physical and psychological turmoil, however, alienation is the dominant content in the book. Thus all the characters of *The Family Reunion* were self- alienated from the family members, relatives and friends who are likely to experience the issue of isolation.

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