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Exploration of Different Kinds of Alienation in T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*

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Abstract

The Family Reunion occupies a prominent place in the history of the revival of poetic drama. The play is full of incidents which present existential crisis. It talks of alienations, separation, meaninglessness, purposelessness, non-attachment, fragmentation and relationlessness. It is Eliot's first flourishing endeavor at employing current setting and speech in drama. The play begins with the family party to have a good time the 16th birthday of Amy, mother of the hero. Harry and his brothers, John and Arthur are expected to come home to join the party. Amy's sisters, Ivy, Violet and Agatha have already arrived home. Charles and Gerald, two younger brothers of her dead husband are also present with Mary, daughter of the deceased cousin of the Dowager Lady (Amy). This family get-together is arranged after a gap of eight years. Amy has developed old and so suffers from cold. She complains of cold, of winters that have grown longer, and of the springs that never arrive soon. She feels cold as she is aged and has lost her vigour and youth. Even Wishwood has always been a cold place. Ivy advises him to go south in winter. Violet detests this place as it is full of crude and uncivilised people. Charles agrees with her and prefers a London Club, while Gerald suggests East. Everybody comes to the agreement that the younger age group is profligate, it lacks endurance, stamina and a sagacity of liability. Amy tells all the members that nobody should cite to Harry the excruciating past and refer to his marriage or talk about his wife. All of them are told to welcome him cordially. On his arrival Harry stares at the Eumenides which have chased him during the last eight years. All the people present there wonder at his weird behaviour. He is obsessed by the past that, while sailing on a ship in the mid-Atlantic, probably, he pushed his spouse over and killed her. This feeling of remorse hangs over his mind so profoundly that he is unable to sustain even the usual relations with his kith and kin. The play closes with the birthday rituals of Agatha and Mary. They place a cake and candles, and on each round they blow a few candles and end it with the hope that the curse would be ended. The play conforms to the practices of existentialism.

Keywords- Existence, Emotion, Purpose, Meaninglessness, Fragmentation.

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The Family Reunion displays different kinds of themes and notions before the audience. The basic pattern of the play is the family relationships and the irruption into them of the force represented by the Furies. The theme of man's alienation from God, Nature, Society, Family and Self has successfully and powerfully, among other things. It has a great thematic potential. It has been looked upon by various critics from philosophical, psychological and religious view-points. It is a story of sin and its expiation, of crime and consequent punishment. The philosophical awareness of time may also be considered as one of Eliot's major concerns in this play. The contrast between the old and the new, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the simple and the complex also strikes us when we look at the play closely. If looked upon it from the existentialist point of view, the play becomes a serious study in loneliness, alienation, frustration and man's search for his own identity in modern times. The world is shaped without form and shade as well as without colour. It is also a fractional reply to the perpetual question of human existence. The play, thus, has been seen as a portrait of permanent human nature in its modern predicament. Eliot 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. The play postulates a supernatural conception of sin. The play has been called as the case study of philosophical psychology with the assistance of stage.

The play gives expression to the reflection of man's alienation from God. The opening setting of the play shows it is afternoon in late March and Amy is in the drawing room. She, like others, is waiting for her sons - Harry, Arthur and John - on the occasion of her birthday party. But she is rather a worried woman since she remembers her past. It was pleasant when she was young and strong. Perhaps, she wants to tell them that it was the age of Faith. The sense of security depended on the belief in God. Man in the age of Faith was in tune with the Sun and Light and the seasons, all God's creations. They were always at his disposal. As God was in favour of man, he had no fears of any sort. Time then went on unbroken. Man was really in 'God's plenty', in light and delight. In contrast to this past picture, Amy's present life is strikingly seen as hopeless in the period which is faithless. Now she feels more uneasy and more insecure perhaps because of her sense of being severed from the God of her faith. She is in the dark fag-end of her life.

The theme of man's alienation from Nature is also reflected in a very minor form in this play. Whatever the little Nature appears in it, it does perform symbolic functions. Wishwood is a cold place and Amy, too, is cold physically due to winter and mentally due to her own problems. She is waiting for summer as well as warmth of it. The dominance of this woman has always taken her away not only from her sons, sisters and brothers of her deceased husband but also from God and Nature. She has often imprisoned herself in her house for all the seasons. She herself has disconnected the current with Nature. She is the only woman from Monchensey family who somehow and to some extent is connected with Nature on the ground that she lives in Wishwood, the North of England i.e. the country side.

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She is living in terms of time, memory and will. But Amy's sons live in cities. Harry has to come from Marseilles, John from Leicestershire and Arthur from London to attend the birthday party of their mother and to be present at the grand reunion of the family. They hardly come to Wishwood. Mother is anxiously waiting for them. She is certain that both John and Arthur would arrive in time for dinner though actually neither of them does actually turn up.

The play is also remarkable for its dealing with man's alienation from Society. Amy and Harry are the two major characters of the play. They are in the centre of the play. On the one hand, Amy is the centre of Wishwood while on the other hand Harry is the centre of this play. Amy is a conventional lady from the upper class family and so tries to be stuck to the old beliefs, culture, values and ethnicity and prefers the rustic ways and manner of Wishwood. It is everything to her, even it is like prison for her. She desires to keep Wishwood breathing to keep the family alive, to keep her alive, and to keep them all together. The play has a twofold patterns and standards: the outer drama takes place at Wishwood, whereas the inner drama revolves Harry. Harry's critical state of mind takes him away from others and alienates him from them. It is actually an extraordinary event because after a gap of eight years, for the first time, they are coming together to celebrate Amy's birthday. This gap of eight years itself is investigative as well as denotative of Harry's social estrangement. Agatha thinks that it is rather excruciating for Harry to come to Wishwood, the place where he was born. He left this place when he was simply and only a boy, and now he is a grown-up man. 'The man who returns will have to meet / The boy who left.' This 'leaving' and 'returning' are redolent of his social segregation. On Harry's arrival, all conjecture at his strange behaviour. His aunts and uncles proposition diverse schemes to make him stay at Wishwood. He has doubtlessly, like the modern young people, lost his sense of taste and smell, and he has no sense of liability in the worldly common sense of the term. He is out of tune with everybody there. He withdraws himself into his own world of make-believe. He thinks that one is as lonely religiously as a traveller is in a swarming wasteland enveloped by a thick smoke with many persons moving about round and round without course

Her direct words, weighed down with the sense of disappointment, reproduce not only Gerald's failure to draw her into the discussion but also her absolute social alienation from the young and the old, from men and women. At first, she thought that she would go on well with Harry, but it could not happen so on account of Harry's distinctive spiritual seclusion in which only the sense of remorse and the lingering Eumenides substance. Her sense of not belonging to any generation aggravates her alienation from society.

The characters in *The Family Reunion* feel alienated from the Monchensey family at Wishwood. Majority of the characters of the play face the problem of maintaining associations with each other. They fail to unite with each other, either physically or sensitively. They find it unfeasible to communicate with each other, and remain lonely and inaccessible from the other members of their family. Amy, like others, is waiting for her sons on the day of celebration of her birthday party. She is reminded of her past. She was once

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very happy when she was young and strong. She looked forward to the day with contentment. But now in her old age she is only to feel and restructure her past. Life is altered so much that no clocks can be trusted; tomorrow cannot be guaranteed. Everything is just uncertain and erratic. The note of nervousness rings throughout her speech. Her thoughts are centered round the image of her family and the maintenance of it. The celebration of her 16th birthday has a special implication in that it is arranged to bring the family and relatives together. But here also each tries to safeguard his own private world and gets lost in it. One notices, in the following dialogue between Amy and Agatha, the portentous ring of the family alienation:

Discussion of man's alienation from God, Nature, Society, Family and Self is the most important aspect of the play. Most of the characters in the play, as we have seen, have failed to ascertain the right social and familial relationships. It is a common inspection that one who is not at one with his society and family is liable to be out of harmony with himself as well.

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