

# Unresolved Female Oedipus Complex and a Dysfunctional Family in Albee's *A Delicate Balance*: A Psychoanalytic Analysis

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## Abstract

In psychoanalytic theory, Freud holds that childhood is a crucial time to personality development and character structure because the child's ego is formulated throughout this stage, steered by paternal ideals and values. Any psychic trauma or unsolvable inner conflicts during childhood affect a child's personality and become the cause of the later disturbances. For him, a healthy person is one that has a strong ego, capable of protecting himself/herself from the forces of the unconscious. This study reveals the impact of the unconscious sexual desires and unresolved female Oedipus Complex on an individual's personal and marital life through the character of Julia in Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. The study also traces the devastating influences of the unpleasant ramifications of bad model of parental marriage and the absence of parental love on Julia's life as a child and an adult, producing her weak ego and causing her frequent marriages' failures. The psychoanalytical analysis of Julia's personality attempts to identify the psychological motives lying behind her emotional immaturity, regressive behaviour and vulnerable personality.

**Keywords:** dysfunctional family, Albee, a delicate balance, Freudian psychoanalysis, female Oedipus Complex

## 1. Introduction

*A Delicate Balance* is a full-length realistic play that highlights the traumas and pressures within an unhappy affluent family and the mechanisms it adopts to keep the psychological and social balance of the household intact. A Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *A Delicate Balance* brings Albee commercial and critical successes along with the Tony Award for Best play, 1967. After the decline in his profession, the play serves to rekindle the interest in Albee's professional work. In his introduction to the play, Albee (as cited in Adler, 2005) says that the play is about the rigid people who get comfy and are reluctant to change their way of life. As an outcome, they lose the ability to act or function properly. They have missed the boat and lost the freedom to select from all the choices they have left before because these choices are no longer available.

In *A Delicate Balance*, Albee dramatizes the themes of the increasing isolation and instability of the modern family, the outer versus inner reality and the destruction of human relationship, veiled

under the mask of the delicate balance of family cohesion. The play revolves around a middle-aged couple, Tobias and Agnes, the latter's sister, Claire and their divorcee daughter, Julia. Although the household live under the same roof, they are emotionally far removed from each other. They regularly strive to shut themselves off in their own little worlds, where they feel safest. The couple encounter a psychologically tumultuous event in their lives as their son, Teddy, died in his early childhood. Ostensibly, they go beyond the crisis and live a quiet, balanced life that is beset by the sudden coming of Harry and Edna, their old friends who escape from their home because of unnamed fear, and Julia on the rebound from a fourth broken marriage.

Seemingly, Tobias and Agnes are an ideal couple, but their marriage is in the process of collapse. It is loveless, unsatisfactory, emotionally void and off-balance. After the death of their child, Tobias evades sexual contact with Agnes for fear of producing another child. However, the couple deny the reality of their dysfunctional marriage and assume a pure avoidance. Beneath the delicate balance of the family lies a sense of loss and frustration. There has been a deep and private sorrow between them. Harry, Edna and their daughter are only other versions of their failure and a reflections of their own anxious inner selves.

## 2. Julia: The Deserted Child and Woman

Julia is a woman in her mid thirties. She is a serially divorced daughter who has recently returned home because her fourth marriage is on the rocks. She comes back from her "latest disaster, dispossessed, and . . . screaming the house down, clawing at order" (p.75). The role that Julia plays in the family is that of the often-return daughter. Julia regresses to her adolescent sanctuary whenever she feels shut out by her husbands. She escapes from the depressing realities of her life and clings to the infantile stage. (Porter, 1979). Having failed to save her recurrent marriages, Julia has lost the opportunity to have children and form a family of her own. The only family unit she knows is her parents and her aunt, Claire. She is very isolated and fearful in her approach to life. She lacks self-confidence and cannot decide for herself independently. Julia never behaves as a mature woman. Every time her marriage breaks up, she returns to her parents' home though there are other choices before her (Stenz, 1978). Deep down, she is looking for the parental protection and for a sense of belonging:

CLAIRE: But you've come back home haven't you? And didn't you—  
with the others?

JULIA: Where else am I supposed to go?

CLAIRE: It's a great big world, baby. There are hotels, new cities. Home is the quickest road to Reno I know of (p.53).

Julia lives a difficult childhood and traumatic past. During infancy, she did not find the love and attention the child needs. On the birth of her younger brother, she became on the margin and moved from the center to the periphery of family. Julia felt that she is displaced in her parents' lives and unwanted; therefore she resented the arrival of the new baby (Hull, 1975). Julia has been a problem child. She rebels against everything and fails in all schools she has sent to. She is often coming home with her "knees all bloody" (p.68), as an attempt to grab her parents' attention. After Teddy's death, her parents mourn the loss of the beloved son, abandon her and move into their own private realm. On the other side, Julia looks guilty for she feels more relief than loss when her brother dies, as Agnes states:

Nothing is calmed by a pat on the hand, a gentle massage, or slowly . . . combing the hair, nor the history. Teddy's birth, and how she felt unwanted, tricked; his death, and was she more relieved than lost...? All the schools we sent her to, and did she fail in them through hate ...or love? (p.72).

The coming of the second child has disturbed the family dynamic and also demands much attention of both parents. Freud (as cited in Voncken, 2015) avers that "a new sibling will always cause jealousy, and will also be enough to fixate a child, especially in the phallic stage when a stable family

dynamic is important" (p.21). Jealousy and hatred are emotions highly present in Julia with regard to her brother. She feels envious towards Teddy who receives all her parents' attention. That is why she feels guilty and regretful upon his death for she, deep inside, wishes Teddy's death so that there would be no competition for the parents love. This wish is rejected by the conscious as immoral and callous, so it is repressed. Freud posits that shameful desires that cause anxiety are usually kept in the unconscious.

Julia feels rejected and unwelcomed by her parents who both keep distant from her: "What the hell did I come home to? And why? Both of you Snotty, mean" (p.47). Tobias is uncaring and he does not know whether Julia is happy or not in her marriages: "But, wasn't Julia happy? You didn't tell me anything", and Agnes always puts her down, calling Julia a "hanger-on" (p.30). Leaving her fourth husband, Julia returns to the reassurance of her parents to be sheltered and looked after, but Tobias and Agnes express impatience with their daughter's pain and never concern with her needs, or offer her the consolation she wants. They are unable to relate to their daughter. Rather than commiserate with Julia, Tobias blames her for the breakdown of marriages:

TOBIAS: This isn't the first time you've come back with one of your god-damned marriages on the rocks. Four! Count 'em!

JULIA: [*rage*] I know how many marriages I've gotten myself, into you...

TOBIAS: Four! You expect to come back here, nestle in to being fifteen and misunderstood each time!?! You are thirty-six years old, for God's sake!...

JULIA: And you're one hundred!

TOBIAS: Thirty-six! Each time! Dragging your.... your marriage with you like some Raggedy Ann doll, by the foot. You, you fill this house with your whining...(p.47-48).

Agnes blames Julia's unsuccessful marriages on Tobias's incompetence. She thinks that he is inadequate to perform his role as the patriarch of the family and helps Julia cope with her marital problems. Tobias detaches himself from his only daughter and does not care a bit about her troubled marriages or recurrent divorces:

AGNES: If you had talked to Tom or Charlie, yes! even Charlie or . . uh

CLAIRE: Phil?

AGNES (*no recognition of Claire having helped her*): ... Phil, it might have done some good. If you decided to assert yourself, finally, too late, I imagine ...

CLAIRE: Damned if you do, damned if you don't (p.30).

Tobias admires his judgment of detachment, considers it a wise decision, elevating himself to Godlike status: "it's rather ... Godlike, if I may presume: to look at it all, reconstruct, with such *detachment*" (p.83). In the course of his life, Tobias plays the minor role in the family as he cedes the authority to Agnes. He responds to challenging issues of family with silence. His motto in life is "We do what we can" (p.16). To feel secure, protected and to avoid confrontation, Tobias plays "Tune-Out" or "the avoidance game" (Szeliski, 1970, p.126). Accordingly, Julia's homecoming disturbs Tobias since this will force him to play his leading role as a father and fulfills his obligation to her daughter (Hull, 1975). He is indifferent to the suffering of Julia and never listens to her, but he constantly withdraws from her daughter. When Agnes proposes that he talks to her, Tobias seems undecided and anxious:

AGNES: . . . Julia might, at the very least, come to think her father- cares, and that might be consolation if not help.

TOBIAS: I'll . . . I'll talk to Doug.

AGNES: And you might talk to Julia, too. You don't, very much.

TOBIAS: If I saw some point to it, I might . . . if I saw some reason, chance. If I thought I might . . . break through to her and say, 'Julia . . . , ' but then ..;what would I say? 'Julia . . . ' Then, nothing (p.30-31).

Albeit she is thirty-six years old, Julia is childish and callow. She has not developed into a mature woman yet. She behaves as the "perpetual brat" (p.95) who is in need for "a pat on her hand, a gentle massage" (p.72) to be calmed. Her immaturity is displayed in her battle with Harry and Edna for

they usurp her childhood room. Throwing a tantrum like a child, she repudiates their right in her father's home, regarding them as 'INTRUDERS' (p.95). Julia demands to regain possession of her womb-like room in quest of warmth and security in her father's home. Like a frightened little child, she wants to be secured in her "a special room with a night light, or the door ajar so [she] can look down the hall from the bed and see[s] that mommy's door is open" (p.63). She unconsciously wishes to revert to the security of the womb where there is no pain or external threats. Julia's bedroom is a symbol for security and comfort, therefore losing it means the loss of her childhood. (Szeliski, 1970). In her childlike behaviour, demanding her room back, Julia transcends the decency and morals. So, she corresponds to the childish id:

CLAIRE: Hello, there, Harry; c'mon in Julia's about to fix us all something.

HARRY: I'll do it; don't trouble yourself, Julia.

JULIA: [*rushes to the sideboard, her back to it' spreads her arms, protecting it, curiously, disturbed and frightened by something*]: No ! Don't you come near it ! Don't you take a step !

EDNA: Let her do it, Harry. She wants to.

JULIA : I DON'T Want to ! !

HARRY[*firm*]: Then I'll do it, Julia.

JULIA [*suddenly a little girl; crying*]: Mother! ? Mother! ?

MOTHER! FATHER! HELP ME! (p. 66-67).

## 2.1. Julia's Regression to Childhood

Julia's personality is psychologically crippled by her troubled past. She experiences troubling moments during her childhood. Both Teddy's birth and death have influenced her as a young child who still needs the devotion of her parents. However, Tobias and Agnes neglect her and direct their attention to the newborn baby, a matter that makes her feel disappointed and rejected. They have never given Julia the assurance that they still love her even if a second child is born. Thus, Julia's early trauma has contributed to a delay in her psychological development. She has not established her own identity as a fully-grown woman, but she remains locked in an infantile stage of childhood development. Her appeal to Agnes and Tobias for help displays her childish dependency. She is "an adult child who never grows up" (Gabriner, 2007, p.9). Julia's call for help is a desperate cry for the family's recognition and acceptance. Unwilling to bear responsibility for her aborted marriages and take control of her disoriented life, Julia falls back on her childhood where she feels safe and secure. Julia lacks the ability to empathize or to build human relationships with others. Her opposition to the presence of Harry and Edna shows that she is emotionally and socially undeveloped: "YOU ARE A GUEST IN THIS HOUSE! You have no rights here" (p.66). She is unable to form meaningful social relationships and this inability marks her retreat to the predevelopment stage of the child.

According to Freudian psychosexual theory (1953), failure to completely go from one stage of childhood development to another leaves a person with unsatisfied needs and causes his/her fixation at, or regression to a certain stage of psychosexual development in order to meet these needs. Julia gets out of childhood with a damaged personality and some desires that are unsatisfied that is why she relapses into childhood to get what she is deprived of. As she fears to face the external world, Julia wishes to recourse to the protection of the womb, her refuge from life. She is trapped in her "Child ego state" where she claims the rights of a child (Hull, 1975, p.13). Bigsby, (1968) argues that the main motive for Julia's marriages is to counter the sense of loneliness. As this does not work out, she retreats back to the stage of childhood with an ambition to get her parents' help, compassion and concern. Julia's return to the parent's home is just like a return to the mother's womb, and to the security of a shelter. Insisting on restoring her womblike room, Julia searches for the safety and warmth of her room where she is free from danger and nobody can bother her. Freud (1963) explains that regression is a mechanism in which an individual reverts back to an earlier developmental stage of childhood, which is deemed more appealing and safe at the emotional level, in order to resolve earlier failures in psychological or emotional development.

In her conflict with Edna and Harry over the possession of her bedroom, Julia is completely overcome with hysteria. Encouraged by Agnes who asks her to take a direct action so as to expel Harry and Edna, Julia goes to her upstairs bedroom, overturns the furniture upside down and hysterically rips Harry and Edna's clothes. Carrying Tobias's pistol, Julia "appears in the archway, her hair is wild, her face is tear-streaked" (p.73-74). Freud provides a clue to Julia's self-dramatizing hysteria. He says that hysteria originates from the unresolved traumatic experiences from childhood which are repressed in the unconscious because they are too painful to recall (Dobie, 2011). In their study on hysteria, Breuer and Freud (1957) state that "any experience which calls up distressing effects" can lead to hysterical symptoms (p.26).

Julia is bound to her unhappy past and responds in an emotionally immature way. Her hysteria could be traced to the traumatic events during early childhood. As a child as well as a grown woman, Julia is intensely attached to her father whom she finds both exciting and terrifying, but her brother's birth damages her relation with him. Freud (1990) declares that "the tie of affection, which binds the child as a rule to the parent of the opposite sex, succumbs to disappointment, to a vain expectation of satisfaction or to jealousy over the birth of a new baby" (p.15).

Then, Julia's hysterical behaviour is a manifestation of the past traumatic memories harboured in the unconscious. Julia releases the unexpressed emotions, related with past traumas, through aggression directed towards Harry and Edna who want to occupy her place in the father's home. Besides, her furious gun-threatening behaviour is a valid expression of her repressed sexual desires and childish feelings for her father. Freud avers that hysteria is a symptom of unsatisfied sexual desires during childhood (Smith, 2003). He interprets it "as acting out repressed desires" (Thurschwell, 2000, p.43). Julia converts her repressed romantic feelings for her Daddy into a psychical activity in order to give expression to them. Hence, hysterical symptoms "represent a substitute for impulses, the source of whose strength is derived from the sexual instinct" (Freud, 1953, p.21).

## **2.2. Julia's Dysfunctional Family**

Julia is a victim of a dysfunctional family. She lacks a healthy model of marital relationship because she does not find in Tobias and Agnes's marriage a good model to adopt and base her marriages upon it. Her marital break-up, rudeness and shortcomings are assigned completely to them. Skynner and Cleese (1997) emphasize that parents pass on their conventions and experiences to their children who model their behaviours on the people surrounding them especially their parents. Julia's parents are sexually withdrawn since Teddy's death. Tobias isolates himself psychologically and physically from Agnes and avoids an intercourse with her for fear of conceiving another child. Then, Julia is exposed to nonsexual parental life and unhealthy family atmosphere, a matter that leaves a bad impact on her psychological development that would otherwise give her a sense of security and set down a foundation for future behaviour, thus allow her to live a content marital life. Freud (1953) affirms that "if there are quarrels between the parents, or if their marriage is unhappy, the ground will be prepared in their children for the severest predisposition to a disturbance of sexual development or to a neurotic illness" (p.228). Further, Kohut (2009) claims that a child born to parents who are emotionally dry, s/he may grow up with a dispassionate personality. This is due to the unhealthy and unloving environment in which a child lives.

Accordingly, Agnes and Tobias's dysfunctional marriage has a negative impact on the emotional and sexual growth of Julia. Their loveless relationship gives their daughter a distorted picture of the marital life. The pattern of the parents' unhappy marriage is echoed and repeated in the bungled and infertile marriages of Julia, as Agnes contemplates: "We see ourselves repeated by those we bring into it all, either by mirror or rejection, honour or fault (p.59). As such, Julia's "matrimonial problems grow directly out of her parent's" (Hayman, 1971, p.74). Her dysfunctional marriages are merely allegorical of her parents' unsuccessful marriage, as Agnes admits: "We become allegorical, my darling Tobias, as we grow older" (p.59). Hence, the unpleasant emotional experience and unresolved problems of Tobias and Agnes scar Julia's mind (Stenz, 1978, p.80).

Julia's relationship with her parents does not fare much better. She is on bad terms with her mother for being so tough with her: "I must discover, sometime, who you think you are" (p.57). From Freudian perspective, "the parents especially a mother are credited for the child's personality" (Cloninger, 2004, p.30). Agnes is the object of Julia's hatred. She views her mother as a bad example of maternity and has a strained relation with her because she does not conform to Agnes's rules and fails to keep her marriages going (Nagtegaal, 2013). For Agnes, Julia serves as an evidence of her failure to produce the ideal picture of marriage she has once desired to achieve. On the other hand, Julia reveres Tobias as a figure of strength and power in her life. She considers him as her role model and finds him a sort of a fascinating figure. But the great man Julia has once loved for the good personality he has, is turned into a cipher in her eyes (Porter, 1979). She has become withdrawn from Tobias, with whom she has once been close. Julia's failure to establish a satisfactory and permanent relationship with any of her ex-husbands arises from her failed relationship with her Daddy, the object of her desire and the first important figure in her early life.

Freud (1953) mentions that a parent-child relationship is very significant in selecting his/her later sexual object and any troubles within this relation will be harmful to the future sexual life of the child. Julia attributes her marital failure to her parents. She blames them for her unhappiness in a marital life because she does not choose her husbands, but her parents have pushed her on whatever man they "thought would hold the fief together best", saying that "love will come after" (p.49).

### **2.3. Julia's Unresolved Female Oedipus Complex**

After Teddy's death, the love is absent from home and Tobias is no longer the loving father. Julia stops calling him 'Daddy' since childhood "when she used to skin her knees" (p.68). So, she searches for the father-figure in her future spouses, hoping to find in them what she is missing in her family (Clum, 2005). Nonetheless, she does not receive the nurturing care and love she expects from them which leads to her frequent separations. Julia cannot form good relationships with any of her husbands or keep her marriages afloat because she recognizes that her spouses are as deficient and unsatisfactory as her father. Like Tobias, Julia's ex-husbands are unconcerned, homosexual and disloyal. This is uttered in Claire's rhyme about them: "Phillip loved to gamble. Charlie loved the boys, Tom went after Women" (p.31), while Douglas is "against everything" as Julia declares (p.55). When she gets married, Julia unconsciously chooses men who reminds her of her father. Seeking the personality model of the father in her husbands, Julia replicates the failed marital experience of her mother (Porter, 1979). Freud (1953) posits that female Oedipus conflict is resolved incompletely and will always persist in the unconscious, thus women remain fixated on the phallic stage. Since the girl cannot possess her father, she identifies with her mother and seeks for an alternative father-figure in a partner who resembles her father physically and professionally.

In fact, Julia is sexually attracted to Tobias. She attributes real as well as imaginary qualities to him. As a small child, Julia regards her father as a "saint, sage, daddy, everything" (p.48). Voncken (2015) argues that the "heroic view of a parent is very childish: children believe their parents to be omniscient" (p.16). Julia's heroic view of her father shows that she creates an idealized father image in her mind. She is never able to outgrow this perspective, thereby she is fixated on the phallic stage. During this phase, when a girl discovers that she lacks the phallus which all boys own, she blames her mother for her castration and hates her. So, she directs her affection towards her father since he has the penis she desires. Fixation at phallic stage results in the female Oedipal Complex. Julia has developed a profound admiration for her parent in the childhood, but she represses her id impulses in the unconscious. However, they still influence her feelings and conducts as an adult. Ewen (2003) asserts that "childhood instinctual impulses and repressions exist in the adult id as strongly as though they had just occurred" (p.19).

Julia's fondness for her father is exposed in the love scene she plays in her parents' bedroom. She smells the bed linens, holding the pillow tightly just like a lover, as Tobias tells Agnes: "Twisted on your

bed, lots of breathing and the great wide eyes? The spread all gathered under her, your big lace pillow in her arms like a lover" (p.71). Julia displays behaviour which suggests that her incestuous feelings towards Tobias in childhood have never faded, rather they lurk in the unconscious. The bed linen rekindles Julia's earlier memories and her intense feelings of adolescence trapped beneath the surface of the conscious mind. Actually, Julia's Oedipus Complex is unresolved. This manifests itself in the rivalry between her and Agnes for winning Tobias's love (Porter, 1979). Her feelings of enmity towards her mother is hinted at throughout the play. She sarcastically calls Agnes: a "drill sergeant, nanny and pope" (p.57). It becomes clear that her feelings towards her mother are actually fed by her affection for her father. This suggests that there is a certain friction in the family, a kind of competition for the father's affection.

Owing to the unsolved sexual problems during childhood, Julia is plagued by the phallic-fixation which culminates in the female Oedipus Complex. Fixation usually emerges because of the unsatisfied desires at a certain stage of development or because the person's failure to overcome this stage successfully and advances towards another stage. Therefore, the libido puts all its energy at that stage and strives continuously to satisfy the unmet needs. Freud (1953) states that to resolve the female Oedipus Complex, a girl should repress her erotic feelings for her father and searches for her love object in a partner who is similar to the father-figure. Julia still holds a childish admiration for her father; therefore, to compensate for the lack of affection and to relieve anxiety, she channels her desire for other males as a substitute for Tobias. She has got married four times in quest of a man that represents her father, but none of her husbands meet her needs. Julia's failed marriages reflect the circle of her fixation upon her father and suggest unresolved feelings toward him. According to Ewen (2003) "an individual who devotes more libido to unresolved Oedipal desires will have less available to fuel such activities as finding a suitable wife or husband" (p.16). He adds that fixation on the parent of the opposite sex or on a certain stage of psychosexual development and failure to deal with the Oedipus Complex may impede an individual of achieving a satisfying heterosexual relationship. Julia's attraction to her father results in her being unable to find an alternative phallus.

The bedrock of Julia's Oedipus Complex is a penis-envy. Since Julia's complex focusses on her father, a certain degree of penis-envy has taken place in her life. Her parents' preference for her brother, Teddy, contributes to the formation of penis-envy as well. She is still carrying the psychological repercussion of feeling inferiority. Julia is yearning to acquire a penis-baby, but her ineffectual marriages thwarts her to reach this goal because she fails to conceive the son that would compensate for her physical deficiency.

### 3. Conclusion

Freud affirms that the early years of childhood are central to the psychological welfare of an adult and necessary in creating positive relationships with the other sex later on. He proposes that an adult personality is a reflection of the traumatic events s/he experiences throughout childhood. These events are retained in the unconscious and continue to influence a person in the future life. Julia suffers from an emotional deprivation and feels that she is worthless, unlovable child after her brother's birth, a matter that produces her insecure and childish personality. She has been exposed to traumatic disappointments from the side of her parents. Her immature character stems in part from the absence of the parents' empathic responses to her childhood needs. During an infantile stage, Julia's parents treat her as an insufficient and faulty child which later becomes embedded in her adult personality in different ways. As a result, Julia feels low self-esteem and does not develop according to Freudian terms.

Additionally, Julia's unresolved Oedipal complex has a role in forming her emotionally disturbed personality and causes her recurrent failed marriages. She remains obsessed with her father and constantly seeks partners that bear similarities to him when looking for a relationship. She has craved for an adoring, protective kind of masculine love she has never got from her father. Consequently, Julia's failure in her marital life is attributable to her dysfunctional family and her unresolved Oedipus Complex.

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