

# Concepts of Domestic Space and the New Family in *Rabbit Hole* and *Clybourne Park*

*Rabbit Hole* ve *Clybourne Park*'ta Ev Alanı ve Yeni Aile Kavramları

Sinan Gül\*

National Defense University

## Abstract

This article examines two modern American plays, *Rabbit Hole* (2006) by David Lindsay-Abaire and *Clybourne Park* (2010) by Bruce Norris, in order to demonstrate the changing characteristics of domestic spaces. These plays depict the ways in which characters' identities and familial dynamics are influenced by disruptions to their home lives, shifts in representations of femininity, the decline of patriarchy, and the generation gap. Although domestic dramas are often criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes about women, these plays challenge these perceptions in several ways. The families depicted in both plays are white, heterosexual, and relatively affluent, and while they may conform to societal norms in terms of race, sexuality, and wealth, they still reflect changes in power dynamics within contemporary American society. These families have become a site for social progress and a symbol of the weakening of patriarchal structures. This trend is slow but steady, offering insight into the evolving dynamics of family values and gender roles, and providing a clear picture of the ongoing changes within families. Both plays address a variety of issues that contemporary American families face, from dysfunctionality to communication breakdowns, and offer innovative solutions while presenting a different family structure than that of previous generations.

**Keywords:** American drama, theatre, domestic drama, *Rabbit Hole*, *Clybourne Park*

## Öz

Bu çalışma, David Lindsay-Abaire'nin *Rabbit Hole* (2006) ve Bruce Norris'in *Clybourne Park* (2010) adlı iki çağdaş dönem Amerikan oyununu üzerinden, evsel alanların son zamanlarda ortaya çıkan yeni özelliklerini analiz etmektedir. Bu oyunlarda ön plana çıkan önemli özellikler ise yaşam alanlarındaki karakterlerin ve kimliklerinin tasvirleri, değişen kadınlık temsilleri, yıkıcı bir olaya yönelik ailesel ve bireysel tepkiler, ataerkilliğin gerilemesi ve kuşak farkı açısından büyük değişiklikler görülmesidir. Ev içerisinde geçen aile oyunları doğal olarak feministler tarafından kadınları, önemli bir kimliği olmayan basit hizmetkârlara indirgedikleri için eleştirilse de *Rabbit Hole* ve *Clybourne Park* bu algıyı yenilikçi açılardan değiştirmektedir. Bu çalışmada analiz edilen aileler beyaz, heteroseksüel ve nispeten varlıklı bir geçmişe sahip ve bu oyunlardaki ırksal, cinsel ve ekonomik tek düzeyliğe rağmen, yine de çağdaş Amerikan toplumundaki güç dinamiklerindeki değişiklikleri yansıtmaktadırlar. Bu aileler, bir anlamda ataerkilliğin zayıflamasını ilan eden sosyolojik ilerlemelerin ortak bir yeri olarak görülmektedir. Oyunlardaki tanık olunan bu eğilim, aile değerleri ve toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri süreçleri hakkında daha anlayışlı olan ve ailedeki sürekli değişimin canlı bir resmini gösteren yavaş

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\*Dr. Dept of Foreign Languages, National Defense University

ORCID# 0000-0002-4529-6699; sinangul36@gmail.com

ama istikrarlı bir dönüşüme sahiptir. Çağdaş Amerikan ailelerinin işlevsizliğinden üyeler arasındaki iletişim eksikliğine kadar çeşitli sorunlara odaklanan her iki oyun da yeni çözümler önermekte ve yeni aile kavramının öncekilerden önemli ölçüde farklı bir yapıya sahip olduğunu tasvir etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Amerikan dramı, tiyatro, aile dramları, *Rabbit Hole*, *Clybourne Park*

### **American Stage: Hegemony of the Middle-Class White Family**

Although at times American dramatic creativity seems as diverse and contradictory as the society itself, plays specifically devoted to domestic life have been long-time favorites with American audiences and critics. Increasing reports of violence, domestic tensions, and abuse by and towards teenagers and other family members have been vital signs that made domestic representations more appealing to society. As the house and home are frequently perceived as “symbols of the self, the psyche, and the body,” (Briganti 8) a thorough investigation of residential spaces can explore the relation between society and the individual. Characters in their domestic settings embody traits of millennial American identity as twentieth century domestic realism has paved the way to an enriched and revitalized American theatre conceptually challenging and culturally pluralist. Advancing the argument of American identity from a domestic point of view, this article focuses on the reflection of American identity in private spaces. The portrayals of American houses and protective family cycles in contemporary plays go through a significant evolution, and thus the American family on stage requires a new assessment. This article evaluates portrayals of American characters in their residential spaces and identifies major changes in terms of shifting representations of femininity, familial and individual reactions towards a disruptive event, the decline of patriarchy, and the generation gap through David Lindsay-Abaire’s *Rabbit Hole* (2006) and Bruce Norris’ *Clybourne Park* (2010). These commercially and critically successful pieces of mainstream American theater share several features which constitute significant differences in portrayals of the American family on stage.

Domestic realism has been criticized for being a “structurally unambitious, homogenous, tunnel—visioned form, churning out the same fundamental message and denying creation of a more open, pluralistic theatre” (Demastes, ix), but contemporary American domestic realism has to a certain extent pulled away dramatically from attitudes of traditional patriarchy and misogyny. The main determinant of this change has been in content rather than form. I believe this is the answer of the millennial American drama to June Schlueter’s question in 1999 about “whether domestic realism remains an accommodating theatrical form” as there has been a growing interest in analyzing domesticity and domestic spaces, particularly after 9/11 which triggered an internal investigation about identities and otherness.

Like twentieth century American domestic plays, *Rabbit Hole* and *Clybourne Park* center on a traumatic event within different family structures and investigate these families' ability to cope with its stresses.<sup>1</sup> The variety of families portrayed is promising but contemporary American domestic realism requires more participation from other ethnic and gender minorities to display a fair spectrum of shifts in cultural and social life. The families analyzed here are white, heterosexual, and of a relatively affluent background. Despite the racial, sexual and economic normativity in these plays, they, nevertheless, reflect changes in the power dynamics in contemporary American society. Several features are common in both plays. First, the end of patriarchy and the emergence of dominating female protagonists are clearly visible: after decades of women's struggle for equal representation, the American stage hosts well-established and independent female characters who are not necessarily bound to their houses by domestic roles. Household chores are often equally divided or women have willingly taken the responsibility. Second, when disruptive events in each play reveal the need for familial unity, comfort is offered by someone outside the family due to the impotence of family members. Third, transformations in American society are reflected through a comparison between the older and younger generations. Younger people are more cognizant of multiculturalism and pluralism, more tolerant of others, and more willing to learn about others whereas older characters are more willing to conserve their values and stick to their life-style. Although these plays by white American male playwrights are mostly about middle-class, white families, their approaches to social and cultural topics include constructive and progressive features.

Lindsay-Abaire describes his play *Rabbit Hole* as "a play about a bereaved family, but that does not mean they go through the day glazed over, on the verge of tears, morose or inconsolable" (64). Becca and Howie's four-years-old son, Danny, dies eight months before the first scene because he follows their family dog into the street through the door that Howie has left unlatched while Becca was answering a call from her sister. Therefore, everybody including Becca's sister shares a feeling of guilt for Danny's death. Lindsay-Abaire tells the story of a despondent family and signals the difficulty of loosening a traumatic event. Despite differences and misunderstandings among most family members, family eventually becomes the main factor reuniting members after all the difficulties they endure.

Similar to *Rabbit Hole* in many aspects, Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* (2011) is also praised for "ripping the Band-Aid off the American epidermis, the one covering the

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<sup>1</sup> It would be, however, anachronistic to reduce the pivotal aspect of these plays to the point that they take place in a domestic area. Contemporary American domestic realism, as the most fertile and flexible mode of American theatre, keeps audiences in their seats while providing opportunities for playwrights to survive. These plays are often capable of successfully exploring the inner depths of human experience, offering psychological insights, political criticism and spiritual counsel not because they take place in private zones, but because they reveal conflicts and contradictions inherent in the society.

oozing sore of race relations in the U.S.A.” (Simakis). Written as a sequel to Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), *Clybourne Park*’s first act turns to a white couple who decide to sell their house to the Youngers (the African-American family in Hansberry’s *Raisin* which ends before the Youngers arrive in Clybourne, a white-dominated neighborhood). There is no black population there, and other white property owners are concerned that their presence might trigger a “contamination” leading to a decrease in real estate prices. Act II unfolds the process of gentrification in Clybourne years later and the audience witnesses a discussion over racial and financial problems that most Americans suffer from regardless of their ethnic and economic backgrounds.

### **The Demise of Patriarchy**

Domestic values and domestic space do not impose restrictions on women in these plays written by male playwrights, rather they are primarily appreciated by both men and women in the plays. The embodiment of feminine and domestic virtues in Becca in *Rabbit Hole* and Bev in *Clybourne Park* increases the importance of these women although it is usually well-known that a writer could easily get away if s/he does not endorse women rights within domestic settings in their texts. For example, prominent playwrights with similar backgrounds and nature, such as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, were criticized by feminists for maintaining patriarchal suppression in their plays. Domestic spaces were heavily denounced for victimizing women in plays starting from *Trifles* (1912) to *How I Learned to Drive* (1999), but the perception of domesticity in contemporary texts through a less phallogocentric language by male playwrights recognizes the equality of sexes within domestic spaces. Desire, defined by Judith Butler as “the feeling of absence or lack” (7), is not central to the recognition of female characters, and there is a clear tendency to avoid a direct suppression of any sexes.

Although the lack of women in production process (as producers, directors, and writers) is often criticized, modern American domestic drama has always hosted strong female characters as long as their existence is justified for the men around them. Hence, the legacy of domestic realism in the twentieth century is a repressive paradigm which neglects the presence and significance of female representation in modern American dramatic texts. Domestic realism in the twenty-first century has evolved to contain a subversive characteristic as female characters have not been as docile as they used to be. However, contemporary characterizations have created a binary view of past and present conditions for women. In this respect, they highlight epistemological paradoxes between then and now which demonstrate how further demands of women can help advance society. These plays have the potential to offer alternatives to limited and detrimental visions of home. However, the rise of women’s awareness and the erosion of patriarchal institutions’ impact on family as well as the concept of marriage and female artists’ rising contribution to the production process of plays, have enabled female characters more than ever to raise their voice against stereotypical perceptions and classifications. The

inclusion of more women mean more sensitivity for female issues. Social struggles and theoretical debates for equal rights have forced recognition of diverse and fluid identities; theatrical texts have also reflected a similar response to find ways of representing varied characters who go beyond stereotypical and simplistic representations.

Alternative visions from contemporary plays contest long-held archetypes and bring recognition to diversity on the conception of female characters. For example, all female characters in *Rabbit Hole* would meet the expectations of women's right activists of the nineties, but Becca, in particular, shines as an independent woman and a contemporary housewife. Indicating her difference through independent lifestyle, Becca is not religious unlike other parents at her therapy group, who describe their kids' death as God's act. She compares God to her father because both were prayed to and both "treated" people "like shit" (51). Her defiance of religion as well as her defiance of her late father as a representation of patriarchal systems echoes radical feminist manifestations. She is also critical of other women who attend therapy groups, "These ladies don't even talk about their kids or their husbands or any of it. I think they are just so happy to be away from all that. It's probably the last thing they wanna talk about. Because I'm sure most of them are bored housewives, right?" (47) Unlike other women in therapy group, Becca is a voluntary housewife who is vividly contrasted to other female characters in the play. Aware of the limitations of her domestic space, Becca has maintained her creativity and dignity while being in charge of her domestic responsibilities and she is a millennial character different than the twentieth century female portrayals who are either not as independent as her or are imprisoned within their domesticity. Becca embodies the new domestic figure of the twenty-first century, created by women's resistance to submission as well as economic forces, which transformed every individual, regardless of age, sex, ideology or other personal traits into participants in the labor market. Becca's situation embodies the modernization of life-styles and the reduction of authoritarian structures within family and society.

Becca's constantly clean and well-organized house is proof of her motherly skills and personal maturity, but her family doubts whether her sister Izzy, who often hangs around pubs and has a messy house, is capable of raising a child. In addition, Becca demonstrates a great deal of expertise in baking. Although appreciation for domestic skills might seem the appraisal of a patriarchal value system, the way these skills are portrayed in the play is not intended to degrade the position of women in society. The reconciliation Becca and Izzy experience before the latter gives birth signals the eroding patriarchal values, as Izzy does not fit into the description of a virtuous mother. Although the quality of domestic service by women functions as an agent and product of cultural and social perception, Becca as a role model, a conscientious housewife and mother celebrates her clumsy sister's pregnancy. Apart from Becca's personal level of integrity and familial background, this might be why it is so difficult for her to accept her child's death.

Becca's potential for self-invention and rehabilitation becomes a key factor in her portrayal whereas her mother is the opposite. Her mother's irrelevant and ill-informed opinions on politics, including her politically incorrect admiration for the Kennedy family based on her personal inclinations, demonstrates her superficiality which is also reflected in her incapability of coping with her son's loss. Becca's struggle with memories isolates her from the outer world, and the only way out of this chaos becomes her reconciliation with the fifteen-year-old Jason, who has accidentally killed her only child. Her relatively positive approach to reconciliation with her son's accidental killer and her encouragement to her mother to act sensibly point to Becca's capacity for personal maturation. Her mother, on the other hand, either ignores her son's absence or does not feel remorseful for his death.

One of the primary differences between Becca and her mother stems from the former's self-realization after her meeting with Jason. Without her husband's confirmation, she meets Jason and reads his published short story dedicated to Danny. They talk about parallel universes and where theirs might be. Becca says, "so this is just the sad version of us" (55). The tone of the play here becomes more optimistic as they reveal their true feelings in their short conversation. In addition, Howie's early arrival indicates his symbolic return to Becca and the end of his brief romance with another woman. Becca has called their friends Rick and Debbie, and they will have a cookout with their children, whom Becca has been avoiding for a while. The following conversation indicates the return to normal for them:

HOWIE: [. . .] And then we'll wait for Rick and/or Debbie to bring up Danny while the kids are playing in the rec-room. And maybe that'll go on for a little while. And after that we'll come home.

BECCA: And then what?

HOWIE: I don't know. Something though. We'll figure it out.

BECCA: Will we?

HOWIE: I think so. I think we will. (61)

Becca's action has enabled them to eliminate the gloomy atmosphere. Although she struggles to find her place between past and present, her action triumphs over Howie's indifference or avoidance of the topic. The fact that their life will go back to its routine does not necessarily imply that they will be happy, but it removes the clouds of sorrow and that transitional loop in their life.

Is it a coincidence that characters like Becca in *Rabbit's Hole* and Bev Stoller in *Clybourne Park* are more virtuous or respected because of their domestic skills? This transformation of domestic virtues from estrangement to an element of reconciliation can be a trend in domestic realism, which is often at the forefront of progressive movements. It has been a harbinger for changes taking place or bells for reformation. For example, cooking is not a strictly female sphere anymore; more men prefer to stay home while sharing the responsibilities. An advocate of fresh ideas, drama holds a liberal attitude towards women's independence. American theater might be commercially oriented, but in certain aspects, it has manifested

liberal and subversive elements by advocating for women and minority rights. Women's freedom of choice, including being a voluntary housewife, has manifested a liberating effect rather than an isolating one on women. *Rabbit Hole* offers an alternative vision for domestic service and rejects the female conceptions of the twentieth century. As the play does not romanticize domestic space or portray female figures imprisoned within the politics of residential areas, the house is not depicted as a sanctuary or prison, and women are not seen as victims of domesticity due to their familial labor. Male characters also share the tasks and duties at home which shows that power and class divisions between couples weigh in favor of the women in Becky and Howie's relationship.

Act II in *Clybourne Park* is also a testimony of younger generations' partial superiority in terms of equalitarianism and level of tolerance towards each other compared to what it was like fifty years ago in Act I, where the stress on domestic space highlights the representations of the patriarchal family construction. When Karl insists that Jim, another guest in Russ' house, stay, he tells Russ that he does not mean to usurp his authority since it is Russ' "castle", and he is "the king" (56). Although this statement sounds overtly Victorian, it accurately reflects the spirit of the 1950s and 1960s, whose oppressive atmosphere is partially responsible for the sexual revolution and counterculture movements as a reaction. When Albert tries to calm Russ down, the latter reminds him that this is his space, "Putting your hands on me? No, sir. Not in my house you don't" (97). The house Russ is selling is his warranty contract with society; in this context it is a guarantor for the freedom and control of the property owner. This is exactly the reason that the Youngers also want to reside in Clybourne Park. This move will elevate their social status to complete independence and freedom.

At the end of Act I, as everyone leaves, Bev and Russ are finally alone in their house. At this point, Norris depicts the solitude of women in the 1950s. While they keep packing, Russ talks about how it is going to be great for him to have a short commute. On the other hand, his wife, Bev, does not have any choice in how to spend her time. While Russ consoles her that he will be at home as soon as his work is over, she responds ironically, "What'll I do in between?" (99) This question indicates the repressive characteristic of domestic space that has been harshly criticized in modern American drama, especially by feminist playwrights. The impact of feminist criticism and the advance of women's rights are represented in the second act as an answer to Bev's question because the play takes place in twenty-first century Chicago where women are not expected to be docile housewives.

Although *Clybourne Park* is strongly associated with independence and freedom, it is still a domain of males, not females. There is, however, a substantial difference in the representation of women in Act II. Female characters are not as submissive as Bev and Betsy. *Clybourne Park's* second act, like *Rabbit Hole*, reflects the demise of patriarchy. Although the private sphere has been traditionally seen as the realm of

females, and the public sphere has been dominated by males (Gallagher 277), the absence of bullying fathers and husbands, or demanding partners on the contemporary American stage reflects cultural and socioeconomic progress. The prominence of politically correct characters is a significant result of workshops, readings, and artistic influences. The process of multiple edits inhibits “a writer from thinking outside the box,” (Hosking) as Lindsay-Abaire points out, but the outcome is usually appropriate plays which conform to middle-class values. Most contemporary playwrights, however, have a clear progressive response to the tyranny of patriarchy which domestic realism usurped. Family politics are no longer necessarily carried out between father and son or father and wife. The new dialectic of families requires more participation as well as more dispersed, equalized, and reversed power dynamics.

Lindsay-Abaire and Norris, like most contemporary male American playwrights, are capable of forming non-submissive and strong female characters. Although there is no clear assertion of a subversive approach to the patriarchal system, as a feminist text would demand, the situation and presence of these characters are highly positive in terms of female representation. These playwrights have their varied reasons for creating well-developed female characters. For Lindsay-Abaire using female characters is a method to “distance [himself] from the protagonist” (Hosking) so that he is not writing about himself. For Norris, an equal division of roles between male and female actors might stem from the tradition of the Steppenwolf Theatre, where he has been working as actors for years. Regardless of the practical necessities, the egalitarian intention he applies in his texts is a fruit of advances in women rights.<sup>2</sup> The reduction of hierarchical and authoritarian structures within the families depicted in his play change the literary and social conservative rhetoric into a more pluralist, open, and ongoing discussion.

### **Disruptive Events and the Despair of Family**

Most dramatic works prefer to associate their theme with daily life, domestic settings and familial issues, so it is not surprising to see that they have been used in contemporary American plays. Besides, people want to see characters and events that they can identify themselves with and by the same token, *Clybourne Park* tells the story of the Youngers family moving out of their primarily white neighborhood while selling their house to an African American family. This planned move, which is the source of conflict, originated from the Youngers’ son’s suicide after his return from the Korean War. As expressed in both plays, the lack of assistance and the hopelessness within the family hinders the reconciliation process and leads people to seek condolence outside the family circle. Moving out of the natural domestic space is usually the first thing to do, as mobility in American families is very

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<sup>2</sup> This egalitarian and advanced situation in dramatic representation, however, should not obscure the fact that there are still many cases of domestic violence and abuse in real life. These plays convey middle-class values so comfortably that nobody feels the absence of troubles which may be subconsciously attributed to lower classes.



frequent. Home is often associated with the absent character, and memory is expected to reset with a change in domestic space. The house characterizes a self-contained ordeal that negates the healing process within the family and functions as a catalyst to ignite confrontations.

Becca and Howie in *Rabbit Hole* also decide to sell their house which is associated with past they wish to leave behind. The house serves as a repository of memory for all these plays, and therefore becomes an item either to get rid of or hold on to. This is a legacy of a modern American drama, famous for portrayals of dysfunctional families; and much the same narrative survives in contemporary domestic realism.<sup>3</sup> The house in *Rabbit Hole* encapsulates leftovers from the dead son's life. The family's reaction causes the whole event to turn into a psychosis with no escape at the end of the tunnel. As the play's title implies, a psychological and chaotic experience awaits at the end of this journey, a self-validation the people involved will explore. This play serves as a small scale version of a national trauma, which the nation experienced during 9/11, reduced to a middle-class family level – the landscape-shifting vacuum of death devastates everyone. Chaos and lack of authority, however, turn death into the subliminal driving force of these plays.

The trauma in these plays is initiated through the loss of a beloved person. Reminiscence or repression of an absent character on stage, like Becca's brother and child, or the Youngers' son, is a frequently used element in playwriting techniques. Different from a flashback, in reminiscence, the dialectic between memory and forgetting plays an important role in self-representation. For example, Becca intentionally records another TV show on one of "Danny's tapes" which her husband, Howie, secretly watches when she is not around. She removes Danny's pictures and his memorabilia. Losing a brother to drug addiction, Becca uses emotional shutdown to reduce her pain. Previous experience of such a loss has an impact on her to escape reality rather than face the agony of it.

Grief for the death of a beloved one in both plays brings family and community members closer to understanding their incapability to assist each other. In each of these separate cases, characters without family sources of consolation—Becca in *Rabbit Hole*, Bev in *Clybourne*—receive assistance from figures outside the family circle. This situation opposes, to a certain level, the subliminal message embedded in American political discourse since 2001. Being a wary and dutiful citizen was defined as keeping an open eye for strangers and people outside of one's circles. Playwrights, however, have indirectly responded through an alternative path

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<sup>3</sup> There are several modern masterpieces of American drama which champion the house as an indispensable part of the play rather than a simple notion of setting. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) portrays a house that needs to be abandoned for Williams' redemption. On the other hand, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) considers a house in a "better" neighborhood as a status definer. Stressing the advanced property ownership of African American community, August Wilson's *Fences* (1983) studies the issue of securing what belongs to a family as the title also suggests.

where outsiders turn into friends or saviors. This might be considered as a therapeutic and optimistic contribution of the American drama to overcoming domestic troubles. This overtone, endorsing social integration in domestic realism, is a novel response of the American commercial stage often criticized for being “conscientiously devoted to manufacturing escapism and obscurantism” (Brustein xiii).

Despite the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the plays due to the losses these families have experienced, it is significant that neither of them emotionally exploits the concept of death; it is mostly used to signify the elimination of emptiness and agony rather than bring the audience to tears for a melodramatic effect. Lindsay-Abaire explains this matter in one of his interviews, “We go [to theatre] because we want to feel less alone. We want to feel that we’re in communion with the story and with other people in the room. It’s about connection. It’s not necessarily about wanting to see how awful the characters’ lives are.” (Harren 14) Although it is a major part of the plots, death in these works destabilizes the comfort zone and triggers action. A more liberal approach to death, the effort shown by characters does not aim to reduce or relieve the pain of death. The aestheticized—slice of life—version in contemporary domestic plays juxtaposes death with life and the living whereas a naturalist representation is mostly based on grief and agony. This reminder prevents these plays from serving merely consoling and therapeutic purposes as the real purpose is primarily to question family structure and significance of death and then provide some relief and guidance. Although the emotional setup of *Clybourne Park*’s finale, where Bev catches her son, Kenneth, in full uniform writing his last letter to his family before his suicide, leaves a bitter tone, the depiction of arguments radically undermines this tragic vision. Rather than lessen the agony, family serves to fill the void of the deceased. Instead, the absence of authority in these families becomes the primary thing to be filled immediately.<sup>4</sup>

The way characters present themselves within their private spaces shapes their personal identity and the balance of power in the house. Their actions offer an insight into continuity and change in cultural patterns, shifts that determine national policies. For example, the lack of family members’ commitment to the production of collective good in the family accentuates their eagerness to promote their individual concerns. The concept of miscommunication within the family is at the center of *Clybourne Park* whose first act is marked by the Youngers’ verbal subterfuge, and the second act by the disorder caused by each character’s enthusiasm to be heard and reluctance to listen. Rather than reach a consensual and harmonious settlement, the individuals take the initiative and claim that he/she is the one to lead the others just like Howie in *Rabbit Hole*. This action is a

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Scanlan, in his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*, points to Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* (1935) as the beginning of this search for new power dynamics within the domestic spaces.

reminder of a competitive culture in which individuals aspire to take control of their own and others' lives. These plays narrate individual aspirations within families in times of crisis from the perspectives of different characters, allowing readers/audiences to better appreciate the human dimension of the events. The inclusion of an outsider into family politics opposes the politically embedded xenophobic atmosphere of millennial America and functions as a healing factor for family solidarity.

### **Transformation through Old-Young Generations**

“Drama ... creates a unique public sphere in which audience gathers to hear, witness, and suffer the public airing of secrets—about themselves. Implicit in every drama, by reason of its form and the concreteness of the experience it represents, are the conditions of a group psychology in which the audience is exposed and put on trial. When that process works, the audience finds itself in a mousetrap in which the supposedly “pathological” characters on the stage reveal, even as they undergo, the conflicts which the audience wants to keep hidden from itself. Theater is dangerous because it publicly stages the truths about society which that society wants to conceal.” (Davis 9)

Walter Davis describes the process of “stage reveal” in which recipients achieve a deepening awareness of concealed truths through the unfolding of conflicts. In popular plays, unlike political theatre which does not refrain from giving didactic messages or showing abominable images, this process of “conscientization” is embodied in familiar forms such as conflicts between generations which reduces the possibility of directly imposing upon the audience in order to ensure the box-office success. Revolt against the “parental archetype,” which underlines the differences between the younger and older generations, has been a commonly repeated theme of drama since *Antigone*. Used commonly by playwrights from ethnic minority backgrounds to highlight problems between immigrant parents and second-generation children (Lee 90), the generation gap has been a fertile field for mainstream American drama to bring up a wide range of conflicts such as tyranny versus freedom, rules against personal philosophies, conservatism against liberalism, the abuse of power and other weighty issues.

*Clybourne Park* portrays a generation gap in two societies separated by fifty years. There is no direct criticism or reference to a generational gap through characters in the play, but both acts engage the issue. Word games, confusion, politically in/correct jokes, and prejudices changing thorough time are some elements Norris employs in his play. Although Norris, in essence, illustrates that humanity has not been advanced as much as we assume, the egalitarian and tolerant nature of millennial America, compared to the sixties, constitutes a major difference.

*Rabbit Hole* also highlights the identity of a millennial mother and points out the differences between Becca and her mother. More liberal and educated, Becca confronts her mother's coping with stress:

Did Izzy tell you I was taking a continuing ed. class? We're reading *Bleak House*. Isn't that hilarious? He handed out the syllabus and I just laughed. Bleak House. Of course no one knew what I was laughing at, which was great. It's in Bronxville so no one knows about me. I'm normal there... I don't get "the face" every time someone looks at me... I like that I'm just a lady taking a class. (118-20)

Nat resorts to the comfort of religion after her son's suicide whereas Becca takes refuge at a continuing education class. Reading literature becomes a shelter against interaction with her husband or other people. The savior position that written word is assigned to serves as a testimony to the twenty-first century's adoption for new kinds of literacies. Communicating or seeking therapy in written forms of language reigns over the spoken word in Becca's case. Exhausted with the assumptions of people surrounding her, Becca struggles with the identity attributed to her by others. Unlike her mother, she prefers to fight against it and literary arts help her reshape her identity. Thus, the impact of literature on Becca's rehabilitation is a crucial difference between her and her mother. Younger generations in *Rabbit Hole* feel better if they escape the family circle. This voluntary exile introduces these female characters to self-realization and the amelioration of grief despite their inability to restore their familial order.

Parallel to *Rabbit Hole* and *Clybourne Park*, the generation gap has been a significant medium to illustrate the advance and decadence of families in American society.<sup>5</sup> In both plays, older characters are portrayed, to a certain level, out of context. Nat's ways are often questioned, and her daughters do not recognize her authority or wisdom. The differences between acts in *Clybourne* also reflect how older generations' perceptions have been forgotten or ignored by the new ones. Old characters' reluctance to admit their detachment from reality is often the primary catalyst to spark controversy between them and their families. The reason for their conflicts with younger people comes from the fact that they are not part of the millennium, their opinions look outdated, and they are not aware of the new boundaries of American society.

In addition to siding with the younger generations while maintaining the line of respect, contemporary American drama supports an enlightened and rational perception which is too prone to categorize, classify, identify, and analyze. Despite

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<sup>5</sup> This situation undermines a common perception in American history that the 1950s formed the best generation and family. Stephanie Coontz argues this myth in her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992) that as long as nostalgia for a fictional and mythologized past is accepted, there is no way to see forward. In this respect, domestic realism can help society to break the nostalgic bonds of the past.

being commercial theater products, these plays do not disregard the importance of spreading new thoughts and experiences within culture. This rational approach is utilized by younger characters: In *Clybourne Park*, the characters in Act II know more about the world due to their travels. Although characters are also aware of several world cities in Act I, they have never been there. Young characters are more global, and they are more considerate about borders. Norris converts this cognizance of world geography into a humorous anecdote where the capital of Morocco becomes a big issue just like Act I where Ulan Bator creates a similar comic effect all thorough the scene.

The point that American society has reached in terms of racial, social, and cultural terms is not compatible with the older generations' identity and their upbringing. Therefore, contemporary playwrights use middle-aged or younger characters to oppose their discourse and offer a more multicultural and egalitarian vision of sociocultural issues.

### **Significance of the Family**

Together with other major theatrical productions in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that realistic domestic drama is attached to the American heart. At the center of American drama and, to a certain extent, of American literature, lies the American family: dysfunctional family conflicts and drama go hand-in-hand. Domestic realism's success on the American stage, however, has partially impeded social criticism. This is one of the reasons American drama was criticized for resembling a "diaper drama" in the 1980s and 1990s by Martin Esslin and Benedict Nightingale, who condemned the fact that problems with parents caused playwrights to ignore the urgencies of the political and social world. Contrary to the European theatre, a strong tradition of social commentary, excluding certain social upheaval periods like the 1940s and 1960s, has not flourished. As Marvin Carlson points out, "theatre in this culture has long been a socially marginal form, generally and not inaccurately regarded as a primarily commercial enterprise oriented toward the entertainment of upper middle-class audiences." (4) Either because of the public willingness to trespass on the private haven of family or a nostalgic wish to preserve a static, idealized, and traditional family on stage, the best setting for appealing to upper middle-class taste has been the home.

The abundance and significance of houses as the main setting in American literature is not a new factor. A house has been a strong symbol of acceptance and a promised part of the American dream for a wider range of opportunities. Owning a house, as Dianne Harris notes, "was the surest way to cement one's (and one's own family's) inclusion in the nation" (15), and not surprisingly, most masterpieces of modern and contemporary American drama take place within domestic spaces whether the characters are the property owners or not. As a possible indication of this house-based philosophy, there has been an abundance of plays whose main setting or theme has been around domestic settings. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass*

*Menagerie* (1945), Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949), Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983), and August Wilson's *Fences* (1983) are examples of realist domestic dramas which carefully investigate individuals' tragedies through a family lens while exhibiting social and national disturbances in the background. The permanence of dysfunctional families resulted in producing more domestic realism as writers realized that "it could address large social and historical issues in theatrical terms" (Berkowitz 3). There is a clear transformation of domestic perceptions not only in the content, but also in form. For example, in the 1960s, private property for minorities meant a means of integration as Lorraine Hansberry uses private property in her play *A Raisin in the Sun* as one of the most efficient ways to reconcile separate racial groups of American society. In a similar vein, August Wilson advances this idea by focusing on fencing family property. Thus, the evolution of these domestic plays' setting can be illuminating not only in terms of theatrical artistry but also in terms of the social forces controlling them.

The house becomes a symbol for America's divided structure and it is a decisive element separating social classes in *Clybourne Park*. A similar type of elaboration is applied in *Rabbit Hole*: Howie cannot express his anger at Jason, who accidentally crashes his car into Danny, at least not until Jason's unexpected arrival at the open house session months later the accident. Howie asks him to leave because of the "family visiting" (37). This request suggests that there is a cycle here, and Jason is not part of this cycle. Although Howie is simply making up an excuse to get rid of Jason, his primary protective shelter is family. Jason's violation of physical boundaries—though polite and kind—releases Howie's submerged anger. The moment their place is "occupied" literally and metaphorically, dramatic conflict takes place. Interestingly, the place where Howie seeks solace does not offer a refuge from the outside or from his own problems. Rather than being forgiven or cleared for his involvement in the boy's tragic death, Jason is blamed for his unannounced arrival at the family's home. His entry justifies Howie's anger. Personal space and private property are integrated into American ideology and are important values, the violation of which is usually not tolerated. Bruce Norris highlights this situation in *Clybourne Park*. 9/11 has been a significant event in American history to reinvigorate the concern for boundaries and identity.<sup>6</sup> Physical boundaries are notably significant for the Americans since private property and its protection have been an indispensable part of the American ideology as opposed to socialist ideologies and European welfare theories. Staged five years after 9/11,

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<sup>6</sup> This attitude, in general, exemplifies the preventative methods after 9/11. A family-centered shield, watchdog dads at schools and neighborhood report programs promote the message to be cautious against those who do not belong to local neighborhoods. It has become imperative to keep all in the family, and anything suspicious outside local circles must be prevented to avoid a moment of danger. Although it does not seem directly affiliated, the incident of Trayvon Martin who was killed due to his suspicious attire and actions around a Florida neighborhood has echoes of this policy.

*Rabbit Hole* conveys similar concerns through an American family's experience of loss and instability.

The finale of the play is synonymous with what America faced after 9/11. If this one family is considered to represent the emotional situation of the country whose sons and daughters are killed by an intruder, or an outsider, the reconciliation with the other reiterates a decisive shift in attitudes and values differing from the mainstream media and the discourse of war. Although the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were deliberate to the victims involved in them and to their families, they came as a shock which was very similar to the shock that Becca and Howie experience after their son's fatal accident. Like Becca and Howie, different people grieved and reacted in different ways. There was a lot of anger, a lot of sadness, denial, and finally acceptance of the truth that nothing can bring the lost lives back, but the lives of the living must go on.

*Clybourne Park*, which is also an investigation of society from different but similar aspects, portrays two different periods of America. If Act I can be divided into two parts, the first one portrays a regular family getting ready to move. This part can be called the private domain. On the other hand, the coming of neighbors inverts the whole play into an investigation of racial and social politics through family norms. The Stollers are content without outsiders. For them, outsiders mean disruption, bad memories, and an unwanted violation of their domestic space, especially for Russ. Like Howie in *Rabbit Hole*, Russ does not welcome investigations concerning his son's death. The untold part of this plot is about Russ and Bev's son, Kenneth, who returns home from the Korean War, and his transition to civil society becomes more challenging than anyone expects. In addition, he is accused of killing innocents in the Korean War. Kenneth cannot stand the pressure and isolation any longer and commits suicide by hanging himself in his room. Russ feels extremely angry and disappointed with his neighborhood. He believes that they are the main reason for Kenneth's suicide, due to their hostile attitude. *Clybourne Park's* first half portrays an America dealing with racial prejudices among problems of veterans and Norris shows us in the second act that despite all the civil and social advancements, society still breeds a lot of prejudice due to the lack of communication among layers of it.

Apart from raising a voice for the whole of America, the setting of plays contains visible similarities, but both playwrights add a touch of locality to their plays. Lindsay-Abaire purports his plays to be independent of time and space, but his Boston roots are usually visible in his plays. The bars and cafes where Izzy hangs out, the suburban neighborhood, their affection for the Kennedys, Howie's business routine, and Becca's cooking style are reminiscent of an industrial North American lifestyle with Irish roots. Lindsay-Abaire's text's main force is a universal feeling and the chaos encountered in the face of death is clearly attached to Chicago. The characters in *Clybourne Park* are middle-class, bourgeoisie members whose activities and conversations hint at a prosperous background. In comparison,

Lindsay-Abair's vision of family is more universal. The family that Lindsay-Abair portrays is from the Boston area, and there is a liberal atmosphere which supports individual participation. Despite differences, the characteristics of different American families coping with a trauma are explored in both plays. In a similar vein but with a different method, Norris uses two completely different concepts of family to discuss property, racism, and segregation within the American society.

### **Conclusion**

Family norms and values have always been at the core of the American nation as presidents have described it as the "cornerstone of society" (Lyndon B. Johnson) or as being "at the center of our society" (Ronald Reagan). The term "modern isolated nuclear family" was coined in 1955 by Talcott Parsons to highlight this simple family unit stripped of kinship ties and strong family networks (Heinemann 12). Tom Scanlon acknowledges the importance of family in the American drama in his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams* (1978):

American playwrights inherited their expectations from a changing family structure and a complex of ethical and emotional attitudes toward the family. From the outset the strains on the nuclear family system were felt in terms of intensity and isolation. ... Yet, in our drama we do not give up the realistic family war. This conservative reluctance wars with the radicalism implicit in our desire to break out of inherited forms. (213)

Although Scanlon is right about the "conservative reluctance" to resist this realistic form, it is clear that children, as a sign of evolution and change, have been moved to the center of this nuclear family as well as the contemporary domestic American realism. They have become one of the most powerful sensual devices to create an emotional attachment to a dramatic text. *Rabbit Hole* focuses on the absence of a child. Although *Clybourne Park* deals with more social problems on the surface, the main plot takes its exigency from the Stollers' son's suicide. In both plays, the death of a child or absence of a happy childhood leaves such a devastating impact that memory becomes a burden for the family, and the house is a prominent factor for the quest of acquiring a new identity. This parallels other contemporary plays (*The Pain and the Itch* [2006] by Bruce Norris, *The Whale* [2011] by Samuel D. Hunter, *Other Desert Cities* [2011] by Jon Rabin Baitz) where children are always at the core of family and cause conflicts of memory and identity.<sup>7</sup>

Another social resemblance that both plays contain, in terms of the social and political timeline, is the proximity of these plays' psychological environments to the

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<sup>7</sup> The prevalence of children occupying the central spot of the American families on stage can be seen as a result of socioeconomic projects inspired by the baby boomer generation. The transformation of American society in the 1960s created the social appeal of suburbs: they became a desirable place to raise children so that parents would be less worried about their neighborhood and other factors. Besides, owning a house in the suburbs has been "a sign of belonging to the middle class" (Harris, 17).



national mindset. It was a time of grief and agony for a long while after 9/11. People kept watching horrifying scenes on TV such as other Americans jumping off the World Trade Center or New Yorkers looking for their relatives, still hoping to find them. Despite the lack of any direct references to 9/11 or its conclusions, the psychology of those years correlates more with Becca's agony over losing her only child and Howie's feeling about his personal space being invaded by outsider(s). The solution Lindsay-Abaire suggests is to embrace someone outside of their routine circle of friends, namely the person who inadvertently kills their son, sounds more constructive and less xenophobic. Things off the stage, however, did not happen as the playwright proposed. Instead, the American government wanted to take revenge; a war broke out and more than a million people died.

Ten years after 9/11 and two years after the ascension of an African American to presidency, *Clybourne Park* focuses on the lack of dialogue and miscommunication which can easily be a brief summary of the decade. In general, it provides a civil discussion but also portrays how most of our discussions have been fruitless and doomed to fail from the start without serious and sincere action. Norris' dramatic vision also brainstorms on the remnants of history and undergirds how we are stuck in them unless they are permanently and willingly solved for everyone in this country.

What is promising in these literary texts is that recognition or reconciliation comes with the acknowledgement of others. American drama, albeit not universally praised for this tendency, boosts a multicultural vision of American society. In response to the concern that Samuel Huntington raises in his book *Who We Are* (2004), American drama reassuringly responds that white, Christian, middle-class, legally married families struggling with their problems are still the conventional pillar of this society at least for now. Recognition of others and their values, however, of which Huntington is skeptical, strengthens the unity rather than damages it at least on the fictional world.

Consequently, in both plays, families have a dysfunctional side which disables family members from offering atonement within the residential zone. Characters outside the family play a key role for the protagonists to find an exit out of her/his misery. Contrary to the discriminative tone of the post-9/11 era, theatrical texts subliminally suggest expanding people's borders for welcoming others. Although that is a progressive approach to social matters, the fixity of white, middle-class, affluent, and nuclear families limits our understanding of the twenty-first century American family phenomenon. Despite family's "centrality within the self-conceptions of the American nation and people" (Heinemann 8), the modern notion of the isolated nuclear family American drama is heavily oriented around "the values of the white-middle class, embodied by its socially and ethnically exclusive hegemonic family ideal" (10). A nuclear and patriarchal family which is "based on the stable exercise of authority/domination over the whole family by the adult male head of the family" (Castells 196) is the prototype of the American society.

However, due to the “rise of an informational, global economy, technology change in the reproduction of the human species, and the powerful surge of women’s struggles, and of a multifaceted feminist movement ... since the late 1960s” (Castells, 197), a new understanding of family where power dynamics are dispersed, equalized, reversed, or ignored has become mainstream. These families have become a common place of sociological advances to announce the melting of patriarchy. This trend has a slow but steady transformation which is more insightful about the processes of family values and gender roles and depicts a vivid picture of the continuous change in the family.

Old elements in a new generation of playwrights continue to exist. The reappearance of similar images and patterns of action involves interesting sophistications. On the face of it, Lindsay-Abaire and Norris are in touch with new modes of perception. Both playwrights try to put some new wine in this old bottle. For example, the decline of patriarchal figures and the prominence of dominant female characters signal a more egalitarian dramatic style. The shift of American feminism from familial oppression to campus rapes and equal pay is also a signal for a better family perception within gender equality groups. This liberal attitude has also changed the concept of domestic space, which is a significant factor in analyzing the generation gap. Positively, the transformation between generations highlights more rational and pluralist identity traits compared to parents and ancestors. Despite the lack of representation of economically and ethnic minor groups, American domestic drama remains the dominant technique for the articulation and production of American values as well as the reflection of cultural identities in the twenty-first century.

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