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Between Absence and Presence: Deconstructing Family Dynamics in Stephen Karam's *The Human*.

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the complex interplay of absence and presence in family dynamics as portrayed in Stephen Karam's *The Humans*. The tension between familial bonds and individual isolation is deconstructed, revealing how absence—both physical and emotional—shapes characters' identities and relationships. By applying Derrida's concept of absence and presence, the study deconstructs the notion of the ideal family, highlighting how the absence of authentic connection and the presence of hidden tensions shape the characters' interactions. Derrida's framework allows for a deeper understanding of how presence is often characterized by the impact of absence, manifesting in the characters' fragmented identities and strained relationships. The study argues that Karam's play presents a poignant commentary on the fragility of family ties in the modern society, highlighting the ways in which shared spaces can amplify feelings of disconnection. Ultimately, the study showcases that the dynamics of presence and

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absence are crucial in understanding the characters' struggles and the broader themes of belonging and alienation within the modern familial context.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Derrida's concept of Absence and Presence, idealized Family, an Stephen Karam's *The Humans*

بين الغياب والحضور: تفكيك ديناميكيات الأسرة في مسرحية البشر لستيفن كرام

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المستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة التداخل المعقد بين الغياب والحضور في ديناميكيات الأسرة كما تجسدها مسرحية *البشر* لستيفن كرام. وتفكك التوتر القائم بين الروابط الأسرية والعزلة الفردية، كاشفةً عن الدور المحوري الذي يلعبه الغياب، بأبعاده الجسدية والعاطفية، في تشكيل هويات الشخصيات وعلاقاتها. ومن خلال توظيف مفهوم دريدا عن الغياب والحضور، تعيد الدراسة النظر في فكرة الأسرة المثالية، مسلطة الضوء على كيفية تأثير غياب التواصل الحقيقي وحضور التوترات الخفية في تفاعلات الشخصيات. يتيح إطار دريدا فهماً أكثر عمقاً للحضور بوصفه مشروطاً بآثر الغياب، وهو ما ينعكس في الهويات المتشظية للشخصيات وعلاقاتها المتوترة. وتجادل الدراسة بأن مسرحية كرام تقدم رؤية نقدية عميقة لهشاشة الروابط الأسرية في المجتمع الحديث، موضحاً كيف يمكن للمساحات المشتركة أن تعزز مشاعر العزلة والاغتراب. وفي النهاية، تؤكد الدراسة على أن ديناميكيات الحضور والغياب تعدّ عنصراً جوهرياً في فهم معاناة الشخصيات، فضلاً عن استيعاب القضايا الأوسع المرتبطة بالانتماء والتهميش في السياق الأسري المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفكيك، مفهوم دريدا عن الغياب والحضور، الأسرة المثالية، مسرحية *البشر* لستيفن كرام

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding and analyzing the portrayal of family dynamics in drama is essential for several reasons. Where the family serves as a microcosm of society, it reflects broader societal norms, values, and changes. The concept of family dynamics refers to the way in which family members relate to each other, help and support each other, and interact with each other on a continuum of feelings that run from love to hate. This conceptualization of family is altered drastically in the modern world due to the impacts of wars and the socio-political circumstances. In terms of how family dynamics can be portrayed in literature, in which relations can reflect a story that is itself very much part of the details demonstrating family dynamics and by examining how familial relationships are depicted on stage, there will be insights into the evolving nature of family structures and interpersonal dynamics in the modern world (Soloski, 2015).

The deconstruction of idealized family concept is an essential goal of this research. Deconstruction, as a theoretical framework, involves dismantling preconceived notions and revealing the underlying complexities, contradictions, and power dynamics within a particular concept or structure. Stephen Karam's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Humans* (2015) offers a poignant exploration of the complexities and challenges within the modern American family. Deconstructing idealized family dynamics involves critically examining the traditional notion of a perfect and harmonious family and revealing the inherent tensions, conflicts, and vulnerabilities that lie beneath the surface.

The play presents a microcosm of contemporary American family life, reflecting the challenges faced by families in today's society. Understanding and analyzing the dynamics of family relationships in *The Humans* holds significant importance in the context of contemporary literature and theater. By deconstructing the idealized image of the family unit, the study sheds light on the complexities and nuances of human connection, challenging traditional narratives of familial harmony and togetherness. Through a critical examination of the play's themes, characters, and narrative structure, the paper will provide deeper insights into the ways in which familial relationships are shaped by external forces and internal powers.

2. DERRIDA'S CONCEPT OF ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory revolutionized literary and philosophical discourse by challenging conventional notions of absence and presence. Where the theory offers a profound analysis of language, meaning, and truth by interrogating the concepts of absence and presence. In deconstruction, Derrida challenges the traditional binary oppositions between these concepts, revealing their inherent instability and interconnectedness.

The absence, in Derrida's deconstruction theory is defined as a "reference to the state of lacking or negation. It signifies something that is not present, either physically or conceptually". Absence is often associated with "what is missing, erased, or deferred. In language, absence manifests through gaps, silences, or the inability to fully articulate meaning. Derrida argues that absence is not simply the opposite of presence but operates in complex relation to it". (Bressler, 1999, p.116)

Derrida defines the presence as "something that is immediate, tangible, or fully present. It refers to what is present in the here and now, whether physically or

conceptually" (Bressler, 1999, p. 118). Presence is often associated with "certainty, stability, and truth". In language, presence manifests through explicit statements, clear articulations, or the perception of full meaning. However, Derrida challenges the notion of pure presence, arguing that it is always already mediated by absence (Bressler, 1999). Absence and presence are often viewed as opposites, with presence privileging over absence in traditional Western thought. However, Derrida complicates this binary opposition by demonstrating how they are intertwined and mutually constitutive. While presence implies fullness and immediacy, absence suggests lack and deferral. Yet, Derrida argues that presence is always marked by traces of absence, undermining its stability and completeness. Lars Frers (2013) discusses this difficult relation in more detail in the following quote:

what is experienced as present is the absence, not the thing or person itself: 'the absence of presence'. When I orient myself towards a person that is not there, then I feel that this person does not fill the space that I want or expect them to fill. Since they are not there, I experience a void, a lack of presence, a lack of sensual connection or resistance. It is this void that I myself then fill with my own emotions and imaginations. (5)

In this context, the notion of absence is a phenomenon that exists in actual experience. Here, absence is equally significant like presence, as it shapes our understanding of presence. Derrida also introduces the idea of a "trace," which signifies that every presence is marked by an absence. "all the traces of presence of those now absent are worked in such a way so as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence, the presence of absence, and so in the final analysis the threshold assumes the status of an enlarged, uncannier zone of indiscernability and dislocation, disrupting all distinctions" (cited in Frers, 2013, p.4), as it is argued that absences are such powerful experiences. They draw their strength from the depth of their embeddedness into the corporeality of those who experience them. The traces of absence is strong to the extent that one can sense it more powerfully than the presence itself.

The concepts of absence and presence, as elucidated by Derrida, hold profound importance in literature as they illuminate the complexities of human experience and perception. These concepts serve as powerful tools for authors to explore themes of identity, memory, and existentialism, inviting readers to confront the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the human condition (Boje, 2001).

Moreover, the exploration of absence and presence in literature encourages readers to critically engage with texts, uncovering layers of meaning and interpretation that transcend conventional narrative structure. For example, in the play *Hamlet* (1603) by William Shakespeare the absence and presence are central to the protagonist's existential dilemma. Hamlet grapples with the absence of certainty and truth in the wake of his father's death, symbolized by the ghost's appearance. The ghost represents an absence, as it signifies the lack of justice and order in Denmark. However, its presence haunts Hamlet, destabilizing his sense of reality and challenging his understanding of truth (Kilduff, 1993). So in drama, characters embody certain presences on stage, but their backstories, motivations, and complexities often exist in the realm of absence. The audience fills these gaps, engaging in a process of interpretation that reflects Derrida's

idea of meaning as contingent and fluid. Derrida contends that every presence is marked by absence.

This study will deal with concept of absence and presence, as expressed by Derrida, and its important role in defining the dynamics of the Blake family's interactions and relationships in *The Humans*.

3. DISCUSSION

Through adapting a deconstruction lens, it is possible to analyze how presence and absence is clear in the lives of the characters and contribute to the play's themes. *The Humans* challenges the idealized images of family dynamics and the American Dream while providing a deep examination of modern family structures. The play conveys the intricacies and inconsistencies that underpin the relationships between the individuals, portraying the dismantling of the traditional family. *The Humans* made its stage premiere in 2014 at the American Theater Company in Chicago. In 2015, it went off-Broadway, and in 2016 it made its Broadway debut. In the same year, it achieved critical acclaim by winning the Obie Award for Playwriting, the Tony Award for Best Play, and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Additionally, it was a finalist for the 2016. (Piepenburg, 2015)

The play draws inspiration from the socio-political climate in the United States following the 9/11 attacks and the economic downturn of 2008. As noted by Samuel G. Freedman in his foreword, "it reflects the nation's concerns regarding income inequality and economic instability". Stephen Karam explores the personal and familial struggles of the Blake family within the broader contexts of social, political, and economic challenges. Initially conceived as a stage thriller, Karam intended to delve into the fears and anxieties stemming from the post-9/11 and financial crisis era. However, he recognized that the realities of everyday life were sufficiently daunting, so the play turned out to be a "genre-collision play" that combines elements of a family drama with those of a thriller. Karam's initial intention to explore fears and anxieties through the lens of a stage thriller exemplifies the fluidity of meaning in deconstruction theory (Rowen. 2020, p.338). This embodies the deconstructive process, where fixed categories are destabilized, and new possibilities emerge from the fragments. Where Stephen Karam engages with the uncertainties and anxieties of contemporary life, and instead of presenting a coherent storyline, the play serves as a site of deconstruction, where meanings are deferred and never fully stable. (Theater Talk, 2:13 – 3:35).

The Humans depicts a Thanksgiving gathering in Brigid and her boyfriend Richard's new apartment, where Brigid's parents, Erik and Deirdre, arrive from Scranton along with Erik's mother, "Momo," who suffers from dementia and requires a wheelchair. Due to financial constraints, Erik and Deirdre are unable to afford professional care for Momo. Complicating matters, they had to sell their retirement home after Erik lost his job due to an affair. While struggling to save their marriage, they also care for Erik's mother. Despite their marital issues, they pressure Brigid to conform to societal expectations by marrying Richard, while also supporting their lesbian daughter, Aimee, in her relationship choices and providing comfort during heartbreaks.

Family disputes persist as a result of their bitterness towards their daughters for their rejection of religion and lack of religious belief. Erik suffers from sleeplessness and persistent pain, whereas Deirdre manages arthritis and has turned to eating disorders. Brigid's sister Aimee is dealing with difficulties following her breakup with her girlfriend

and her job loss as a result of digestive problems that required surgery. Brigid, who is unemployed, battles depression while working at a pub to pay off her student loans.

Because each character has a different level of disabilities, the complex experiences and harsh realities are presented. The effect of deconstruction on a multigenerational family is shown in *The Humans* in a genuine manner that avoids clichés. Karam skillfully captures the inner drives, hopes, and disappointments of a family juggling duties as both caregivers and recipients. Throughout, a sense of intimate connection sustains the family, empowering them to endure adversity. In *The Humans*, the emotional dynamics among family members encompass a spectrum from affection, joy, and admiration to conflict, frustration, and bitterness. By opting for continuous staging without breaks, Karam enables these emotions to coexist and unfold concurrently, as articulated in his note:

The Humans takes place in one real-time scene without any blackouts. Life continues in all spaces at all times. While this is difficult to render on the page, the noting of "UPSTAIRS" v. "DOWNSTAIRS" is a reminder of the exposed "dollhouse" view the audience has at all times. Throughout the journey, the audience's focus may wander into whichever room it chooses. (Karam, 2015, p.5)

This quotation challenges the conventional notions of presence and absence, continuity and discontinuity, and the fixity of textual representation. By setting the play in one continuous, real-time scene without blackouts, Karam disrupts the hierarchical structures that typically govern theatrical narratives, blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future. This approach echoes Derrida's concept of "difference," which "emphasizes the inherent instability and deferment of meaning within language and text" (Derrida, 1967, p.13).

From a Derridean deconstructive perspective, the setting of *The Humans* functions as a site of both absence and presence, revealing the complexities of representation and perception within theatrical space. The portrayal of the rundown two-story apartment in Chinatown reflects the conventional depiction of the American household in theater, embodying a sense of absence through its dilapidated state and the absence of furniture and appliances. The apartment's condition, described as "big enough to not feel small" and "just small enough to not feel big," (Karam, 2015, p. 9) encapsulates the deconstructive notion of binary oppositions blurring and destabilizing. The worn rooms and warped floors suggest a sense of decay and disrepair, embodying absence and lack. Yet, the cleanliness and upkeep of the space introduce a presence, signaling the family's efforts to maintain stability and order amidst adversity.

A turn-of-the-century ground-floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in New York City's Chinatown. It's just big enough to not feel small. It's just small enough to not feel big. The two floors are connected via a spiral staircase. Each floor has its own entrance. The apartment's pre-war features have been coated in layers of faded offwhite paint, rendering the space curiously monotone. The rooms are worn, the floors are warped, but clean and well kept. The layout doesn't adhere to any sensible scheme; the result of a midcentury renovation in which two autonomous apartments were combined. UPSTAIRS: two rooms divided by an

open entryway. The room with the staircase also has the apartment's lone, large deep-set window with bars. (Karam, 2015, p. 2)

The cracks in the apartment's walls symbolize the underlying tensions and deconstruction within the family. As the characters gather for Thanksgiving dinner, the cracks serve as a physical manifestation of the emotional and psychological strain they experience. The cracks represent the vulnerability and fragility of human relationships, as well as the hidden complexities and unresolved issues that lurk beneath the surface (Gibson, 2020, p. 4).

Despite the reciprocal care relationships among all the characters, Momo, the grandmother with dementia, is the focus of the majority of the care labor. According to Janet Gibson (2020), persons suffering with dementia are sometimes referred to as the "living dead" due to changes in their cognitive and physical capacities that prevent them from functioning on their own. As a result, they are no longer regarded as genuine individuals. The play does not only dwell on how the characters have adapted their lives to accommodate Momo's needs and find joy in their time together, but it also focuses on the losses and deconstruction experienced by the family and Momo.

In the opening scene, the presence of Momo's wheelchair precedes her physical introduction, emphasizing absence as a conceptual theme. The mere inclusion of a wheelchair or a disabled character on stage doesn't inherently ensure inclusivity in a play. However, it becomes a political statement when utilized to advocate for disability justice. According to Petra Kuppers (2013), wheelchairs can serve as potent symbols and means of communication. Therefore, in *The Humans*, the wheelchair's presence becomes a focal point, drawing attention to issues of care and accessibility, imbuing the narrative with political significance aimed at reshaping societal attitudes towards disability, care, and illness. Longmore and Umansky (2001) observe that disability in American culture is often associated with the absence of various elements, such as independence, autonomy, or control, echoing the theme of absence and presence inherent in Derrida's deconstructionist perspective.

However, within Karam's play, the wheelchair takes on a different significance, symbolizing the deconstruction relation with her health. Despite being designated for Momo, she is not the one who utilizes it. Instead, due to Momo's advanced dementia, every family member becomes a wheelchair user. Following Erik and Deirdre's joint effort to assist Momo into the wheelchair, Momo begins to utter incomprehensible words and phrases, indicating her disconnection from her surroundings and inability to recognize those around her. As the play illustrates, dementia is a complex process that is challenging for family members as well as the individual who is suffering from it. Erik finds it difficult to urge Momo to give up driving, while Momo finds it hard to believe that she is no longer able to perform some tasks. However, Momo gradually comes to terms with her new body mind and recognizes it as an integral part of who she is. The family members also learn to modify their lifestyles to suit Momo's requirements and her new identity.

Momo often appears disconnected from her family and the present moment. Her memories of the past serve as a coping mechanism, reflecting her longing for the love and stability that she feels are lacking in her current life. Additionally, Momo copes with her deteriorating health conditions by imagining that she still leads a fulfilling life and

possesses strength. Such qualities, which are not available in reality, represent Derrida's concept of absence. Conversely, Momo's available life is portrayed as challenging and fraught with problems, representing the presence or the available. Though Momo is physically present, her mental state often reflects an absence. This duality signifies the emotional distance she experiences, which can be interpreted as a coping strategy—by retreating into her own world, she shields herself from the pain of present realities.

Later in the scene, after the family has said grace, Deirdre reads an email from Momo that has started a new Thanksgiving custom. Email use has dramatic significance for attempts to challenge the deconstruction of health because by giving Momo a voice, it proves the presence for people with dementia and refutes ableist notions that devalue their lives or that refer to the absence of their ability. It functions as a tool to give Momo agency and voice. As Deirdre states:

She refused to quit driving, refused... so, six years ago?, Erik couldn't bring himself to take the keys from her, so he got her to take a driver's exam so the decision wouldn't be on him... and part of the test is--they show her a picture of a "yield" sign, but without the word "yield" on it and God love her, she can't name it. (Karam, 2015, p.43)

Momo is not the only crippled character on stage, but every character has varying degrees of disability. As Deirdre wheeled Momo downstairs to soothe her down, the audience watched Aimee, who was upstairs, nurse a cramp before she went to the lavatory. In another scenario, Erik is upstairs comforting Aimee, who bursts into tears following a phone call with her ex-girlfriend, while Deirdre, Richard, and Brigid tend to Momo downstairs. Despite the open intimacy that characterizes the family's connection dynamics, the characters frequently fail to understand each other's issues, primarily because of the generational divide.

Daughters' and parents' affective reactions to one another alternate from being supportive and spiteful of one another. While the characters are quick to criticize each other's choices and acts, they also pay close attention to each family member's well-being. With a strong work ethic and the goal of giving their girls a better, more comfortable life, Deirdre and Erik have established themselves as middle-class citizens. But as Jayne Houdyshell notes, even though Erik and Deirdre are both college graduates, their lives are just as unstable as their parents', thus they are both "perplexed" by the idea of a "better life" (Theater Talk 13:16 – 13:35). Each member of the family, as Karam explains, clings to something to sustain them: unlike Deirdre and Erik's Catholicism, the daughters reach out in different ways, placing their trust in things like yoga, meditation, juice cleansing, therapy, and super foods.

While Erik and Deirdre think that as long as their faith is strong, they wouldn't need other techniques, Brigid and Aimee are unwilling to discuss religion. Children, like their parents, struggle to fully comprehend their motivations and challenges. Each finds it difficult to comprehend the viewpoint of the other. Brigid and Aimee can only fathom the challenges Erik and Deirdre face in providing Momo with both physical and mental care. They overlook the fact that the couple's struggles extend beyond the caregiving duties, though. Because of their demanding work environments, Erik and Deirdre are both physically exhausted, yet their efforts do not result in financial security. As Erik tells Richard, "I'll tell you Rich, save your money now . . . I thought I'd be settled by my age, you know, but man, it never ends . . . mortgage, car payments, internet, our

dishwasher just gave out . . . [. . .] don'tcha think it should cost less to be alive?" (Karam, 2015, p. 40). The lines illustrate that in the US, the promise of upward mobility is unfulfilled. On the other hand, pursuing such a promise deflates their dreams for a better life and leaves them oppressed and deconstructive.

They strive to reach the American dream, which actually embodied the concept of absence. However, Karam demonstrates that the dream is only an illusion—particularly when a handicap is present. They put in a lot of effort during their lives to have better lifestyles, but as Mary Jane and Margie found out, the fruits of their labor can go in an instant due to the judgments made by their employers. In addition, Erik experiences persistent back discomfort, and Deirdre developed arthritis after years of working the same job. Ironically, despite their best efforts, the money they earn is insufficient to even compensate for the costs of any health issues brought on by their job. These available unfavorable circumstances represent Derrida's idea of presence.

Aimee "uses humor to deflect tension," as Cassie Beck puts it, and like Erik, she keeps her sentiments to herself. According to E. M. Smith, Aimee may also have PTSD, which effectively makes her ulcerative colitis worse.

BRIGID: You'll lose the whole intestine?

AIMEE: It cures the disease, though, so, . . . but . . . yeah . . . they make a hole in

your abdomen so the waste can, you know .(Karam, 2015, p. 81-82)

The play leaves open if Aimee has PTSD or whether the sickness is genuinely connected to it. She clearly experiences pain and cramps, though, and she needs surgery due to the possibility of malignancy. The end is left ambiguous reflecting the complexities of family dynamics and the human experience. The final moments reveal a deep sense of disconnection among family members. As they confront their fears and vulnerabilities, the emotional boundaries that separate them become more potential. The play ends with Momo's deteriorating mental state and the family's fragmented interactions, suggesting a clash between their hopes for connection and the harsh realities of their lives. Momo's interactions with her family members reveal her struggle with love and connection. She often relies on her family's attention for validation, and the lack of genuine emotional support exacerbates her feelings of loneliness.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Stephen Karam's *The Humans* offers a poignant exploration of familial dynamics, challenging idealized notions of family life. Through the lens of deconstruction theory, the play delves into the complexities of relationships, identity, and societal expectations. By deconstructing the traditional family structure, Karam exposes the vulnerabilities, tensions, and struggles that lie beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary lives. Through characters like Momo, Erik, Deirdre, Aimee, Brigid, and others, the play navigates themes of caregiving, disability, mental health, and the pursuit of the American dream. Ultimately, *The Humans* invites audiences to reflect on the imperfections and realities of family life, offering a nuanced portrayal that resonates with the complexities of contemporary society. Ultimately, Karam invites us to confront the realities of our lives while acknowledging the enduring power of familial bonds, even in the face of uncertainty and emotional distance.

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