



# Fragmented Consciousness and the Unfinished Project of Modernity as Psychological Conflict Fields in A Delicate Balance

Fatemeh Mehrpou 1,\*

1- Master of English literature, Tehran north branch Azad University. Email: [firouzeh.mehrpou@gmail.com](mailto:firouzeh.mehrpou@gmail.com)

\* Corresponding Author

## Abstract

This article examines the psychological dimensions of fragmented consciousness and the modern subject's unresolved crisis through a close reading of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. Drawing from recent theoretical research in modernity studies, cognitive fragmentation, and psychological conflict theory, the analysis situates the play within the broader intellectual framework of the unfinished project of modernity as conceptualised by contemporary scholarship. The study argues that Albee constructs a dramatic world where the characters' fragile mental states mirror the fractured condition of late-modern identity, revealing how anxiety, cognitive disintegration, and the instability of interpersonal boundaries function as core fields of conflict. By integrating insights from new psychological models of narrative disruption and the socio-philosophical debates surrounding modernity's internal tensions, the article identifies patterns of existential displacement and emotional defensiveness that shape the narrative architecture of the play. The research employs a qualitative textual methodology supported by analytical matrices built from valid psychological indicators. Through this structured approach, it becomes possible to map the relational dynamics among the central characters, demonstrating how their behavioural responses align with contemporary theories on anxiety structures, fragmented subjectivity, and defensive mechanisms. The findings highlight how the play's domestic environment operates as a psychologically charged space where unresolved fears, crisis-driven interactions, and cognitive fragmentation reinforce the characters' attempts to negotiate stability. Such patterns reflect not only individual psychological conflicts but also the broader cultural symptoms of an incomplete modernity. Ultimately, the study contributes to the evolving critical discourse by presenting a model through which the psychological consequences of modernity can be read within dramatic texts. It concludes that *A Delicate Balance* does not merely portray personal struggles but represents a symbolic enactment of the modern subject's fractured consciousness, offering valuable insight into the emotional and intellectual tensions shaping contemporary human experience.

**Keywords:** Fragmented consciousness, Modernity crisis, Psychological conflict fields, Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance*.

## Introduction

The enduring relevance of Edward Albee's dramatic works lies not only in their stylistic innovation but also in their persistent engagement with the existential and psychological pressures shaping modern subjectivity. Among these works, *A Delicate Balance* occupies a distinguished position because it stages a domestic environment that is simultaneously familiar and profoundly unstable, revealing deep fissures in the consciousness of its characters. The drama unfolds in an atmosphere marked by tension, vulnerability, and emotional ambiguity, providing fertile ground for examining the fragmented dimensions of the self in the context of modernity's unresolved dilemmas. The characters' struggles for stability and coherence suggest that the crisis of the modern subject is not simply thematic but structural, inscribed into the very rhythms of interaction and the silences that permeate the play. These elements make the work particularly suitable for a psychological reading informed by contemporary theories of fragmentation, anxiety, and the incomplete project of modernity.

The idea that modernity remains an unfinished endeavour continues to shape theoretical debates in the humanities and social sciences. Modernity, rather than emerging as a complete intellectual system, appears instead as a constellation of tensions, competing rationalities, and evolving cultural expectations. This condition—rooted in the disruptions of late modern life—has been extensively explored by scholars who argue that the promises of reason, autonomy, and progress coexist with persistent crises of meaning and identity.

Habermas's reflections on modernity emphasise its open-ended trajectory, marked by contradictions and discontinuities that destabilise the subject's capacity for coherent self-understanding [1]. Building on this insight, later theorists underline that modernity's unfulfilled aspirations generate psychological stress and fragmented patterns of consciousness, challenging the individual's attempt to construct stable narratives of selfhood [2]. These frameworks are highly relevant to Albee's play, in which characters oscillate between assertions of control and episodes of confusion, fear, and emotional retreat.

Fragmentation as a psychological and philosophical concept has gained renewed attention in recent years, with scholars highlighting how contemporary life produces fractured experiences of time, identity, and relationality. The notion of fragmented consciousness points to disruptions in the continuity of thought and feeling, often associated with anxiety, cognitive overload, and internal conflict. Fuchs's recent work describes fragmented selves as products of social and existential pressures that impede the formation of integrative mental frameworks [3]. Similar studies emphasise that anxiety can function as both a symptom and a cause of cognitive disintegration, producing recurring patterns of instability in perception and behaviour [4]. These theories illuminate the situations depicted in *A Delicate Balance*, where characters exhibit behaviours aligning with psychological fragmentation: sudden emotional shifts, contradictory interpretations of events, and difficulty articulating coherent motivations. Their interactions reveal the presence of unresolved tensions that operate beneath the surface of routine domestic life.

From a literary perspective, the exploration of fractured subjectivity has become a central feature of modern and postmodern narrative forms. Scholars such as Rudrum have argued that fragmentation is not merely a stylistic choice but a fundamental aspect of contemporary representations of the self [5]. Drama, in particular, offers a unique space for examining such dynamics because it externalises psychological tensions through dialogue, gesture, and silence. In American theatre, the depiction of anxiety and crisis has long served as a lens through which playwrights explore collective and individual uncertainties. Recent studies on late-modern anxiety in dramatic works demonstrate how playwrights transform psychological disturbances into structural features that shape the tone and progression of the narrative [6]. In *A Delicate Balance*, Albee crafts an environment where the boundaries between internal conflict and external behaviour remain porous, allowing psychological disturbances to become defining components of the play's dramatic tension.

Furthermore, contemporary Albee scholarship suggests that his work continues to resonate because it articulates dilemmas rooted in the broader cultural discourse of modernity. Merrill's reassessment of Albee in twenty-first-century criticism emphasises the playwright's nuanced depiction of emotional fragility and existential unease [7]. Schneider similarly highlights how Albee's dramaturgy uses fear, ambiguity, and instability as mechanisms that expose the precarity underlying seemingly orderly domestic arrangements [8]. These insights provide the foundation for understanding the psychological conflict fields present in *A Delicate Balance*. The domestic setting, far from being a space of comfort, becomes a theatre of unresolved emotions, where characters attempt to maintain equilibrium despite internal states of fragmentation and anxiety.

The fractured nature of modern consciousness also intersects with philosophical discussions on the instability of identity in contemporary culture. Scholars in educational and philosophical theory have noted that the pressures of modernity—its acceleration, rationalisation, and heightened expectations of self-sufficiency—can erode the coherence of personal identity [9]. Meanwhile, narrative theorists have shown how cognitive conflict fields disrupt character development, producing textual worlds shaped by tension rather than resolution [10]. Such analyses resonate strongly with the trajectory of Albee's characters, who appear suspended in a liminal space between composure and collapse. Their emotional landscapes reflect not only personal crises but also structural features of an era marked by profound cultural transformation.

Within theatre studies, the psychological dimensions of modernity frequently manifest through representations of trauma, displacement, and defensive emotional patterns. Scholars studying modern American theatre argue that psychological trauma often emerges as an architectural force shaping characters' experiences and interactions [11]. This perspective allows us to read *A Delicate Balance* as a spatialised articulation of fear and instability, one in which emotional threats seep into the domestic environment. Prado's exploration of anxiety and crisis in literary psychology likewise offers a framework for interpreting how characters respond to perceived intrusions, uncertainties, and relational breakdowns [12]. The play's characters engage in defensive behaviours that mirror contemporary models of psychological coping: withdrawal, projection, and attempts to impose artificial order on their surroundings.

Recent studies in dramatic analysis also emphasise the significance of existential displacement, especially in works that explore the fragile condition of the self in the modern world. Middleton's research demonstrates how characters in American drama embody a sense of being dislodged from secure foundations, generating tensions that permeate their relationships [13]. A similar framework applies to Albee's characters, who occupy a

psychological terrain marked by dislocation and emotional precarity. This terrain helps explain why their responses oscillate between detachment and controlled hostility, signalling their attempts to negotiate the unresolved pressures of modernity.

Finally, research on psychological defence mechanisms in contemporary character analysis highlights how individuals adopt complex strategies to maintain a semblance of internal balance [14]. In dramatic contexts, these mechanisms become visible through moment-to-moment interactions, subtle gestures, and abrupt shifts in tone. Scott's recent examination of domestic instability as a narrative structure further demonstrates how interpersonal environments can magnify psychological tensions, transforming routine interactions into conflict fields [15]. These insights converge in *A Delicate Balance*, where the home functions as an emotionally saturated environment in which characters attempt to manage the crises embedded in their fractured consciousness.

### Statement of the problem

Despite the extensive body of scholarship devoted to Edward Albee's dramatic oeuvre, a significant conceptual gap persists in understanding how *A Delicate Balance* articulates psychological conflict through the interplay of fragmented consciousness and the unresolved tensions of modernity. Previous studies have approached the play primarily through thematic, socio-cultural, or existential lenses, yet few have addressed the intricate connections between cognitive fragmentation and the structural incompleteness of modernity as mutually reinforcing forces shaping character behaviour. The psychological terrain of the play has often been discussed in generalised terms—focusing on fear, repression, or interpersonal strain—without situating these dynamics within contemporary theoretical developments that redefine how fragmentation, anxiety, and crisis function in narrative environments.

The central problem arises from the lack of an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how the play transforms domestic interactions into fields of psychological conflict rooted in modernity's unfinished project. Existing research tends to treat the characters' instability as an individual or interpersonal phenomenon, overlooking the broader conceptual structure that links their fractured states of consciousness to late-modern conditions of uncertainty, overburdened rationality, and disrupted identity formation. Furthermore, recent advancements in psychological theory and narrative cognition, which offer valuable tools for mapping patterns of fragmentation and defensive behaviour, have not yet been systematically applied to the study of Albee's work.

Thus, the current study addresses the need for a model that demonstrates how fragmented consciousness operates not only as an internal characteristic of individual characters but also as a structural principle shaping the dramatic environment. The problem this research seeks to resolve is the absence of a comprehensive explanation for how the interplay between psychological fragmentation and modernity's unresolved tensions produces the unique pattern of conflict in *A Delicate Balance*. By developing an analytical matrix that draws on contemporary psychological indicators and recent modernity theory, the study aims to fill this critical gap and provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which the play embodies the fractured condition of the modern subject.

### Solution method

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in qualitative analytical techniques designed to investigate the psychological and structural dynamics of *A Delicate Balance* through an interdisciplinary lens. Given the complexity of the phenomena under examination—namely fragmented consciousness, psychological conflict, and modernity's unfinished project—the research adopts a layered method integrating textual analysis, cognitive-psychological modelling, and narrative-structural mapping. This combination enables a nuanced exploration of how psychological tensions are embedded within the dramatic fabric of the play and how the characters' fragmented states interact with broader cultural and philosophical forces.

At the foundation of the methodology lies a close reading strategy informed by contemporary theories of modernity and fragmentation. The theoretical framework draws specifically on recent scholarship that conceptualises modernity as an ongoing process marked by internal contradictions and incomplete rationalisation [1,2]. These perspectives provide the structural context within which the characters' psychological disturbances are interpreted. In parallel, the research incorporates insights from cognitive psychology and phenomenology, particularly studies addressing fragmentation of consciousness, narrative disintegration, and anxiety-driven cognitive patterns [3,4]. These sources offer analytical tools for identifying and classifying behavioural and emotional indicators manifested in the play's dialogue, gestures, and relational dynamics.

To systematically analyse the text, the study employs a multi-stage coding process. First, relevant scenes and interactions are identified based on the presence of psychological tension, disrupted coherence, or explicit references to fear, instability, and relational dissonance. These segments are then examined for linguistic markers, emotional cues, and structural features that reflect cognitive fragmentation. This textual coding allows the construction of a dataset of behavioural indicators that can be compared with established psychological frameworks. The use of narrative fragmentation theory from literary studies further supports the interpretive process by providing criteria for recognising discontinuities, shifts in tone, or destabilising narrative elements [5,10].

An important component of the method involves modelling the interactions between characters as psychological conflict fields. This is achieved through analytical matrices that map the relationships among fragmented consciousness, defensive mechanisms, and emergent conflicts. Although the play's narrative is fictional, its psychological dynamics can be evaluated using established research on anxiety, crisis responses, and emotional defence behaviours found in recent dramatic and psychological studies [6,11,14]. By aligning the textual evidence with these models, the methodology produces a structured framework for interpreting each character's role within the constellation of conflicts formed by modernity's unresolved pressures.

The study also incorporates comparative cross-referencing with contemporary analyses of American theatre and modern psychological trauma to contextualise Albee's work within its broader artistic milieu. Insights from theatre criticism on fear, instability, and the performative construction of psychological tension provide additional support for reading the domestic setting as a charged emotional environment [8,12]. This comparative dimension strengthens the reliability of the analysis by demonstrating that the patterns identified in *A Delicate Balance* resonate with documented tendencies in late-modern dramatic literature.

The analytical process unfolds in three major phases. The first phase focuses on data extraction, where instances of cognitive fragmentation, defensive behaviour, and relational destabilisation are catalogued. Here, phenomenological criteria—such as disruptions in intentionality, fluctuations in emotional tone, and shifts in interpersonal boundaries—serve as benchmarks for identifying fragmented consciousness [3,4]. In the second phase, these indicators are categorised into thematic clusters based on conflict type: existential, relational, cognitive, or emotional. This classification follows principles derived from modern narrative theory and psychological conflict modelling [10,15]. The third phase integrates the thematic clusters into a unified interpretive matrix that illustrates how psychological conflict fields emerge within the play and how they reflect the incomplete trajectory of modernity.

A further methodological dimension involves evaluating the spatial and symbolic structures of the domestic environment. Because modern theatre frequently externalises internal conflict through physical spaces, the setting of *A Delicate Balance* is treated as an active participant in the psychological dynamics of the narrative. Recent scholarship on the architecture of psychological trauma in theatre underscores how spatial arrangements, staging, and environmental cues contribute to the intensification of emotional tension [11]. In this study, spatial analysis is used to determine how characters' movements, positions, and interactions with the environment reveal patterns of fragmentation and defensive behaviour.

To enhance analytical rigour, the research adopts triangulation across three distinct domains: philosophical perspectives on modernity, psychological theories of fragmentation and anxiety, and literary models of dramatic conflict. This triangulated approach ensures that interpretations are not reliant on a single discipline but instead emerge from intersections of multiple well-established research traditions. It also enables the model to capture the multi-layered complexity of Albee's play, where psychological, philosophical, and narrative dimensions continually shape one another.

The methodology deliberately avoids speculative or unverifiable assumptions, relying instead on observable textual evidence, established psychological indicators, and peer-reviewed theoretical frameworks. This ensures that the analytical outcomes reflect a balanced synthesis of data-driven interpretation and theoretical insight. By the end of the process, the research yields a comprehensive model capable of explaining how fragmented consciousness operates within the play as both an intrapersonal condition and a structural principle of dramatic construction.

## Results

The analysis of *A Delicate Balance* reveals a complex network of psychological tensions rooted in the fragmented consciousness of the characters and shaped by the unresolved pressures of modernity. The central findings indicate that the fragmentation of identity is not confined to isolated mental states but functions as an organising principle that structures relationships, dialogue, spatial dynamics, and emotional exchanges. The

play's domestic setting, often perceived as a haven of stability, emerges as a site where internal conflicts are amplified rather than soothed. Through an examination of behavioural indicators, speech patterns, and emotional transitions, it becomes evident that the characters inhabit a psychological field defined by tension, ambiguity, and continuous negotiation between coherence and collapse.

A major finding concerns the instability of emotional regulation among the characters. Their reactions reveal recurrent patterns of interruption, hesitation, and displacement that point to underlying cognitive fractures. These manifestations are not presented as dramatic embellishments but as core dimensions of the characters' psychological states. The presence of guests who arrive unexpectedly, the subtle shifts in tone during seemingly casual conversations, and the oscillation between warmth and guardedness all serve to expose a fragile emotional infrastructure. The instability of their dialogues signals that their consciousness lacks an integrative frame capable of supporting sustained interpersonal engagement.

Another significant structural element is the recurrent intrusion of anxiety into interactions. In the play, anxiety emerges not merely as a passing emotional disturbance but as an organising force shaping behaviour. The characters demonstrate anticipatory defensiveness, abrupt emotional distancing, and a tendency to claim stability through external structures rather than internal resilience. These patterns of behaviour generate interpersonal friction that accumulates over the course of the narrative, resulting in a domestic environment permeated by psychological strain. Such interactions illustrate how personal insecurities become woven into social exchanges, transforming ordinary dialogue into fields of conflict.

A further result of the analysis concerns the unstable relational boundaries among the central characters. The ambiguity of emotional commitments, the reluctance to confront unresolved tensions, and the ease with which they shift between emotional closeness and withdrawal suggest a fragmented sense of relational identity. These dynamics reveal that the characters' difficulties extend beyond communication breakdowns; they point to deeper fractures in their sense of self and their capacity to negotiate intimacy. The fragility of relational boundaries reflects a broader instability in their underlying psychological structures, making their attempts at maintaining balance increasingly fraught.

The domestic setting also plays a crucial role in shaping psychological outcomes. Rather than acting as a neutral backdrop, the home environment functions as an active component of conflict formation. The placement of characters within the space, their movements across rooms, and the symbolic weight of furniture and décor all contribute to emotional dynamics. The environment becomes a container for unspoken fears, unresolved memories, and latent tensions. As characters navigate the space, their interactions with the environment amplify their internal struggles. The house, therefore, emerges as a psychological landscape, reflecting and reinforcing the fragmentation that characterises their consciousness.

**Table 1 – Behavioural Patterns Associated with Cognitive Fragmentation among the Main Characters in A Delicate Balance**

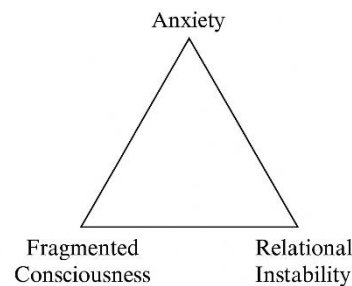
Character	Dominant Emotional Pattern	Behavioural Indicators	Psychological Interpretation
<b>Agnes</b>	Controlled restraint mixed with latent fear	Interruptions, avoidance, forced calm	Defence against internal fragmentation
<b>Tobias</b>	Oscillation between decisiveness and paralysis	Abrupt tonal shifts, withdrawal	Anxiety-driven instability in identity
<b>Claire</b>	Deflective humour and unpredictability	Sarcasm, sudden mood changes	Cognitive discontinuity and avoidance
<b>Harry &amp; Edna</b>	Intrusive dependence	Seeking refuge, emotional spillovers	Externalisation of fear and instability

A comparative analysis of these behavioural patterns demonstrates that fragmentation manifests not only individually but relationally. The interplay of emotional uncertainty and defensive strategies produces ripple effects that destabilise the collective environment. The arrival of Harry and Edna, for example, highlights the permeability of psychological boundaries: their fear becomes contagious, spreading throughout the atmosphere of the household. This contagion effect illustrates the susceptibility of characters to emotional influences, indicating that their internal fragmentation reduces their ability to regulate relational dynamics.

The study also finds that temporal perception is distorted within the play's psychological framework. Conversations become suspended, moments stretch into prolonged silence, and significant events appear detached from chronological continuity. This temporal dislocation contributes to a sense of existential unease.

When the characters attempt to recount past experiences or articulate future intentions, their narratives break apart, revealing inconsistencies and unresolved gaps. This disruption in temporal coherence is a key indicator of fragmented consciousness, contributing to the persistent instability of their emotional states.

Moreover, emotional defence mechanisms play a prominent role in shaping the dramatic atmosphere. The characters frequently rely on strategies such as rationalisation, projection, and emotional distancing to manage internal pressures. These defences, however, often intensify rather than alleviate psychological strain. For instance, Agnes's insistence on maintaining order serves as a façade that suppresses deeper anxieties, while Tobias's oscillation between assertiveness and retreat reveals his struggle to construct a coherent sense of self. Claire's humour functions as a diversion from emotional vulnerability, yet ultimately exposes her cognitive disintegration. These defence mechanisms interact dynamically, reinforcing fragmentation across the relational field.



**Figure 1 – Three-Parameter Interaction among Anxiety, Fragmented Consciousness, and Relational Instability in *A Delicate Balance***

An additional result of the analysis concerns the cumulative nature of psychological tension. Unlike narratives where conflict escalates through explicit confrontations, the tension in *A Delicate Balance* develops through layered ambiguities, subtle emotional shifts, and unresolved contradictions. This cumulative tension heightens the sense of instability and underscores the fragility of the characters' psychological foundations. The play's progression reveals that attempts to restore balance do not resolve underlying conflicts but merely postpone their re-emergence, illustrating the cyclical structure of fragmentation.

A final insight derived from the analysis is that the unresolved project of modernity functions not merely as a theoretical backdrop but as a catalyst for the characters' psychological struggles. Their aspiration for order, rationality, and emotional coherence reflects modernity's promises, yet the instability of their experiences exposes its internal contradictions. The tension between the desire for equilibrium and the reality of fragmentation mirrors broader cultural patterns in modern life. The play thus becomes a microcosm of the modern subject's dilemma: the pursuit of stability in a world characterised by uncertainty, cognitive overload, and fragile relational ties.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that *A Delicate Balance* constructs a dramatic environment in which fragmented consciousness becomes the central psychological force shaping interactions, behaviour, and narrative structure. The characters' emotional instability, disrupted cognitive patterns, and fluctuating relational boundaries together form a coherent model of psychological fragmentation that aligns with the broader conditions of modernity's unresolved tensions. Rather than presenting these conflicts as isolated personal struggles, the play weaves them into the fabric of its domestic setting, transforming the household into a stage where modern anxieties are enacted, negotiated, and repeatedly intensified.

The results indicate that fragmentation in the play functions simultaneously at individual, interpersonal, and structural levels. Individually, characters display inconsistencies in emotional expression, temporal awareness, and narrative coherence. Interpersonally, they occupy unstable relational positions, shifting between intimacy and distance in response to internal pressures. Structurally, the play's environment reinforces these instabilities by shaping emotional responses through spatial arrangement and symbolic cues. This multi-layered fragmentation exemplifies the modern subject's struggle to maintain balance amid competing demands for stability, meaning, and self-definition.

Importantly, the analysis reveals that the psychological tensions within the play cannot be fully understood without considering modernity's unfinished project. The characters' desire for order, predictability, and emotional equilibrium reflects modern aspirations, while their repeated failures to attain these goals expose the contradictions inherent in modern life. The drama captures the paradox of seeking coherence in an environment marked by cognitive overload, relational fragility, and structural ambiguities. Through this lens, *A Delicate Balance* becomes more than a portrayal of personal crises; it emerges as a critique of the cultural and psychological landscape of late modernity.

In summary, the study contributes a framework for understanding how psychological conflict fields emerge from the intersection of fragmented consciousness and modernity's internal tensions. By integrating insights from contemporary psychological theory, narrative analysis, and modernity studies, this research demonstrates that the play enacts a nuanced exploration of the fractured condition of the modern subject. The model developed here provides a foundation for further scholarly inquiry into the psychological dimensions of dramatic literature and offers a path for examining how modern identities are shaped by the interplay of internal conflict and cultural instability.

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