



## GENDER, SEXUALITY AND POWER RELATIONS IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY*

Dr Shuchi Agrawal

(Assistant Professor-III, Amity Institute of English Studies & Research, Amity University, NOIDA)

[sagarwal2@amity.edu](mailto:sagarwal2@amity.edu)

### ABSTRACT



“The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.” (Antonio Gramsci)

Modern American Society was an assault equally on the integrity of an individual and the social contract which sustains that individual in his relations with others resulting in alienation. But if alienation erodes a sense of the real and breeds a mode of conformity as an apparent solution to the problems of isolation, it also creates a sense of guilt, nebulous, unrelated, an acknowledgement of that very failure of community and organic relationship which is itself the essence of alienation. In order to create awareness and a sense of kinship amongst his fellow Americans, Albee says: “Sometimes it’s necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly.” (The Zoo Story 12)

**Keywords:** *Illusion, Alienation, Absurd, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Power, Gender, Class Difference.*

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## INTRODUCTION

With *The Zoo Story*, Albee is credited with changing the course of American Theatre History. If Edward Albee had not existed, he would most certainly have been invented. When he emerged in 1959, the theatre was in its usual state of crisis but it was a crisis which seemed deeper and more irremediable than usual. Arthur Miller has already apparently withdrawn from the public realm appalled by the political persecutions of the decade. Tennessee Williams nearly spent one quarter of a century as a playwright; he also began to succumb to his personal problems. O'Neill was dead- finally and undeniably. America desperately needed a new playwright but the economics of Broadway were such that the financial risks were too great to take a chance on untried talent. In that scenario, Albee proved as a savior and messiah to the declining Theatre of contemporary America. It was Martin Esslin's influential book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) that firmly placed Albee in the company of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco. As Albee states: Theatre of Absurd deals with "man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense- which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political, social structures, man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed". (Which Theatre is the Absurd One ) Albee like Beckett, through his *Theatre of Absurd* wants his readers and audiences to accept reality without illusion but unlike, Beckett, his emphasis is more social than metaphysical. He sees the possibility of change whereas Beckett finds it out of question.

To Albee, alienation is a product of decision taken, action deferred, myths endorsed, a freedom denied, rather than a simple consequence of capitalism. When Albee first appeared, he was seen as and indeed, was a liberal voice recalling the individual to his moral and spiritual responsibility. As Jerry tells Peter: "What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit? (The Zoo Story 9)

*The Zoo Story* is concerned with Jerry's attempts to convert Peter to his new religion of Man. Jerry uses many strategies to break his boredom and monotony and forcefully enters into conversation with Peter who initially denies to communicate but

gradually gets trapped into communication network built by Jerry. Jerry gets Peter's attention when he mentions: "I have been to the zoo...." (1)

## DISCUSSION

Peter pretending to be happy as a married man having one wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets as pets at his household, but most of the time, he spends outside his house as his wife is highly domineering. He considers himself successful under the veil of being a well-established man in his forties, living in posh colony in Manhattan until Jerry trespasses into Peter's private life and raises elemental questions of existence of individual. In order to get Peter's attention, Jerry tells him the story of landlady and her dog who used to bark at him whenever he entered into the house and how at first, he tried to challenge the dog and then tried to befriend with him and eventually, tried to kill him by feeding him a poisonous hamburger. Thus in order to mingle with human-beings, he first experimented mingling with animals. He says: "I made up my mind. I decided: First: I'll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn't work.... I'll just kill him." (14 ) Jerry is fond of talking about animals because for him, the whole world is a zoo with people, like animals, living caged lives, segregated from each other in their self-created cages of desires, barriers, racism, class differences, etc. He tries to make Peter understand that he is also living in a cage of conventions, domesticity and false values. Through his long monologue of landlady and dog, he wants to make him understand that as he was interested in getting the reaction of dog to him, in the same way, he is interested in Peter's reaction to him. When that even doesn't work, he enters into a sexual and violent act as the knife used by him is a phallic symbol.

In the play, the sexual act is clearly homosexual. At the same time, it is a suicidal act. When Jerry is stabbed with a knife, he screams like a "wounded animal" finally welcoming his death for which he is thankful as his death was not only a discovery of truth to Peter, but also in the process, he himself was enlightened. Thus Jerry commits suicide as life has no meaning left to him. Sartre rightly says: "Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being an eternal." Death has the power to erase the very memory of our existence.



Sometimes people try to overcome this problem by earthly achievement but death still wins out in the end. In case of Jerry, death might mean that some people have such a hard life that death comes as deliverance. Symbolically, it is the death of Jesus that delivers- the shedding of his blood for the atonement for our sins. It is only because the Day of His death was so good that we call it Good Friday- that we can have any hope of life after our own death. Death is no respecter of persons. This tragic absurdity frustrates all of our efforts to find meaning in life. Thus Jerry dies for Peter. He dies to save Peter's soul from death by spiritual starvation. Peter will be forced by Jerry's death to know himself and to feel kinship with the outcasts for whom Jerry has prayed.

In contemporary America, there were many marches and protests against the Vietnam War as well as for Women's rights and desegregation. Certainly, the nation was tired from the liberalism and radicalism of the previous decades. Many issues were raised to get equality. It was the time when blacks and other minorities were without basic rights and when people's children were sent to war. At this point of time, Jerry comes off from a lower middle class, from dysfunctional family background whose mother eloped with a lover and father turned to alcohol. His relationship had been very abnormal and dissatisfactory as he mentions: "Mom walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old", and "Pop slapped into the front of a somewhat moving city omnibus", and "I hang my head in shame that puberty was late.... I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l". (11)

Jerry has valid reasons to denounce class system and heterosexuality. It is his way to avenge on society through his non-conformity to social codes, rules and regulations. He does not believe in social regulations which are imposed on an individual, his freedom of choice and his individual spirit. Society has fixed parameters to judge an individual by his success and stability. If someone is following heterosexual structure in relationship, one is a part of the society but if not, as in the case of Jerry, he is forced to choose to be an outsider of society. If he tries to challenge the paradigms of hierarchy, he is considered an invader to the peace, quietness and calm of upper class section of society, e.g., Peter. If

Jerry tries to awaken them with the elemental feelings of comradeship and brotherhood, he has to take away his life in a pseudo-violent act.

Society has always been indifferent to Jerry's familial problems which he had been bearing since his childhood. He has two empty picture-frames in his rooming house... nothing to put into that which symbolizes emptiness and vacuity of his own life. This indifference is piled up and finally coming out in a form of revenge and aggression against the social policies, class difference, heterosexuality. He defies hetero-normative relationships and embraces homosexuality and he does not feel guilty about his true sexual identity. He says:

"I never see pretty young ladies more than once, and most of them wouldn't be caught in the same room with a camera. ... I've never been able to have sex with...or how is it put?... make love to anybody more than once... I mean, I was queer..." (11).

Thus he performs his subjectivity as Butler rightly said that the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one has arrived on the scene. (Gender Trouble)

Thus Jerry is suffering not only because of his disturbed childhood, dysfunctional family system but also because of socio-economic barriers and his non-conformity to hetero-sexuality. He thus, appears in the park to get understood, to get heard this time without any psychological, economical and class barrier. If he finds himself more comfortable with males and has a natural dislike for other sex, as female, in this case, he should not be supposed to be a criminal who has assaulted social law and order. He has no sense of guilt if he does not receive the amorous glances of his landlady as he says: "But I have found a way to keep her off. When she talks to me, when she presses herself to my body and mumbles about her room and how I should come there, I merely say: but, Love; wasn't yesterday enough for you, and the day before?" (11) The description of landlady also shows his disgust with her: "But the landlady is a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage." (11)



Peter and Jerry's conversation is not a communication of two individuals rather it is a communication of two classes, two sexed bodies. Due to repeated failure of communication as the voice of a minority is not adequately heard and the message is not properly perceived, Jerry has to entangle with Peter in a violent act. He says: "You fight, you miserable bastard; fight for that bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats; fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood; you pathetic little vegetable." (25)

It shows his disgust with structure of hierarchy and how an individual is known by his material possessions not by his ideology and individual spirit. That's why he impales himself on knife and prefers to die but not to be a blind follower of social regulatory bodies. Albee has sketched Jerry's character with more vividness which is lacking in the portrayal of Peter as he himself confesses: "I thought "The Zoo Story" was OK but slightly one-sided, all about Jerry and not a lot about Peter. I thought it would be better if we know more about Peter." (Prequel to Zoo Story)

### CONCLUSION

Thus combining both real and absurd elements, Albee has created a play dealing with the issues of isolation, alienation, class difference, growing inaction in American society, absurdity of human life, and power relations. He focuses on communication which can only lead to solution from isolation. Through this play, he also challenges social and sexual norms. He also tries to unlock the ideological cages in which man has trapped himself leading to separation and segregation from each other. All in all, the drama enacts the story of the caged existence of the modern man whose real essence is lost in a world where people have become indifferent to each other; where they have grown highly materialistic but at the cost of their values of love, affection and sympathy. His existence is similar to that animal that lives physically but dies spiritually. His presence can be felt on the modern "waste land" but no one cares for him. He is only confined to his place, his apartment hardly knowing his neighbours and usually calls them by titles or descriptive words. In this adverse situation, only his death can add any meaning to his meaningless and absurd existence.

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