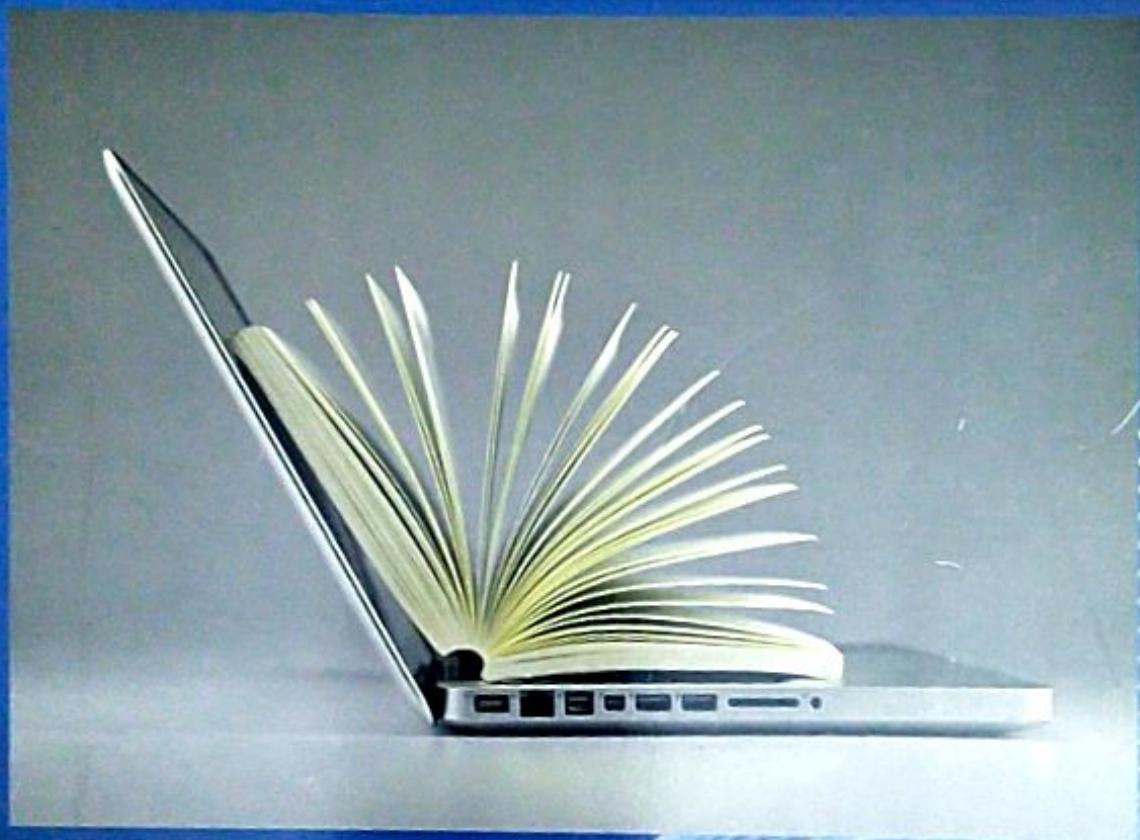


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20	RADICAL FEMINISM ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN	DR. T.PRIYA	153-160
21	AN EXPLORATION OF SHAKUNTALA'S QUEST FOR FREEDOM OF SOUL IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S SHAKUNTALA-THE PLAY OF MEMORY	RUPA IYENGAR, DR. BEENA G	161-168
22	SPECIFICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES IN INDRA SINHA'S <i>ANIMAL'S PEOPLE</i>	DR.V.GNANAPRAKASAM	169-175
23	"SHARAB, KEBAB, AUR SHABAB: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE JOURNEY OF FEMALE ENTERTAINERS AFTER THE DECLINE OF ARISTOCRACY THROUGH THE LENS OF SHYAM BENEGAL"	ANKITA MANNA	176-183
24	IMAGE OF RURAL WOMAN IN THE FEUDO-PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY: A STUDY OF DALIP KAUR TIWANA'S <i>A JOURNEY ON BARE FEET</i>	GURSHRAN KAUR TIWANA, DR. SOHAN SINGH	184-191
25	ALBEE AND THE THEATRE OF LOSS: SUICIDE AS A TOOL FOR SURVIVAL IN <i>THE ZOO STORY</i> OF EDWARD ALBEE	RITU GUPTA	192-198
26	A STUDY ON IMPROVING THE WRITING SKILLS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT TERTIARY LEVEL USING DESCRIPTIVE WRITING	K. JEFFERSON, DR. V. RADHAKRISHNAN	199-204
27	RASA EXPERIENCE IN PAULO COELHO'S THE ALCHEMIST	HAMILTON G.	205-213

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Albee and the Theatre of Loss: Suicide as a Tool for Survival in
The Zoo Story of Edward Albee

ABSTRACT

Edward Albee appeared in the American Theatre in 1959 and depicted the theme of loss and human depression. He used suicide as a tool to dramatize the metaphysical theme of human despair. Albee appeared at a time when both Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller had already passed their zenith. He published his first play *The Zoo Story* in 1958 and since then he dazzled the audience winning his third Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for *Three Tall Women*. In 2000, he won the Tony Award for his play *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* Albee's career has spanned almost half a century and it has seen many ups and downs in terms of quality. Albee's appearance proved very lucky for the American theatre since he appeared at a time when America was desperately looking for a new playwright. As C. W. E Bigsby observes, "If Edward Albee had not existed, he would most certainly have been invented" (Bigsby 249). When he emerged in 1959, the theatre was in its usual state of crisis but it was a crisis which seemed more serious and more irremediable than usual. There was a crisis which went much deeper than the apparent decline or actual disappearance of the major dramatists of the previous period. Albee seized the occasion and became the American playwright of the 1960's. Albee successfully blended the realistic with the surrealistic. Albee's *The Zoo Story* appeared in New York on January 14, 1960.

Key Words: Depression, Metaphysical, Zenith. Desperate, Irremediable, Dazzled, Blended, Surreal

Albee reacted against the plays and the conventions of O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Albee's *The Zoo Story* depicted the agonies and disillusionment of that decade with intensity and

frankness. The performance of the play surprised the drama critics of America as Albee depicted unconventional themes of alienation and anxiety of people. The mood of the youth was of frustration and despair since they found the illusion of progress and life false and misleading. The young generation lashed at the very foundations of the American Dream. Albee was inspired by the Theatre of the Absurd as he borrowed heavily from the French dramatists Ionesco, Genet and Beckett. The new themes and challenges of the American Society were depicted in *The Zoo Story* with new methods and techniques. Albee realized that the situation after World War II was very grim. Following Ionesco, Beckett and Genet, Albee highlights the absurdity of human existence, despair involved in the process of living and the constant threat to the failure of humanness in man by the failure of sex, love and communication. For Albee, however, these are not the attendant problems of a metaphysical or religious world as they are to Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco, but the result of a sick culture. Albee ridiculed the success myth, the image of American manhood and the institution of marriage. Albee's *The Zoo Story* brought him world-wide recognition since he borrowed heavily from the Theatre of the Absurd. It is a drama of language. It is quite interesting that Albee uses the tool of suicide in the plot structure of the drama. Jean Gould aptly comments:

He had spoken out at last, telling the truth in sweeping indictment of the world as he had found it—a world that made conformity a virtue and nonconformity a vice, a disease (Gould 277).

Albee soon realized that human life after the War II had been threatened by many socio-political factors. With the loss of self in the contemporary literature, the protagonist is a schizoid personality. No wonder in the existentialist works of Strindberg, Pirandello, Dostoevsky, Proust, Joyce, Beckett and Ionesco, the traditional concept of character is totally lost. Albee dramatizes a frustrating parody of human contact; he deals with the themes of hatred, humor, anger and nausea. Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a long one-act play in which "nothing happens". Peter and Jerry are involved in nonsensical exchange of dialogues until the violent ending. Man suffered alienation and displacement, moral degradation and corrosion of self. David Riesman wrote his famous book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and discussed the psychological predicament of modern man who was afflicted with the cancer of alienation. Albee depicts the haunting loneliness and the human despair to establish a 'connect' with others. Albee gave a new voice to American drama projecting Jerry as a victim of sick mercantile American culture as observed by Stephen Bottoms: "Albee empowered the disempowered. Jerry is the anti-establishment, counterculture hero" (Bottoms 19). The protagonists of Albee are bound to be the wheel of time and headed for the destiny

of death. Jerry, George and Martha, Nick and Honey are characterized by an inner division. Albee's protagonists are fragments of debris, thrown up by "time". No wonder, Albee's *The Zoo Story* depicts an acute lack of communication of Peter and Jerry. The protagonists are isolated human beings, lonely and desperately yearning for human contact. Albee's *The Zoo Story* dramatizes the impotency, sterility, alienation and anxiety of the neurotic protagonists who failed in love and marital relationships. As Kolin and Davies point out, "Albee is the most absorbing postwar American dramatist, ranking only second to O'Neill as a subject for critical exegesis" (Davis 2). Rutenberg stressed the social aspect of Albee's plays describing their sociological relevance. Albee was a serious dramatist who took up the social issues which gripped the psyche of the youth after the War and the great Depression. Stenz focused on the psychology of the characters. Two decades of criticism have proved that *The Zoo Story* is a study in man's loneliness in general and the modern American man's struggle for survival. Jerry is the lost animal of the Zoo world, sensitive and belligerent. He is full of hatred, self-pity and self-imposed isolation. C.W.E. Bigsby observes thus:

"Albee's thesis is that there is a need to make contact, to emerge from these self-imposed cages of convention and false values so that one individual consciousness may impinge on another" (Bigsby 72).

Robert Brustein dismissed Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1960) as "sexual-religious claptrap" (Brustein 22), as Jerry has all the attributes of a homosexual pervert: he is lonely, seductive, aggressive and rebellious. The play describes the life which man has created for him as a "solitary free passage" characterized by indifference towards others. The image of the Zoo is a valid image for man who has come to accept loneliness as the norm of existence. Jerry pushes Peter onto a bench referring to him as a vegetable. Jerry's conversation with Peter expresses his homo-erotic fantasy to seduce Peter. Jerry is the lost animal of the Zoo World- sensitive and belligerent. Jerry's need to make contact is an inner compulsion, a psychological urge, an inevitable necessity of the neurotic. In the words of Harold Clurman: "But when he succeeds in approaching an animal or a person, it is always through a barrier of mistrust and in a tension of disgust, fear and despair" (Clurman 13). His predicament is not metaphysical, religious or transcendental as in the case of the protagonists of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco: rather he is victim of a sick culture. Thus Jerry underlines the absurdity of human existence consequent upon the failure of love, sex and communication. Indeed he is a harrowing portrait of a young man. Albee in *The Zoo Story* depicts an encounter between Jerry and Peter belonging to different social classes. In his first encounter with Peter, Jerry exhibits an intense hunger for relationship. Henry Hewes calls him an outsider, "an

obnoxious stranger" (Hewes 32). Donald Malcolm opines that Jerry is "just another of those talkative cranks with which the city abounds" (Malcolm 68). The plot of the drama tells about two- Jerry and Peter who confront each other in Central Park of New York. Jerry has all the traits of a borderline personality: he is frustrated and depressed. Jerry accosts Peter when the latter is reading a book on a bench on a sunny Sunday afternoon in summer in a secluded corner of the Central Park. Like a sick patient, urged by his emotional restlessness, Jerry ambles up to Peter and announces:

"I've been to the Zoo... I said, I've been to the Zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO" (Albee, *Zoo Story* 12).

His declaration confounds and baffles Peter who goes on asking again and again the mystery about the zoo but Jerry holds him in suspense not deliberately but out of his neurotic instability. The myth about the Zoo is exploded only when he narrates his harrowing experiences of the "The Lady and the Dog" in a neurotic volcano. Jerry's insistence tone, his broken language, repetitions, pauses, incoherence in conversation-all these are the traits of a borderline protagonist ready to commit suicide. Jerry struggles desperately to strike up a conversation in a ridiculous manner. Jerry moves around Peter's bench and asks direct questions in an incoherent language: "You're married...How many children you got?...Any pets?" (*Zoo Story* 16-17). The entire encounter of Jerry with Peter symbolizes the ironical parody of the quest of the traditional hero. Jerry represents the lost intellectuals of America who are homeless. He belongs to a world in which everyone is "a permanent transient" (177). In his *Introduction*, Albee observed that the conflict between Peter and Jerry forms the core of the drama. His personal vision of the world becomes "an image of the communication loss" (12). Martin Esslin observes that Albee uses all the anti-theatrical tools to depict the conflict between Peter and Jerry in *The Zoo Story*. Albee satirizes through Peter "the absurdity of human life" (390). In Jerry and Peter, we have the examples of "lonely people trapped in the callous universe" (*Zoo Story* 392). Albee has given the realistic background of Peter and Jerry in simple and effective words. Jerry is a young boy in his "late thirties"; Peter is "neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely". Peter's face suggests that he was once "handsome" (158). Peter is dressed in the conventional way, representing the middle class. In the beginning, Peter is quite at peace reading a book. He is settled and is leading a comfortable life. He has all the material amenities of life. He becomes uneasy on hearing Jerry's story. Peter does not want to talk to Jerry whose appearance looks imposing and disturbing. Peter lives in a posh apartment in the East Seventies, while Jerry "lives in the West Side of New York City" (*Zoo Story* 177). The image of the Zoo is the most effective in

the drama and Albee depicts the corrosion of self of modern American man through this powerful image. Jerry says: "I went to the Zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals and the way animals exist with each other and with people too" (34). Peter and Jerry talk about the useless things of life and express their neurological anxiety through lifeless and dead images. They banter about the set of pornographic playing cards that Jerry keeps in his apartment. All of a sudden Jerry changes the subject and tells Peter about his visit to the Zoo. Albee has described the perversion and degradation of Jerry who has become an untamed "animal" (177). It is pertinent to note that Jerry lives in a tormented house, his dwelling place is "an underworld described in the old myths" (170). The dog of his landlady symbolizes decay, sterility and horror. Jerry also owns a "pack of pornographic playing-cards". Jerry shows no reluctance whatsoever about recalling his own private life. He is not married but apparently has had plenty of one night sex experience with women and once he found solace and comfort in homosexual perversion: "I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son...may be just with sex" (30). Jerry gives an account of his neighbors- "The Puerto Rican family that entertains a lot: the woman who cries determinedly all day: the homosexual who plucks his eyebrow, which he does with Buddhist concentration" (26). This obviously reveals Jerry's neurotic loneliness as he emerges an antithesis of Peter. George Wellwarth aptly observes thus:

Nothing protects him, and consequently, he feels the full agony of Adamov's cripples or any number of other characters from the current avant-garde theatre" (Wellwarth 276).

Jerry's mental paralysis is further revealed in his story of "Jerry and the Dog" which is a rehearsal of an anguished cry for contact with something external to his own consciousness. He descends to the world of animals in despair in his sordid quest for identity and when he finds himself lost, he longs for suicide. After telling Peter the story, Jerry feels somewhat relieved from his neurotic tensions. Jerry decides to deal with the dog in his own neurotic manner: "I decided: First, I'll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn't work...I'll just kill him" (37). Language in Albee's plays is clichés ridden and marked by emptiness and insignificant repetition, which mirrors a void existence. Left with no alternative, he must make contact "WITH ANIMALS!" (42). Jerry is exhausted and for the first time he sits down on the bench besides Peter. He observes that he has annoyed Peter. Suddenly Jerry "tickles", "pokes", "punches" and "pushes" Peter off the bench. Jerry plays the last card and opens a knife and tosses before Peter. In desperation, Jerry grabs Peter by the collar, slaps him and spits on his face and drives Peter to rush over to pick the knife. Then

with a heavy sigh Jerry runs into the knife and kills himself. Jerry uses the tool of suicide to survive in modern society. There is a blend of mockery, contempt and desperation in his long speech but at the end he does feel his sense of hopeless alienation: "Oh..... my... God (He is dead)" (61). Jerry suffers from depression and is the victim of mental anxiety. Depression can become an abnormal emotional state. Jerry is a depressed person who thinks of himself in a very negative way. He views his future with despair. He feels himself to be responsible for all his problems and considers himself to be a failure. He starts believing that he is inferior to Peter.

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