
**ALIENATION AND QUEST FOR SELF: A STUDY OF EDWARD
ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY***

Sudhir Kumar¹

(Research Scholar)

Department of English, CCS University, Meerut

Dr. Ravindra Kumar²

(Professor)

Department of English, CCS University, Meerut

Abstract: *The Zoo Story* (1959) is a landmark play of modern American drama that explores the themes of alienation, existential anxiety, and the quest for self in an increasingly fragmented society. Through the contrasting characters of Jerry and Peter, Albee exposes the psychological isolation and failure of communication that characterize modern urban life. Jerry's desperate attempt to establish a genuine human connection with Peter reveals his profound loneliness and his search for identity and meaning in a world marked by indifference and emotional detachment. Peter, on the other hand, represents the complacent middle-class individual whose material comfort conceals spiritual emptiness and emotional alienation. The play demonstrates how the breakdown of interpersonal relationships results in existential isolation, making authentic communication almost impossible. Drawing upon existential philosophy and the principles of the Theatre of the Absurd, this study examines how Albee portrays the modern individual's struggle for identity, belonging, and self-realization. It argues that Jerry's sacrificial death functions as a final act of self-assertion, compelling Peter to confront his own emotional sterility and existential predicament. By analyzing the symbolic structure, dramatic techniques, and psychological dimensions of the play, this paper highlights Albee's critique of modern society and his enduring concern with the human condition. Ultimately, *The Zoo Story* presents alienation not merely as a social condition but as an existential crisis that can be overcome only through authentic human engagement and self-awareness.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Absurd Theatre, Social Classes, Detachment, Sterility, Disillusionment.

Edward Albee (1928-2016) is one of the most celebrated figures in modern American drama, known for his incisive exploration of human relationships and existential crisis. Albee was a social protester, a decidedly sociopolitical dramatist who anticipated, and subsequently became a part of the social eruptions in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century. In a literary career spanning more than five decades, Albee wrote a number of plays. Besides, being a social critic, Albee was also an absurdist writer Edward Albee entered the

American theatre world with his diverse plays in the early 1960s that portrayed the anguish and disillusionment of that period. Like many other writers during this phase, Albee was also aware of the growing isolation among the people and the coldness and callousness in human relationships. The theatre of Edward Albee was the theatre of protest and recovery, expiation and confrontation. Albee wrote the drama of the absurd, mingling the realistic with the fantasy to inflict a savagely satirical attack on spiritual sterility and hypocrisy, and to summon up with profundity the tragedy of alienation. Death, betrayal, abandonment, pain, loss, dying and anesthetized individuals leading death-in-life existence has long been the central themes of his plays. Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a seminal work in modern American theatre that delves into the alienation and existential struggles of the individuals in an increasingly fragmented society. Through the intense and often absurd interaction between the two characters, Jerry the isolated, and Peter the bourgeoisie, Albee explores the identity crisis and the inherent need for human connection. This paper attempts to examine the existential concerns in Albee's play *The Zoo Story* by focusing on the existential and psychological dimensions of Jerry's character.

Edward Albee observed, "**The health of a nation, a society, can be determined by the art it demands.**" This statement reflects his belief that literature and drama serve as mirrors of society, revealing its moral, cultural, and psychological condition. Edward Albee has often been recognized as one of the foremost American dramatists associated with the **Theatre of the Absurd**. Influenced by the European absurdist tradition and existential philosophy, his plays explore the human condition by emphasizing existence rather than predetermined essence. Although Albee developed a distinct dramatic voice rooted in American society, several of his early plays, particularly *The Zoo Story*, exhibit many of the characteristics of absurd drama.

The **Theatre of the Absurd** (French: *Théâtre de l'Absurde*) is a term used to describe a group of plays written primarily by European playwrights during the late 1950s and early 1960s. These works express the view that human existence is fundamentally meaningless and purposeless, making genuine communication difficult or even impossible. The term was popularized by critic Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), although it draws upon the philosophical ideas presented by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In this philosophical essay, Camus argues that human beings continually search for meaning in an indifferent and irrational universe, thereby creating the condition he describes as the "absurd."

Major playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, N. F. Simpson, Arthur Adamov, and, in the American context, Edward Albee. Their plays depart from conventional dramatic structure and instead portray the absurdity of human existence through fragmented dialogue, symbolic action, repetition, silence, and irrational situations. Rather than presenting a logical sequence of events, absurd drama explores themes of alienation, loneliness, anxiety, fear, and the breakdown of communication.

The Theatre of the Absurd represents reality through symbolic images, dream-like situations, psychological conflicts, and distorted perceptions that reveal the inner fears and anxieties of human beings. In this context, Edward Albee's dramatic works challenge the ideals of the American Dream and expose the loneliness, emotional isolation, and spiritual emptiness that often lie beneath the surface of modern American life. Consequently, Albee is widely regarded as an important American representative of the Theatre of the Absurd, although his plays also transcend the movement by addressing specifically American social and psychological realities.

Eugene Ionesco, in the essay on Kafka, defines about the term absurd where he says, "The absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, and man is lost, all his action become senseless, absurd and useless". He wrote in a far more realistic in than did the first masters of this form; Adamov, Ionesco and Beckett. He had learnt much from his masters but he changed his style. He applied "The theatre of the Absurd" to the context of American life. His chief interest lies not in surface banalities-though indeed, many of his characters seem mired in just such a prosaic world – but in various disputatious zones, zones in which Albee's characters indifferent or uncomprehending masks of imperturbability are shattered by a coming to consciousness about the self, the other and the culture they inhabit.

The absurd plays of Edward Albee satirize, not the deviations from an ideal but the human condition itself. Albee uses a wide range of theatrical styles and technical devices to present naturalistic and satiric images as well as expressionistic and absurdist images of the human predicament. The quest for meaning, value, and purpose of life has been a long and arduous process. This has been a back-breaking investigative program from ancient to contemporary philosophers. Atheist and theist existentialists have attempted to philosophically promote a robust answer to this quest. The problem of existence is aggravated by our search for meaning, purpose, and value of life amidst the factual experience of difficulties, sufferings, unknown future, pain and death. Edward Albee was the incarnation, almost the living archetype of angry adolescent who revolted against the bourgeois milieu in which he grew up, and the corrupt society with which he refuses to be integrated. Three themes – criticism of the bourgeoisie, sexual obsession, impossibility of communication are woven into the matrix of almost all his significant plays. Edward Albee, when interviewed in 1991, himself says that "all my plays are about people missing the boat, closing down two young, coming to the end of their lives with regret at things not done as opposed to things done. I find that most people spend too much time living as if they're never going to die. Anyway, there are only two things to write about life and death" (Mann 131).

The Zoo Story was Albee's first produced play, and has been proclaimed by 'Christopher Bigsby' as "the most impressive debut play by any American dramatist." It was written in 1958 and it is Albee's most successful work. This one-act play was premiered on 28 September, 1959, at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt in Berlin, Germany. Following a favorable reception in Berlin, this play was rapidly produced off-Broadway at The Cricket Theatre in a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. The play won to Albee his first obit award. It also won the Vernon Rice Memorial Award in 1960. *The Zoo Story* is a remarkable achievement: "A tour de force, it contains in miniature the central concerns of most of Albee's canon." Mixing earthly naturalism and alienating, absurdist effects, the play has received a bewildering variety of interpretations. The play ranging from a homosexual pass, to an admonition not to talk to strangers in Central Park; it has also been interpreted a Christian allegory about Peter denying Jerry three times, and as an attack on human fragmentation isolation or lack of communication.

The Zoo Story is a one act play about a young homosexual named Jerry who hates the world he can't live in and the one he resides in. The play explores the themes of isolation, loneliness, miscommunication as anathematization, social disparity and dehumanization in a materialistic world. It blends on the one hand the revolt of the flamboyant bohemian against a placid bourgeoisie, and on the other hand, the solitude of the vagabond, the emotional isolation of the social exile, the envious obsession with bourgeois comfort, the basic need for communication even at the price of death. Mary Castiglie Anderson describes *The Zoo Story* as "an example of absurdist and nihilist theatre" (Anderson 93).

The play has two central characters, Jerry and Peter. Jerry, the hero of the play, skillfully induces Peter to listen too much of his life's story. Out of loneliness and a courageous desire to connect with something outside of himself, Jerry goads Peter into a fight and kills himself upon the knife he has given to Peter. So Peter cannot dismiss Jerry as merely obstreperous or inconvenient; their actions have transcended the limits of Peter's tidy view of the world. No matter what the cost, authentic contact has been achieved. The exorbitant cost is, of course, much to Albee's point. This play graphically confirms W.H. Auden's dictum: "We must love one another or die." Since the play, *The Zoo Story*, took place in 1958, the play's mood reflects the cultural ethos of the 1950s. Albee is writing social criticism in the cold War era in America. This split had become a hallmark of the 1950s and 1960s. Uncomfortable subjects like homosexuality, women's equality, civil rights, segregation, contraception, cancer and communism, if they were not mentioned, seemingly could be ignored. America refused to confront such issues directly. The traumatic aftereffects of the two World Wars were evident on the psyche of the people in the entire world. It was an age in which man suddenly found himself cut-off from all his roots and he lost in a world of inner barrenness. People became isolated, alienated, and agnostics. Albee's *The Zoo Story* presents a sharp perception of man's loneliness in a world of spiritual importance, or a social order in which there seems to be troublesome break-down of human communication. On

the surface level this play is concerned with human isolation. It shows that this world is like a Zoo with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals that are men are separated both from each other and from their own basic animal nature. Anita Maria Stenz observes the aftermath of this crisis: "The two characters, which in conventional society represent extremes in the social spectrum, illustrate the consequences of apathy and human indifference and reveal the self-destructiveness and cruelty implicit in an education for conformity" (Stenz 05).

The sense of isolation in large cities, the subhuman condition of people like Jerry, their aimless life etc. have been dramatically shown in the most skillful manner. The tragedy of Jerry's life contains various incidents. It lies chiefly in his failure of coming closer to someone whom he regards as his own. Jerry and Peter start off as strangers, but Albee's dialogue convinces us that within the short time Jerry inflicts himself on Peter with such uncompromising determination that in spite of all Peter's efforts to keep him off, he gets to know Jerry better than he has ever been known by his wife or his daughters and better than he will ever get to know anyone else. As a matter of fact, Peter becomes lonelier than before because he grows increasingly aware of his own isolation. At the beginning of the play, Jerry attempts to initiate a conversation by asking Peter whether he would mind talking with him. Peter, unwilling to appear rude, replies that he would rather read his book. Although the conversation briefly shifts to the weather, Jerry soon redirects it to his visit to the zoo. After mentioning the zoo once again, Jerry remarks:

JERRY: I've been to the Zoo.

PETER: Yes, I think you said so... didn't you?

JERRY: You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight. You have a TV, haven't you? (Albee 15)

Jerry's cryptic statement foreshadows the tragic events that conclude the play. While Peter initially dismisses Jerry's remarks as eccentric, the conversation gradually forces him to confront his own emotional detachment and existential loneliness. Each time Peter takes the bait of Jerry's provocation, Jerry skillfully makes him feel guilty for becoming angry or patronizing. Even when Jerry asks seemingly absurd questions such as, "What's the dividing line between upper-middle-middle-class and lower upper-middle class?" (Albee 20), or provocative ones like, "Who are your favorite writers? Baudelaire and J. P. Marquand?" (Albee 21), Peter remains trapped by his deeply ingrained habit of politeness. As a result, no meaningful communication is established between the two men. Instead, their repetitive exchange of conventional questions and answers merely creates the illusion of genuine human contact, underscoring the play's central themes of alienation and the failure of communication.

This prevalent sense of isolation, a fundamental reality of life in large cities, Jerry feels challenged to combat vigorously, aggressively and as it happens to the death. Thus, the theme of the play bears directly on a current social problem and at the same time on the deeply

philosophical subjects handled by writers like Ionesco, Beckett, Genet and Albee. The subjects are the attempt to live by illusion, the alienation of the individual from his fellow men, the terrible loneliness of every living human being. As we see in the play Peter is self-isolated. His innate stoicism protects him from himself and from the world. Peter's is a kind of middle class stoicism. While genuine stoicism raises a man above pleasure and pain, this middle class variety protects him by anaesthetizing him in the common place. As well as Peter is one of the 'people' who are separated from the animal in himself and others but on the other side Jerry is an animal (as he known his own nature) who resents his separation from the other animals. Part of his isolation is imposed upon him. He is determined to discover the essential nature of the human condition. Therefore, he strips himself of goods, things and obvious relationships. Deprived of the usual family relationships, Jerry refuses either to sentimentalize them or to console himself for what he is, with comforting justification, built upon memories of an unhappy childhood.

Jerry is social vagabond. He has experience of the existentialist agony of complete isolation and tries to understand the meaninglessness of concepts such as 'sense, order and neat categorization.' According to Jerry both society and the condition of entire human being are depressed as his image of the Zoo. Most of the middle class persons have to endure this predicament of modern civilization but there seems to be no solution to it. "With everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other and always the people from the animals." In the Zoo, animals are kept in cages, separated from each other and they cannot communicate with one another. All this is known to all of us. The cages are the symbols of social conventions and false values and the animals are the symbols of different categories of human beings. Jerry represents the modern man who intensely considered the basic problems of human beings making contact with objects, with animals, with people, with ideas and at last with God in the guise of a human being. Jerry's long speech in *The Zoo Story* has all the signs of pseudo-crisis. It is used here to explore Albee's preoccupation with man's failure to make contact with others and the drying up of those feelings that should provide connection. Brian Way aptly observes: "The entire human condition, for Jerry, is a zoo of people (and animals) forever separated by bars. Jerry, of course, seeks to break down the bars and cages which keep Peter, his family, and those like him isolated in their own little zoos" (Way 44).

In the modern world life is essentially meaningless and miserable. In search of his identity man is going to doom. There is no hope in the life of man because of the inevitable futility of man's efforts. There is complete lack of contact and the human life has become sterile. Albee wants to expose such hollowness of life in modern world. The scene of taking the bench symbolically shows the futility of time. When Jerry sits on the bench and gradually pushes Peter to the other end of the bench, he speaks in a planned manner to infuriate Peter. Peter is also made to vacate the bench. This arouses possessive instinct in Peter who tells Jerry firmly that, this bench is his and he is not going to vacate it. This scene is also very remarkable because it

explores the possessive instinct which is increasing in the human life. Modern man is not satisfied in his life and his aimless life makes him boredom and unhappy.

The Zoo Story is an absurd as well as an existential play. In it the life situation of modern man, specifically its meaninglessness and absurdity, is expressed in existential terms. The complete breakdown of values, the utter incapacity for creative action, and the tedium of daily life are regarded as the enervation of modern man. The play can also be studied as a picture of the problems and conflicts of an existential character. It presents the experience, the decision and the irreversible action of Jerry, an existentialist figure, who merges himself incongruously but markedly as a permanent transient. Peter, the successful executive with the right kind of wife, and the right kind of pets and hobbies and habits, moves complacently on the surface of life, pushed on by a kind of inertia which is mistaken for intention. Jerry destroys the illusion by pushing him into action and forcing him to exert his will consciously and directly. Things are rejected for ideas and important facts are turned into conscious and deliberate action. What happened at the Zoo is the recognition of what has happened inside Peter and Jerry as a result of their encounter. Jerry, Albee's anti-hero, depicts the haunting loneliness and human despair to establish contact with others only through verbal communication. Jerry, being primitive and direct disappointedly tries his best to make contact with Peter. When he becomes unable to bear Peter's smug self-esteem, he forces Peter to murder him. As Peter tries to defend himself, Jerry tosses a knife towards his feet to make, the fight "more evenly matched", and as Peter holds it in his outstretched hand to defend himself, Jerry impales himself on the knife. At last the two men are joined by the death weapon. This is truly insipid scene through which Albee seeks to critique the emptiness of modern-day existence.

The Zoo Story is brilliantly devised with its careful build-up of the love-hate theme between Peter, whose only offense is that he is inoffensive, and Jerry, who is full of hatred, self-pity and imposed isolation. A key to understand Jerry's relationship with Peter can be found in Jerry's self-portrayal as a "permanent transient", one of the most poignant paradoxes in the play. Jerry is a soul on the run, a fugitive from schedules, family ties, loneliness and most of all the time. The play shows that the quarrel between the two men arises because of the material elements represented by the bench. In the play Jerry does most of the talking and he is the more articulate of the two. In Harold Pinter's, "The Dumbwaiter, another two characters play, horror is achieved through what is left unsaid, the pauses of the unknown. Albee's play *The Zoo Story* achieves horror through what lies behind what is said, specifically in Jerry's long account of his adventure with the dog, which led him to visit the Zoo to study the life force of animals.

The entire play has been considered as a search for identity or connection. In the end Jerry dies but he is joyous and he reaches beyond his own self to commiserate Peter, urging him to flee and wiping the fingerprints from the bloodstained knife. Jerry takes comfort in his

success, even though it is achieved at the cost of his own life. In his final moments, he says: "I came unto you (He laughs, so faintly) and you have comforted me. Dear Peter" (Albee 61). In fact, Jerry's death is a deliberate act of protest against the wrongs of the society, the bourgeoisie values that cause Abhorrence, the injustice of the system and the isolation of man. In discussing the necessity of the stabbing, Albee suggests that death is the only way Jerry, a social outcast, can shatter through the well-ordered world of Peter to educate him. Throughout the play Jerry tries all the way to teach and fails. He finally makes a last effort at teaching, and I feel succeeds. Peter, who lives, is coerced to face a continuing anguish that has arisen from his cultured complacency, leading him to the awareness of the destructiveness below the surface of his contented life. He is now an accessory to murder. The play implies that the survival under these circumstances may be the murder of our fellow man. Through the character of Jerry, this play mirrors the existential crisis of modern man and we can say that in the entire existence modern man in his quest for genuine relationships. Despite the pervasive ugliness, and sadism, and despair, the audience is deeply affected by the tragic plight of both men.

Works-Cited

- Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story*. Dramatists Play Service, 1959.
- . *The Zoo Story*. Penguin Books, 1959.
- . *The Zoo Story, and The American Dream: Two Plays by Edward Albee*. Plume, 1997.
- . "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" *The New York Times*, 25 Feb. 1962.
- Anderson, Mary Castiglie. "Ritual and Initiation in *The Zoo Story*." *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, edited by Julian N. Wasserman, University of St. Thomas Press, 1983.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. *Modern American Drama, 1945–2000*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Rev. ed., Anchor Books, 1969.
- Rutenberg, Michael E. *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest*. Avon Books, 1969.
- Stenz, Anita Maria. *Edward Albee: The Poet of Loss*. Mouton Publishers, 1978.