

Ills Afflicting Modern Man: A Study of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

Manisha Chillar

Associate Professor of English

Pt. NRS Govt. College, Rohtak(HR)

Abstract:The health and happiness of a society depends largely on the extent it has been able to cultivate a sense of relatedness and reciprocity amongst its members. This implies that the individuals should be motivated by the desire to co-operate and communicate with each other in a spirit of mutual understanding and responsibility. They should be stirred to action not by the narrow concerns of self-preservation, but by the larger sentiment of helping others. The purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the causes and consequences responsible for the disintegration of the human values. It also aims at bringing out Edward Albee's belief that by adhering to principles of humanistic behavior one can emerge as a celebrant of life even in the face of daunting pressures.

Keywords: Alienation, Isolation, Relationship, Reality, Futility, Inertia, Vacuity.

Introduction: Reuben Osborne in his book *Humanism and Moral Theory* sees the development of humanistic morality in man as a development from a state of egocentricity to sociality. The growth of moral consciousness is correlated with the growth of co-operative tendencies. This development of Human morality provides a basis for "complex interpersonal and social relationships" (Osborne 30).

The plays of Albee are a powerful expression of a deep feeling of distress at the knowledge that these vital human values have become reduced in modern times both in content and quality. *The Zoo Story* is caustic comment upon a world which has gone almost bankrupt in finer human feelings of mutual sympathy, love and faith. A sense of belonging to each other seems to have become alien to man in an urbanized and materialistic society of today. Wallace is

right when he argues that “basically he (Albee) is attacking the fictions which North American society has developed to escape the alienation and discord which he views as modern urban reality”(Wallace 54). He seeks to expose how modern man has lost moorings and is adrift in life without a sense of direction because he has been able to strike his roots neither in the traditions of past nor in a vision of the future. He lives only in a prison of the self, characterized by a state of vacuity, inertia and sterility of emotions and thought.

The present paper will analyze this predicament of man and will try to reveal the sickness and malice consequent upon it. It will explore Albee’s method of dramatizing this theme by using cause and effect relationships. It will also try to find out the purpose of Albee which motivated him to depict the condition of modern alienated from all the vital sources and means necessary for man to achieve full realization of his human happiness and potentials. It can, thus, bring out Albee’s faith in the viability and validity of humanistic principles even in the context of rapidly changing social, economic and cultural patterns in modern age of science and technology.

The title of the play, *The Zoo Story* is very apt and a revealing comment upon the kind of life man is trapped in to live. Edward Albee has used the “Zoo” as a powerful semiotic image suggesting many parallels with human life. It underlines the helplessness of man in the modern urbanized world which is similar to that of animals behind the bars in the zoo. He, like animals of the zoo, is shut up in the cells of self, unable to transcend the barriers of egotism, ignorance, fear and distrust. This isolation into a life of self-centeredness has snapped his bonds with the world around him. The consciousness of social and economic status further throws these discontented individuals apart from each other, condemning them to an existence of animals in cages. Their vision of life is too limited to distinguish them from beasts who hunger for nothing more than food and sex. Their concerns do not go much beyond the self, the physical and the immediate. All of this becomes evident, once the reader focuses upon the life and personalities of Peter and Jerry, the two main characters in the play.

Peter is in his “early forties” and is “neither fat nor gaunt; neither handsome nor homely.” He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses and even though middle-aged,

looks a little younger. Peter has an executive position with a small publishing house where he makes around eighteen thousand a year. He has a comfortable middle class existence with a wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. This description may lead someone to conclude that he has a happy family but the fact is that some unexorcised demon of guilt and emotional void has always kept him deprived from happiness of family life.

The play reveals nearly nothing about the past life of Peter. We only know this much that he used pornographic playing card for sexual gratification before marriage. He feels hard hit by Jerry who asks him about his children:

Jerry: And you have children.

Peter: Yes; two.

Jerry: Boys?

Peter: No, girls...both girls.

Jerry: But you wanted boys.

Peter: Well...naturally, everyone wants a son, but... (ZS 389).

When Jerry pricks his masculinity and potency Peter's reaction changes from fury to helplessness. He admits:

Well you are right, we'll
have no more children. (ZS 389)

It is this helplessness and sense of guilt that subdues Peter before his wife whom he finds oppressive.

Peter is too much concerned with his self alone to think about his family and society he lives in. He prefers to sit alone on a park bench and read a book instead of spending his Sunday in the company of his wife and children at home. He is so much possessive that he is not ready to allow anybody else to share even the bench lying in a public place. He lacks the humane feeling to the extent that he remains unmoved even when Jerry is killed. He grabs the book and flees.

Jerry, the other main character in the play, is “in his late thirties” and is rather “carelessly” though not poorly dressed. He has begun to go “too fat” and while he is no longer handsome it is evident that he once was. He lives on the top floor of a four storey brownstone rooming house on the upper west-side between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West. We also discover that he was orphaned when quite young, though his recollection of it is without a trace of bitterness and pain. After the death of his parents, he moved in with his man’s sister whose only memory he still has is “she did all things dourly: sleeping, eating, working, praying”(ZS 395). She too dropped dead on the stairs to her apartment on the afternoon of his high school graduation.

Jerry’s house which his aunt left for him is barely finished with one of its walls made of beaver board. Among his neighbours include a coloured queen who wears a kimono and keeps his door open while plucking his eyebrows, a Puerto Rican family with a husband, wife and some kids and a lady with her dog. This lady has some foul parody of sexual desire and makes Jerry the object of her sweaty lust. The lady’s dog is hostile towards Jerry and snarls constantly at him. Jerry is afraid of this black monster of a beast. He too had instinctive hatred for him. He tries to kill the dog by giving it poisoned meat. But the dog survives and after a few gratifying moments he regains his habit of snarling and biting at Jerry. The relationship is still dogged by a feeling of suspicion.

Jerry goes to the zoo and finds “everyone separated by bars from everyone else.” From there he wanders and goes to park and meets Peter. He tries to communicate with Peter using every means at his command but Peter fails to respond. Gilbert Debusscher observes, “The impossibility of communicating with ‘the other’ is remarkably expressed by the slowness, awkwardness and difficulty of the dialogue which often tends toward monologue with Peter a reluctant and monosyllabic partner”(Debusscher 21). This failure of communication, lack of sympathetic understanding of each other and reciprocity makes Jerry desperate and he throws himself impatiently on the knife, thus committing suicide.

This description of Jerry and Peter shows that they are not only suffering from inner void but also from emotional instability, insecurity and an absence of purposiveness in their life. The

breakdown of communication is so complete that they fail to communicate not only with each other but even with the members of their own families.

Albee here is not content merely with the depiction of a modern man condemned to an animal existence of a limited vision and narrow concerns. He, like a major playwright, goes deeper into the causes at the root of predicament of modern man. He, for this purpose, uses the method of cause and effect and thus provides a rational explanation and understanding to reader of all those factors that have reduced man to sub human level. He, however, does not simplify matters; he provides an insight into the complexity and multiplicity of the causes which have largely determined the psyche of Peter and Jerry.

Jerry, as is clear from the description given above, is a product of the broken home, since his good old mom walked on good old pop when he was ten and a half years old. Obviously, he could not have known the stability and steadiness of her happy and harmonious domestic situation. After leaving home, his mother even “embarked on an adulterous tour of our Southern States...a journey of a year’s duration” before she “parted with the ghost in some dump in Albama.” After about “two weeks”, his father also “slapped into the front of a somewhat of a moving city omnibus” (ZS 395) and committed suicide. If his mother was promiscuous and loose, his father, impulsive, reckless and irresponsible.

Jerry not only exhibits this family weakness, he also repeats almost the same history; he fails to make a mark economically and socially and, like his father, falls a prey to the family weakness of impulsive coping style and ends his life in a suicidal murder.

Jerry’s inherited weakness developed in an environment which made this weakness all the more serious. His father lived drinking his days away while his mother too preoccupied with her “most constant companions among many others.” The child probably appeared to them a bitter reality of their futile marriage and was, hence escaped from. Their marriage seems to have been heavily conditioned by the social milieu. A study of their motives clearly shows that the mother had married for material welfare. The father has failed in the American value of acquiring money and status and hence was reduced to a cipher by the mother, who hungered for both money and status. Marriage is multilevel contact – sexual, psychological, social and

spiritual but the marriage of Jerry's parents lacked such content absolutely. The mother's infidelity is suggestive not only of the break-down of the traditional pattern of marriage but also of the intensity of the damage done to marriage by sexual abnormality. This kind of situation not only led to emotional insecurity and psychological-scarring but even reduced Jerry's chances of growing into a healthy and integrated individual.

Thus, in spite of being in a family, Jerry suffered from loneliness resulting from the emotional insufficiency of his parents as well as their escaping from the reality of their wrecking marriage, of which their child stood as a living proof. That is how when his parents died, Jerry was thrown into the big world as an orphan just at the age of eleven and a half. Although his aunt kept him, yet in no way did this new support improve his conditions except that when she died he had at least an apartment to live in. Jerry calls it a "terribly middle European Joke," perhaps because now he had an apartment of his own to live in but no one to live with. Thus, in the absence of familial bonds, Jerry quite early in his life was set adrift his solitary voyage across the vast seas. Alienation for an individual like him easily becomes *interalia* a permanent and pathological condition.

Before we examine how alienation was pathological for Jerry, we need to probe little more into his private situation. Most significant of his varied possessions are "two picture frames, both empty" which quite literally means that Jerry has no frame of reference whatsoever. This fact only coincides with his sense of emptiness when Jerry reconstructs his own antecedents so painstakingly. The crystalline transparency with which he catalogues his possessions, a knife, two forks, two spoons, eight or nine books, a pack of pornographic playing cards, regular deck is a painful reflection on his isolation.

He has possibly been repeating the whole sequence to himself, even to others in his desperate attempts to make contact. The "rooming house" is, in fact, a human parallel to the zoo where everyone separated by bars from everyone else, is living out the trauma of his caged existence.

Some of the occupants of the rooming house include "a colored queen," "a lady who cried all the time," "a Puerto Rican family" all of whom impress us being either eccentrics or

social outcasts. Jerry's assertion in this context "I'm a permanent transient" is no purple oxymoron but a painful admission that he has no sense of belonging to the place he has been living in. What may be true of Jerry on one level is also true of majority of Americans who seem to be living in a cultural vacuum. The title of the play can be justified only if *The Zoo Story* is seen not as a pure narrative but a total perspective of life and world that surrounds Jerry. It is the perspective of a man who, having lost his moorings completely, is now wandering in a world he hardly understands. Against this backdrop, the 'Zoo' we realise becomes an objectified version of Jerry's own situation and his visit there is motivated by his desire "to find out more about the way people exist with animals and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too" (ZS 408).

So much then for Jerry's alienated condition, but what makes it turgidly pathological is homosexual past. He admits that ever since he has had homosexual liaison with a "Greek boy" in his adolescence, he has never been able to have sex "with the little ladies" "more than once" which is evident in his confession to Peter:

I've never been able to have
sex with, or, how is it put?...
make love to any body more than
once....And now, oh do I love
the little ladies; really, I love
them. For about an hour (ZS 395-96).

His relatively early initiation into homosexuality seems to have crippled his response to a healthy, integrated heterosexual relationship and his pathological isolation seems to have impaired the possibility of authentic existence for him.

This is obviated by his response to the landlady and her dog living on the third floor of the same building. The landlady who is contemptuously dismissed by Jerry as "a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthrope, cheap, drunker bag of garbage" (ZS 398) had, it seems, tried to make him, "the object of her sweaty lust." Every time "she pressed to his body" and mumbled

about her room, he was able to combat the threat of her morbid sensuality, but he failed to cure the obsessional neurosis that she suffered from, when Jerry failed to respond to the landlady's crude almost tyrannical sexuality she tried to make contact with him through the dog. Her sexuality is projected on to her dog who "almost always" had "an erection." Her identification with the dog is complete. Jerry tells that while eating hamburgers the dog made "sounds in his throat like a woman". A little later when the landlady learnt about her dog's sickness, her eyes "looked like the dog's eyes." Dog, in a way, becomes a symbol of her instinctual, biological reality. However, the dog can be seen as a symbol of even intuition. The landlady's promiscuous relationship, too, seen in its proper perspective, could have afforded Jerry an opportunity for individuation, who, being cut off from eros, fails to experience it otherwise. He might have become an individualized soul if he had accepted the demands, however compulsive of this heterosexual relationship. Jerry's attempts to feed the dog, and thus keep him away, show not only his "kindness" as he puts it but even calculated effort to thwart the sexual needs of the landlady. It is a different matter though that in denying her a sense of gratification he is denying himself an opportunity to get integrated. His attempt to poison the dog and thus kill him is almost a surrealistic attempt to kill the lady's unbridled, animal like sexuality. It is no surprise that "her bewildered lust" is forgotten with dog's sickness but is revived when "the dog recovered his health and" Jerry's absolute failure to make contact with the dog is his failure to relate to the landlady. Eros, which is the dynamic principle of relatedness, thus fails to vitalize itself and results in its collapse on itself. Not only this, it has seemingly led to a psychic disorientation where fusion of fantasy and real experience has become virtually impossible for him. He is apparently admitting a fact about himself when he tells Peter "when you're a kid, you use the cards a substitute for a real experience and when you're older you use real experience as a substitute for fantasy" (ZS 397). Thus, estranged from family and society, he is caged within his own dark cell. The world is wide, no more than zoo for him "with everyone separated by bars from everyone else."

If Jerry is presented mainly as the product of distorted family relationships, the second character of Peter, with his wife and two daughters has been presented as a further distortion in family relationships. Peter's childhood is also loveless. There is nothing eventful and memorable

about his past life. He finds in it nothing inspiring and motivating which could shape his life. His past is a kind of big blank and provides him no point of reference. Characterized by emptiness, it has incapacitated him for meaningful and fulfilling interaction with others. He is therefore, reticent, inarticulate, introvert and shows an evident self-absorption with an unspecified sense of guilt. Having failed to find purposiveness, Peter seeks escape into the world of fantasy and sexual aberrations. He took to playing pornographic playing cards for sexual gratification before marriage;

Peter: Well I guess a lot of us did.

Jerry: And you threw them away just before you got married.

Peter: Oh, now; look here, I didn't need anything like that, when I got older.

Jerry: No?

Peter (embarrassed): I'd rather not talk about these things (ZS 396).

This embarrassment of Peter's is a confirmation of some sense of guilt concerning his sexual life which he is still unable to exercise. This prosaicness plagues his adult life as well. That is why, he does not find anything entertaining or; pleasing in his family life. Rose A Zimbardo observes that Peter's family life is hollow. It is a life in which cats, children, wife and parakeets are interchangeable. They are all "merely props whose function it is to disguise nothingness and isolation" (Zimbardo 13). That is why, Peter prefers to spend a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon in an isolated park of a public place reading a book. He says:

I sit on this bench almost every Sunday afternoon in good weather.

It's secluded here: there's never anyone sitting here, so I have it all to myself (ZS 409).

His love for a secluded place on Sunday's is suggestive of his alienation from family. It indicates the want as well as self-denial of genuine connection. His words "all to myself" express

his egocentricity and failure to find fulfillment in relationships. It shows that his predicament like that of Jerry is the product of his past which works like an invisible hand and continues to pull the strings of his behaviour and thoughts.

Besides the role of the past, the social and economic factors too have contributed a lot to the lack of mutual understanding and cooperative tendencies with each other. Debusscher writing in the same vein also points out that “the primary theme which emerges from this play is the virulent criticism of bourgeois complacency, of the hypocrisy, of good conscience, the emptiness of the false value of American life supported by advertising and pseudo-intellectual magazines” (Debusscher 9). We notice that there is a contrast in the social status of Jerry and Peter. As stated earlier, Jerry is one of the large number of unemployed persons. While on the other hand, Peter is in an executive position and enjoys all comforts of life with his wife and children. His position and comforts have bred in him a sense of complacency and love for status quo. People like him never make any concession to others at the slightest expense of their position. Jerry tries to establish some kind of contact with Peter. But Peter with his bourgeois complacency fails to respond to it. This may be one of the reasons why these two persons are unable to establish a bond of human contact and relatedness. Peter Wolfe also finds that “the play uncovers the relationship across the class-barriers”(Wolfe 250). It seems that Jerry is conscious of his class gap;

...say what's the dividing line between upper – middle – class
and lower upper – middle – class?

Thus, Jerry feels that it is because of the difference between their economic and social status that Peter does not want to make a contact with him. Jerry thus succeeds in the worlds of Bigsby “in shattering the mask which has identified him (Peter) as a bonafide member of American society but which simultaneously served to obtruse the humanity of his real facts.” The purpose of the playwright in presenting this dismal situation of human existence is to emphasize the significance of the values based on genuine human feelings and emotions in

achieving meaningful human contact. This cannot be achieved as the play suggests, without removing the causes which have thrown man out of harmony with his own self as well as the world outside. The transcending of social and economic barriers is one of the essential steps towards this goal.

It is clear from the forgoing analysis that the purpose of Albee in depicting the loneliness and isolation of modern man is not simply to draw a pessimistic picture of disintegrated individuals caught up in an absurd situation. On the contrary it reflects an effort to make people aware of the ultimate realities of their condition, to shock them out of their complacency and to make them feel that they have become mechanical and quiescent and thus deprived the dignity that comes of awareness and sensitivity. His peculiar use of dialogue, imagery, language and character delineation help him achieve this purpose brilliantly. The play assails both the recklessness and irrationality on the one hand and apathy and complacency on the other. He treats satirically all kinds of moral deviations from a balanced and normal human behavior. His attack is particularly directed against man's self-centeredness which has resulted in his isolation and alienation from all the vital sources of human happiness. In this way, Albee tries to emphasize the value of cooperation and reciprocity which are necessary conditions for developing the humanistic morality based on intentions directed towards other people as expressive of social relationships. Albee's liberalism in the play is about communication, about relationships, about action. In the last analysis, the play establishes as a humanist with the faith that man can be shaken out of the abyss of ignorance, selfishness, complacency and moral and emotional void.

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