

## Miscommunication and Alienation Portrayed in Edward Albee's "The Zoo Story"

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### **Abstract:**

*The present paper explains the famous American drama of Edward Albee's The Zoo Story that depicts how gradually the social issues, lack of communication and alienation took place. The important of the American drama specifically in modern and postmodern period is clear in the several themes which are displaying the difficulties of American society. The play the zoo story also exposes how to struggle against social issues such as family fragmentation, lack of communication and other issues. So how Edward Albee accounts for the contemporary social issues in this play and how the American society is influenced by those problems?*

**Key words:** Miscommunication, Alienation, American drama, the Zoo, Dehumanization

### **INTRODUCTION**

*The Zoo Story* is a one-act play written in 1958 by famous American dramatist Edward Albee. The play explores themes of isolation, aloneness, miscommunication as social differences, classes and dehumanization in a commercial world. *The Zoo Story* is considered as an absurdist denunciation of the American morals and the failure of communication. This play

is a great example of The Theatre of the Absurd. It exposes several significant themes such as failure of communication with people, the mistakenness of most human values, man's separation from his fellow human beings. His play is inhabited by isolated human beings desperately looking for honest communication with other people. Because of the impossibility to contact, they often create worlds of their own in which they can search for shelter from the hostility from the external world. The dramatist explains that the play is necessary to eliminate the illusion in order to reach reality and to enable the character to start living in a perfect and a peaceful world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a long one-act play in which "nothing happens" except the exchange of dialogues until the violent ending. Language creates situations and gives momentum to the play. Through verbal communication only Jerry Albee's portrays the haunting loneliness, and the human hopelessness to establish a 'connect' with others. With the character of Jerry, Albee gave a new voice to American drama. Albee empowered the disempowered. Living on the margins of the society, Jerry is the anti-establishment, counterculture hero. He is the dark stranger, the social outcast, the orphan, the Other (Bottoms 19).

On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1960, *The Zoo Story* opened at the Provincetown play house in New York. The play was well received by audience and some critics too, but according to some critics, the play has miscommunication overtone. *The Zoo Story* represents two complex characters. Jerry, the protagonist of the play, is a complex character while Peter, the second character, appears less complex. The two men are isolated by social class, intellectual interests, goals, ways of life: "Peter is the embodiment of the model capitalist man that is confronted with the emotional isolation of the social exile" (Debusscher 10). On

the one hand, Jerry lives in a world where thousands of peoples are living with food, clothing, shelter, friendship, luxurious life .The interpretation of the ending of play varies from reader to reader. As Jerry is described “the central figure exhausts himself and finally dies of trying to integrate himself, to reestablish lost contact, ‘to belong’” (48).

The play is the picture of American alienation felt by many in American culture during the 1950s, but Jerry's fight for communication with Peter exceeds the times. “The play can be explained as a sociopolitical tract, a pessimistic analysis of human alienation, a modern Christian allegory of salvation, and an example of absurdist and nihilist theater, but the play has managed to absorb these perspectives without exhausting its many levels of meaning” (Anderson 93). *The Zoo Story* conveys the alienation and lack of communication in American drama that deal with these issues. The playwright will prove in numerous later plays that his interest lies in a fundamentals sense of alienation, but the urgent need for communication was most stated in his very first play.

*The Zoo Story* thus gives a theme that will consume Albee throughout his occupation, namely, the tendency of people to establish psychological barriers in order to avoid profound relations. Jerry tries to communicate, to enter into connect with another man. His death is an escape from the unfriendliness and misery of being rejected by the external world. Albee puts Jerry's loneliness as a universal condition of the modern man. The play arises from the alienation felt by many in American culture during the 1950s, but Jerry's battle for connection with Peter transcends the times.

In fact, most of the speech in the play is told by Jerry. Peter talks very little. Jerry wants to establish communication with Peter, but he does not talk to anyone. Like the imprisoned animals, he is just observed and his presence is felt, but no one talks to him or realizes what he wants and what he does not (Ismail 6). Jerry has harmful torture when he actually tries to

establish communication. Harold Pinter states that: The element of language still plays an important role in this conception, but what happens on stage transcends, and often contradicts, the word spoken by the character (Harold 26).

Martin explains that a Logical communication in the play is decreased to pointless cries and screams. They use stereotypical expression, silences and ambiguities as effective methods to represent life as they see it. These silences, imperfect sentences with gaps and abbreviations used in the play to numerous interpretations. Characters on the stage engage in verbal and nonverbal dialogues and make silences speak through vocal intonations and signs (Esslin 19).

## **ALIENATION: THE COLLAPSE OF SOCIAL PERSONALITIES**

An alienation is the main social issue that results from people humiliation and personality crisis and includes a series of social, economic, cultural, and political changes. These changes affecting American society and the world have been led by hostile attack and exploitation. The first view shows the man as alone, homeless, lost in the depth of his alienation. *The Zoo Story* accounts for the life of Jerry who has become burdened not due to conflict, but due to alienation from his family as well as from other characters. Jerry does not share any of his internal feelings with anybody. Therefore, the inner tensions increased day by day which finally caused his suicide. Jerry's mind is like a well which has an entry door but after entry there is no exit. The alienation and other feelings completely interrupt his life of which he wants to destroy his life. *The Zoo Story* brought American silence and alienation on the stage.

An alienation in American life depicted very symbolically by Edward Albee in *The Zoo Story*. The play opens when Jerry and Peter are quarreling for a bench in the open space of the zoo. The scene has a symbolic importance in the life

of most of the Americans. In the "story of the dog" episode in *The Zoo Story* Jerry is conscious about the alienation. While telling the story of the dog he tries to show his own will to kill himself. Jerry tries many times to generate meaning in his life hardly, but he does not do it well. This sense of meaninglessness gives him the impression that he is like a captive animal in the zoo. Therefore, the best way to get rid of this critical illness is to kill his life. Jerry and Peter symbolize two different worlds, the world of success and development, and the world of the imprisoned and alienated souls. Seifker explains that the dialogue between Jerry and Peter represents "a clash of two very different worlds" (Siefker 40). Jerry wants from his audience to tell his stories. He is in need to tell his stories in the hope that he can create some memorable actions that will immortalize him. He comprehends that he should find escape from his alienation that outshines his life through media. The author clarifies failure of communication and sense of alienation through ambiguous and doubtful motives of characters during their interaction with each other. This picture of Jerry's imprisonment is a manifestation of his manner towards American life. Jerry paints a picture of a society in which people are separated from each other due to sociopolitical and interpersonal barriers. The zoo offers an accurate similarity for such human loneliness as Jerry says that :

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. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But if it's a zoo that's the way it is (Albee 10-11).

For Jerry, zoo is a symbol for American life. Realizing that, Jerry searches for an escape in the form of having some interaction with Peter who is a complete outsider to him (Oliver and Bogard 34).

## LACK OF COMMUNICATION: THE FAILURE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Lack of communication in American life depicted very symbolically by Edward Albee in *The Zoo Story*. The play displays when Jerry and Peter are fighting due to a bench in the park and talking about the zoo. The scene has a representative and significant picture of Americans life. In the "story of the dog" episode in *The Zoo Story*, Jerry is conscious about the miscommunication. Jerry starts from suffering and ends all the sufferings at the last by killing himself. The communication problems occur in the play as the mirror of the communication problems of society; the play attacks the very foundation of American optimism". Lisa suggests that Jerry "wants to give voice to the people of his class whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society" (Siefker, 34). The play begins with the dialogues between Peter and Jerry. Jerry tries to attract the attention of Peter by failure communication:

Jerry: I have been to the zoo (Peter doesn't notice) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER? I've BEEN TO THE ZOO!

Peter: Hm?...What?...I'm sorry, were you talking to me?

Jerry: I went to the zoo, and then I walked until I came here. Have I been walking north? (Albee 1)

In above quotation, Jerry starts discussion at first and makes Peter to talk to him. He tries to know all about him by asking him several questions. Identify his profession, family size, area of residence and income. Jerry asked Peter many questions and these questions help him to expose the personality and life style of Peter. Jerry seems very perplexing character at the beginning of the play. He doesn't know what he is performing, but aware about his confusing situation. As his dialogues suggest that for him animals are more important. There is a resemblance in the behavior of animals and human beings. Through Jerry is a confusing character who doesn't know what

he is doing but he knows very well what he wants. His whole action is related with his wanting. He made Peter to act as how he wanted to act him. Albee comments on the behavior of the American men and women in their society. Some critics also consider the lack of communication is the main solution in order to escape from the life of spoiled men and women.

When Jerry tells a dog's story that time he says that the dog has affection with me but I am tried to kill him by poisoning his food. But now the dog does not show any sign of love or affection. He does not bark by looking at me. But according to Jerry's bad luck, the dog never likes Jerry. Jerry remains in his a lonely life, like an animal in the zoo. He fails to make a connection with neither a man nor an animal. Martin Esslin says about Jerry's "inability to establish genuine contact with a dog, let alone a human being (Esslin 267 ). Jerry wants to communicate with someone, but he doesn't succeed and he fails not only with people but with animals too. This story of the dog is similar to the story of Jerry. Albee himself comments on the attraction or closeness between these two stories in an interview: "I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story* to a certain extent, is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, eventually failing and trying and failing" (Mann 32). Thus, after Jerry fails to achieve his aim with the dog, he decides to come to the zoo to put an end to his life. I tried to kill the dog who loved me. I wanted to kill myself. These dialogues of Jerry was well-planned and not a sudden reaction. His intension was already fixed. He wanted to kill himself and he used Peter as a tool to complete his wish. Peter unconsciously helped him in activated satisfaction.

While discussing with Peter, Jerry admits that he likes to know about people when he gets the opportunity because he gets very less chance to communicate other people:

"I don't talk to many people\_\_ \_ except to say like: give me a beer, or where's the John, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself" (Albee 2).

The above dialogues show Jerry's failure of communication. It seems that Jerry does not feel comfortable while communicating with other and he gets very less chance to talk to other people. It suggests that he lives a lonely, isolated and alienated life, completely separated from other people. But Peter does not feel any trouble while talking to others. But it's very clear that he is proud of his career, his salary, his general home situation etc. Jerry is strongly aware about his impoverishment of communication with other people in the world. In the beginning of the play, Jerry impresses the audience as being "*not properly dressed, but carelessly*" (1). His external appearance represents his great weariness. The outer appearance is symbolic which suggest the audience that the person is tired of his own life. He is tired of due to his awareness of miscommunication.

Jerry had mostly contact with his landlady and her dog when he was in boarding house. Jerry attempts to win friendship with the animals like dog, cat etc. after recounts his relationship to the dog, Peter claims to have not understand Jerry, the landlady, "or her dog". This line is the cause of final development and the final action. When Peter refer the dog as *her dog* that time Jerry shows a sudden reaction that:

her dog.... It is her dog! I thought I was my ....no.no. You're right. It is her dog. (looks at Peter intently, shaking his head)  
I don't know what I was thinking about; of course you don't understand (10).

He blames Peter for not understanding him. Now he fights for the ownership of the bench. Peter is sitting on, even at the cost of his life.

Critics have called Jerry "*schizophrenic*" as he suddenly allows himself to be killed. According to that, Peter rejects not



only “a crazed man”, but as Albee suggests, all experience associated with the visceral, mysterious, non-rational “ (Roudane 39). When Peter shouts on him,” *I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE*” for a moment everything was silent ( Albee 17). The meaning of silence is unspoken in the play, but we can guess what does Albee mean? What are the unspoken sayings? He speaks about pain, alienation or lack of communication that is reflected in his weariness. When Jerry fails to gain Peter's understanding becomes more violent, he forces Peter to pick up a knife.

## CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the two important themes of Albee's play *The Zoo Story* such as the lack of communication and inevitable alienation. It also exposed the failure of human relationships in American society. His characters invent fake forms of community to disguise the fact that they are alone. Therefore, the play makes a forbidding atmosphere with so many negative aspects like alienation, miscommunication, isolation, poverty, insecurity, homelessness, etc. but the protagonist of this play Jerry hopes for a better community by sacrificing his life to make the upper class society aware of the presence of the poor, homeless as well as alienated people who live in American society. As an embodiment of instability and threat, Jerry stays alive in the readers' mind.

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