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Existential Trauma and Alienation: A Study of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to make a study of the alienated and claustrophobic existence of man in the modern world as presented in Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story*. Albee's plays are generally concerned with the predicaments of modern man. He presents the characters who are somehow estranged from the outside world and lead a marginalized existence. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry is representative of those people who are alienated from each other and are victims of a deadening loneliness. He is like a caged animal of a zoo that lives and dies without making any impact on others' lives. The paper would offer an overview analysis of the theme of alienation and social detachment that pervades throughout the play.

Keywords: Claustrophobic; Marginalized; Existential; Alienation; Detachment.

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is centered on the existential crisis, social alienation and emotional detachment that lead the protagonist to his ultimate end. It shows the consequences when human existence loses its meaning and all communications fall apart. The play gave Albee national and international recognition. After its publication in 1958 many playwrights started following Albee's techniques. John Guare said that this play "spawned a whole generation of park bench plays..... To show you were avant-garde, you needed no more than a dark room and a park bench." The issue of alienation is projected through the alienated life of Jerry who lives and dies in seclusion, with little sympathy from other members of the society. The play has two characters, Peter and Jerry. Peter is "a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger." Jerry on the other hand looks disheveled. He is presented as a "man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness" (ibid). The discrepancy in

outward appearances indicates the dichotomy of the life-styles these two characters lead. Albee hints that these two different worlds can never be reconciled. Peter is an ordinary publishing executive, who has a very easygoing settled life, while Jerry lives a solitary life. The setting is equally significant. Jerry's arrival at the zoo indicates his desperate efforts to be released from his alienated existence and form communication with others. Jerry's identity crisis is emphasized when he repeatedly says: "I've been to the zoo. [PETER doesn't notice.] I said I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO" (ibid.)! From the very outset of the drama Jerry behaves like a caged animal. He feels that the world has nothing to do with him. He keeps talking and asking questions to capture others' focus. What he wants is to be paid heed to. Lisa M. Siefker suggests that Jerry "wants to give voice to the people of his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society." Jerry's willingness to talk to others is evident in his conversation with Peter:

JERRY: I'll tell you why I do it; 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, buddy. You know things like that.

PETER: I must say I don't...

JERRY: But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.

PETER: [Lightly laughing, still a little uncomfortable} And am I the guinea pig for today?

JERRY: On a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon like this? Who better than a nice married man with two daughters and ...uh... a dog? [PETER shakes his head, sadly.] Oh, that's a shame. But you look like an animal man. CATS? [PETER nods his head, ruefully.] Cats! But, that can't be your idea. No sir. Your wife and daughters? [PETER nods his head.] Is there anything else I should know? (656-657)

Albee chooses two totally contradictory characters to emphasize the sense of alienation that some people are doomed to suffer. Jerry and Peter embody two different worlds, the world of peace and affluence, and the world of the alienated souls whose lives are of little concern for

others. Siefker notes that “Jerry’s interruption of Peter’s Sunday ritual of reading in Central Park escalates from a conversation to a clash of two different worlds.” Jerry’s world consists of people who are marginalized from the main social fabric. Jerry’s “laughably small room” is surrounded by quarters inhabited by people who are as secluded as Jerry. Jerry’s life outside the mainstream of society “doesn’t sound like a very nice place” (659) to Peter, who is a denizen of a happy and harmonious world. Jerry gives a detailed description of his flat:

“What I do have, I have toilet articles, a few clothes, a hot plate that I’m not supposed to have, a can opener, one that works with a key, you know: a Knife, two forks, and two spoons, one small, one large; three plates, a cup, a saucer, a drinking glass, two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books.” (Ibid)

It only manifests the boredom of Jerry’s life. He has nothing to do except looking at the objects of his flat. When Peter asks, “About those empty picture frames....” (ibid)? Jerry replies: “I don’t see why they need any explanation at all. Is it clear? I don’t have any pictures to put in them” (659-660). The hollowness in Jerry’s life is symbolized by the empty pictures frames. Jerry is in constant search for people to talk to them. He needs some ventilation to release his pent up feelings. That is why when he found Peter he starts talking about his own life, beginning with the story of the old Pop and old Mom. Then he tells about the gatekeeper lady, who used to “press her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me” (ibid). She makes Jerry “the object of her sweaty lust” (ibid). Even this lady treats Jerry like an animal that she can use for her carnal desire. Unable to make any fruitful connection with human beings Jerry thought of communicating with the animals. He tells Peter: “It’s just that if you can’t deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS” (667)! Jerry hopes to find some love in his communication with the dog, which has been eluding Jerry for years:

Now, here is what I had wanted to happen: I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves. I hoped ... and I don’t really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations. ... I hoped that the dog would understand. (666)

But even the dog does not show any sign of feelings for Jerry. This increases Jerry’s sense of frustration to the extreme. He is plunged into acute existential crisis. Albee himself comments 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, ultimately failing and trying and failing.” Jerry feels that “animals are indifferent to me.... like people (he smiles slightly)...most of the time” (663). Even a dog does care him. He decides to come to the zoo to put an end to his life. He reaches the conclusion that his life is meaningless. Therefore he decides to kill himself. He tells Peter: “You’ll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don’t see it on your TV tonight.” What Jerry asks for is a little recognition from the world that doesn’t have any concern for Jerry. He feels that the best means to get noticed is by making a dramatic end of his life. He hopes that his death might bring him to public notice. He likens his existence with a caged animal whose liberty, desire, everything is restrained. He decides to free himself from this claustrophobic existence through death. He chooses Peter in this mission of self-destruction. All of a sudden Jerry started quarrelling with Peter over the bench. He provokes Peter to fight for his bench and threatens him with a knife. This is just a pretext. Jerry just needs a way to kill himself. He wants someone to kill him so that his death would be reported as murder, and it will create some great news. But Peter does not involve himself. On the other hand Jerry is determined to be killed by someone. He can commit suicide “but his suicide would not be remarkable enough to create much, if any, narrative in the media. Murder has a chance of making the news.” He wants a dramatic end to his life. He hopes that his death might bring some meaning of his hitherto meaningless life. Albert Camus says that people commit suicide because they feel that “life is not worthy of living”. According to Camus, a reason for living is the same as a reason for dying. People may kill themselves for the ideas and illusions that give them the reason for living. (Camus, 1991:4) Ultimately Jerry impales on the knife, thus wounding himself deadly, but does this in a way that would mislead others to think that he has been murdered by someone. He feels that he achieves something for the first time in his life and thanks Peter: “Thank You, Peter. I mean, now; thank you very much. [PETER’s mouth drops open. He cannot move; he is transfixed.](673) He feels his caged soul is now released. Before death Jerry asks Peter to leave quickly before the arrival of the police.

Albert Camus says:

A world that can be explained with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a

stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, 1991:6)

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a drama about human beings who are alienated creatures, dehumanized by the gross materialism of a world that does not care for feelings and emotions. Here one has to find some meaning of life through death. It is only through death that Jerry hopes to get identity for his nameless existence. This is the sheer irony of human existence fraught with alienation and loneliness.

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