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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The Theatre of the Absurd and Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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Abstract:

Edward Albee was aware of the social malaise and the ills of the affluent American society of the 1960s. Racial strife, brush wars abroad, the rise of the cosmopolis and the decentralization of family life are the facts too well known to the social critics of the time. Observing social amenities and accepting a stereotyped role make it possible for the people to converse without communicating, to live together while remaining strangers. Because Albee feels strongly the alienation of the individual in the midst of a group oriented society, his work has an affinity with the continental playwrights of the absurd; because he feels that social conventions have become a defence mechanism that contribute substantially to this alienation.

Keywords: Existentialism, Defence Mechanism, Absurd, Meaninglessness, Expressionism, American Dream, Alienation,

Edward Albee first won recognition with his one act play *The Zoo Story*, which was performed in Berlin as part of a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. His next play *Death of Besie Smith* was also first performed in Berlin. These plays were much acclaimed on the continent and he identified himself with the avant garde movement, sometimes referred to as the Theatre of the Absurd. With substantial theatrical force Albee has been remarkable in bringing into focus, albeit in the American context, the pointlessness and absurdity of the human situation. While Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, critics though they are of American society, implicitly accept its broad structure of value. Albee, as if he is outside of society, makes an onslaught on the foundations of American values. This image of an artist, an outsider, who is alienated from the contemporary spiritual climate and criticizes it as an impartial observer, makes him one of the tribe in the Theatre of the Absurd. More than any other contemporary American playwright, he has concentrated our attention on the tragic gap between man's environment and inner being, his growing alienation, his failure to comprehend the fantastic complexities of modern life, finally his caving into a cosy world of illusion as a desperate attempt to escape the nightmare of insecurity and fear. The overall break down of values, the utter incapacity for creative action and the ennui of routine life are seen as the manifestation of the malaise of the modern man.

The Theatre of the Absurd is not name of the specially created drama. The term, The Theatre of the Absurd, owes its origin and validity as a critical counter to Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) dealing principally with the plays of Ionesco, Genet, Beckett and Pinter. Thus Martin Esslin used the term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' to describe the drama that came to be written mostly after the second world war. In Europe it was a period of disillusionment. The age old values of religion and morality stood shattered and were replaced by nothing else. Man specially the sensitive and the intellectual, lived in a void in which all talk of truth, struggle and dignity seemed meaningless and absurd. It was Albert Camus who first gave a philosophical description of the absurdity of modern man's existence. In the 'Myth of Sisyphus' Camus says that man becomes aware of the absurdity of his existence when he realizes that the world is really an unintelligible and a meaningless place in which his own position is very insignificant. This absurdity is brought to its end by death which is only reality known to man but before death, the absurdity that is human existence has got to be lived. Hence the need for artificial beliefs and illusions which work as anesthesia against reality. Obviously, Martin Esslin borrowed the term 'absurd' from Camus and applied it to the play which reflected the spiritual climate of the age. The playwrights of this age, though they experimented with different themes and styles, had a few common features in their approach towards life and art. Samuel Beckett, Inesco and Genet in France and Edward Albee in America are regarded to be the chief exponents of this mode of the theatre.

Martin Esslin makes a distinction between the conventional representational theatre and the absurdist theatre. He argues that the point of distinction does not lie so much in what the dramatists have to say as in their technique of saying it. In substance and theme, according to Martin Esslin, Giraudoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre and Camus are undoubtedly absurdist. Martin Esslin says, "yet these writers differ from the dramatists of the absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning while the theatre of the absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought."

In terms of substance and theme, other dramatists too than those listed by Esslin could be said to belong, though, in some cases only partly, to the absurdist school. The 'sense of the senselessness of the human condition' informs not only the works of Pirandello, Strindberg and Chekov ! it is there in great tragedies of Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine: Oedipus, Hamlet, Phedre – all are ultimately confronted with the meaninglessness of the human condition. The tragic situation in each case, emerges from the realization that all conventional values are mere husks and that man must confront his fate and know himself all alone. Life loses its configuration imposed by the code of accepted beliefs and is laid bare in a meaningless stretch of 'tomorrow and to-morrow.....'. But certainly the term, the Absurdist, is not to be applied to the above dramatists, because meaninglessness of life is not the only or the whole theme of their

plays. In them, certain values such as the dignity of the struggling man, the need of the order and humility emerges out of the tragic catharsis and are accepted as pure and positive.

The Theatre of the Absurd, therefore, specifically characterizes those dramatists of post-second-world-war world who have given up any pretence to representational method and devised an amalgam expressionistic-symbolist-allegoric stage-techniques and highly stylized and ruthlessly clipped language. Analyzing the emergence of the absurdist vision and its nature, Martin Esslin says in the Twentieth Century: “Basically, Theatre of the Absurd expresses the loss of feeling that the world makes sense, and can be reduced into an integrated system of values – which is due to the decline of religion – that had been apparent since the end of the first world war, and decline in the belief in the substitute religions of nationalism, faith in progress and socialism, in the cynical disillusionment of the period after the Second World War.

The First World War gave a violent jolt to the illusory conversational moral values many of which fell apart and decayed. Eliot dramatized this situation on an epic scale in *The Waste Land*. But a longing for the rains remained and longing gave rise to hopes of salvation through a mirage of sentimental ideals such as nationalism, socialism, communist dictatorship, democracy, free world and a recourse to religion. The Second World War blew up these sentiments into shell-smoke, and laid the bare complete meaninglessness of all values, conventional and imaginary, ancient and modern: it killed the very longing and the hope. The human condition was aptly summed up by Camus as the myth of Sisyphus: life suddenly appeared to be a mere drag and an utter boredom.

The pointlessness of life is the theme of Samuel Beckett’s famous play *Waiting for Godot*. In ita theme O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* is akin to the absurdist drama. Through the characters and their predicaments O’Neill builds up a study of the whole human condition. Though they have a thirst for happiness, the hopeless existence of his tramps is doomed. The ennui and pointlessness of life in American context has been forcefully brought out by Edward Albee in one play after another. His early one act plays are brilliant absurdist analyses of contemporary social and psychological tensions; *The Zoo Story*, *The Sandbox*, *Fam and Yam*, and *The Death of Bessie Smith*. *The American Dream* is a searching attack on the myth of American optimism. The play is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity. It is an examination of the predominance of illusions in American social life. In parable style this dominant characteristic of his society, the life of make-belief and compromises, the pighead assurance that justifies any kind of cruelty for the satisfaction of one’s ego, has been expressed.

The dislocations and rituals of The Theatre of the Absurd are cunningly used in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* For the mutual destruction and reconciliation games of a history professor and his wife. This play presents the agonized exorcism of illusions on the part of a university

professor and his wife who have created a fantasy child to compensate for their own sterility, set in the town of new Carthage, the play constitutes a warning to American society, as it is to the individual, content to accept the illusion in preference to the harsh realities of private and public life. This play is a savage dance of death reminiscent of Strindberg, best work, existing on at least two levels apart from the realistic one: as an allegory of American society, a poetic image of its emptiness and sterility, and as a complex ritual on the pattern of Genet.

Albee carries on his crusade on the myth of American happy family, and portrayal of female dictatorship at home in *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The childless family consists of husband and wife: George, an unsuccessful professor of history, finds his attractive and boisterous wife, Martha too overbearing. Their barren life discovers mutual attraction only when they hurt and humiliate each other ruthlessly, and the late night party, the setting for this play in which two guests – Nick and his silly wife Honey – have been invited, is the occasion for mutual excoriation. The intensity of hatred, of savagely ironic scorn, of enjoyment at each other's humiliation is communicated through an extraordinary resilience and range of language. They consume a prodigious amount of liquor, and their "fun and games" begin to take the shape of ruthless cruel aggression: humiliate the host, get the guests, hump the hostess, : in the course of which Martha, to humiliate George, makes a feeble attempt at seducing Nick. George takes revenge on Martha by killing their child, the fictitious child that never existed, a source of consolation for childless Martha. Martha at the end is frightened and submissive.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? may well be viewed as an exploration of the myth of the American dream. The fantasy of the unborn son cleverly built into the fabric of the action, is the very heart of the play, although the visible drama of action centres on George and Martha flaying the hide of each other. The play impresses us as an exquisite piece illustrating the significant place of illusion in modern American life. It is a work in which Albee attempts to touch the heart of American culture, the culture that manufactures fantasies and dreams as well as motor cars and holly wood films. The personal failures of characters represent the failure of a culture, and the unborn son is symbolic of the American dream of fulfillment and happiness. The metaphor certainly reaches beyond the immediate to the American scene in general, and Albee here more successfully communicates the ethos of artificiality and sterility which it had been his particular care to present in *The American Dream*. The technical dexterity of organizing the incidents into a close-knit fabric of emotion and action is superb, and here is some of best urban nervous dialogue to be written in the American Theatre. No wonder that it has proved an immensely popular play in England and the States.

The staging of *Who Afraid* in 1962 was a crucial event in the birth of a contemporary American theatre. In this play George and Martha, who are faced with the reality of their purposeless, dreary and hence unbearable life, can only exist by creating an illusion that they have a son who is coming home 'tomorrow' for his birthday. When this illusion is shattered they are left tired

and cold, that is symbolically dead, and no longer have the will to fight each other. Thus the play is a lively, well constructed piece of work having philosophical significance in context of the drama of the absurd that mingles the realistic with fantasy to present a savagely satirical attacks on spiritual sterility, blandness, conformity, and hypocrisy, and to summon up with deep feeling the tragedy of alienation.

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