

Absurdity of Society in Edward Albee

Pradeep Kumar^{1*} Dr. Chhote Lal²

¹Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan

²Associate Professor, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan

Abstract – These words were spoken by Edward Albee in 1998, in his “Speech to the American Council for the Arts”. The address makes it clear that Albee is concerned with the “societal and cultural health” (SMM 194) of the American civilization. The lecture focuses on various aspects which are disturbing the placidity of American society. The first idea Albee is concerned with is the passivity of American society. He said that only forty-nine percent of people voted in the last election held in 1994, which means that the civilization is governed by the will of half of the potential electorate. So, he is concerned with the passivity of society and this fragile democracy.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

Economy is also a matter of concern. Albee said that “our economy, as a result of eight years of the Reagan disastrous mismanagement, gives the false illusion of being a healthy economy” (SMM 199). Racial disharmony is also attacked by Albee, because racism ends the human capacity for decency and sympathy. Sociopolitical loop-holes, such as love and care not for man but for money and position also frustrate Albee. Attacking this, he said that American culture is the outcome of nothing else but commercial need. He wants his civilization to step ahead from this “need” to desire and satisfaction. In an interview with Bruce J. Mann, Albee declared:

I find the passivity of American society constantly growing, getting more dangerous, the fact that half the people vote, two-thirds of the people don't know the names of their senators and representatives. Three quarters of the people, when they were asked – would you give up the Bill of Rights for some security? – said ‘sure.’ The drift towards religious autocracy in this country, a sort of curious kind of polite fascism that is generally in our society, is very troubling, and I think if people spent more time informing themselves about what it is to be alive and the responsibilities of it and the responsibilities of democracy, we'd be a lot better off. (129)

Albee is concerned about the American democracy which under the garb of democracy is actually a dictatorship of two parties – Republican and Democrats – and of a few people. These are the matters of concern for Albee in relation to society and civilization. Thus, Albee unlike the ‘art for art's sake’ school, fits in the group of those writers who believe in the idea of ‘art for the sake of society.’ Albee's art

has a specific purpose i.e., to amend the society. He wants to make his civilization realize that disorder is spreading its wings in personal, professional and social wards of life, and in order to expose the weaknesses of American society literature should be used as an instrument.

Due to this very reason of attacking American optimism, Albee's work falls into the category of the Theater of Absurd. Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* considers Albee one of a few absurd writers of the United States. Esslin wonders over the scarcity of absurd literature in the United States and commenting on the reason for this dearth he says,

The convention of the absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life, which has been a characteristic of countries like France and Britain in the years after Second World War. In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose. The American dream of the good life is still very strong. In the United States the belief in progress that characterized Europe in the nineteenth century has been maintained into the middle of the twentieth. (*Theater of the Absurd* 311)

In the twentieth century this optimism received some sharp shocks, and some realist writers turned to absurdism to awake the civilization from the long sleep.

Albee's absurdism has the touch of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Beckett's preoccupation with the problem of being and the identity of self can be seen in Albee's plays. The perplexity of ‘who I am?’ Consists the grain of truth in it. It is a very helpful pondering for providing a complete explanation for

the deep existential anguish that is the keynote of Beckett's work. The feeling of uncertainty is the very ebb and flow of Beckett's plays, in the same way uncertainty and instability are important characteristics of Albee's plays. For Beckett, as for Sartre, man has the responsibility and duty of facing the human condition as recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness; so the idea of nothingness and the concept of 'nada' or 'nihilism' is the very base of Beckett's writings. As Beckett lacks both characters and plot in the conventional sense in his play *Waiting for Godot* because for him subject matter is more important factor where neither characters nor plot exist; in the same way Albee's various plays, e.g., *Box-Mao-Box* and *Knock! Knock! Who's There!?* Lack any plot and important characters because of the same purpose. On the other hand Albee is equally influenced by Eugene Ionesco who, in Tynan's words, declares that "words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible" (qtd. in Esslin, *Theater of Absurd* 128). Ionesco accepts that his images of world are nothing except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness and hideous, useless hatred; and a similar idea of this brutal and selfish world and society is given by Albee. The ideas of isolation and lack of communication in Albee's absurd society have been derived from Ionesco's world in which people can no longer talk because they can no longer think. Difficulty to communicate is the root cause of the loneliness of man in a community or society. Ionesco in *The Lesson* and Albee in *The Zoo Story* present this idea. Thus, Albee has exposed the absurdity of his society by using absurdism as an instrument.

American society has been awakening from this long sleep through the medium of realistic literature, and absurdism and existentialism are the branches of this tree named realism. Brian Richardson rightly observes,

In American realist drama, the focus is often less metaphysical and more directed to social and psychological issues, as playwrights contest the official optimistic master narratives of American society, including difficult versions of the romance of 'the American dream.' (*Introduction* 15)

The plays of all the realists playwrights run through the clash of incompatible interpretations of the social world – the world which is inadequately established on the insubstantial dream, if not on a systematic lie.

Albee's plays present the American way of life as one in which the societal bonds have been deprived of meaning. He attacks American consumerism, terror of isolation, lack of communication, hypocrisy and "disgraceful socio-economic changes" (Bottoms, *Interview* 244) along with the political fallaciousness. Albee believes in man's ability to change but he is

angry with man's unwillingness to change. This is why Albee takes the help of middle-class society. He says,

The theatre reaches the middle class and is most sophisticated in areas where there is a middle class to reach, which may be okay, because that's the class that is going to effect change in the social structure and in a society of that sort. (Fuente, *Interview* 13)

The society in the United States is divided in two categories – the legendary and the real i.e., one who lives in dream world and the other who has experienced the real world. *The Zoo Story* (1959), *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1961) *Box-Mao-Box* (1968), *The Man who had Three Arms* (1983), *Occupant* (2002) and *Knock! Knock! Who's There!?* (2003) focus on these two sections of society. The aim is to peep into that side of American society where many complex questions have still to be answered. This is a civilization where everything is smooth at the upper level which is just a mirage. The civilization believes in 'congenital optimism', it believes that 'difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer'. Even immigrants claim to be 'a one hundred percent American, born and raised in America.' Thus, the idealism is the very root or spirit of this nation. But the very foundation of idealism starts shaking when it confronts realism. This is what the above mentioned plays expose in order to amend the society.

Theater happens to be the greatest weapon to unearth the human absurdities which are presented on the stage by dramatist. Thus Albee, too, uses theater as a tool to unite different classes which have been divided by the growth of the cities. Like Charles Dickens' London, Albee presents New York in *The Zoo Story* where people do not have contact with each other. Therefore, like London, in this play New York becomes the place where people have lost humane touch with each other. Albee, thus, in this play satirizes the cold behaviour of one man to the other. He advocates that instead of coldness there should be warmth in the human relations which American society certainly lacks. He believes that the rat-race for material success is a great hindrance to express the passion between the two fellows. In this play his main objective is to create the fellowship between Jerry and Peter who represent two different sections of society. He further portrays that this fellowship should be real not notional.

The Zoo Story brings together the legendry and the real, the "upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle-class" (ZS 163), success and failure, the 'vegetable' people and the 'animal' people, reticence and the real talk, open movement and the zoo by bringing together the polar opposites of American society in the guise of Peter and Jerry.

The Zoo Story, Albee's first produced play, is an attack on fragmentation, isolation, lack of communication and social disharmony. Albee describes the situation of New York in 1950s when people after the World War Second moved to different places in order to search for their livelihood. The people from all over the world found America, particularly metropolitan cities like New York more lucrative. As physically the war did not make any impact here in comparison to Asia and Europe which were totally ruined by war. In this play, Albee portrays a struggle between the people who were there and who came from outside.

REFERENCES

- Kolin, Philip C. and J. Madison Davis (1986). *Critical essays on Edward Albee*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., Print.
- Kramer, Peter D. (2006). *Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind*. New York: Harper Collins Pub. Print.
- Lemay, J. A. Leo (1990). ed. *An Early American Reader*. New Delhi: Asian Book Pvt. Ltd. Print.
- Lodge, David (1972). ed. *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman. Print.
- Magill, Frank N. (1986). ed. *Critical Survey of Drama: English Language Series*. New Jersey: Salem P., Print.
- Mann, Bruce J. (2003). ed. *Edward Albee: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Marx, Leo (1964). *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*. New York: Oxford UP, Print.

Corresponding Author

Pradeep Kumar*

Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu,
Rajasthan

E-Mail – py75328@gmail.com