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A POST STRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE SELECTED PLAYS OF EDWARD ALBEE

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Abstract

The plays of Albee are conceived on various modes of communication-non-verbal devices (pause, silence, gaps, dots, gestures, postures) and sub textual undertones thereby robbing an Albee text of a grand finale. Hence dramatic communication in Albee's plays is marked by ambiguity, ambivalence and polyphony. Like Beckett's and Pinter's characters, Albee's characters evade and avoid meaning or finality thereby coming closure to the post structural communication. Thus the plays of Albee understudy may be interpreted from a post structuralist perspective though it is a humble attempt to do so.

Keywords

Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Absurdism, Existentialism.

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Edward Albee emerged as a leading yet controversial figure in the American theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. With the variety of plays that detailed the agonies and disillusionment of that period and the transition from the Eisenhower years to the turbulent 1960s, his plays with their intensity, their grappling with modern themes and experiments in form, startled critics and audience alike. While changing the landscape of American drama, he was unanimously hailed as the successor to Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. During the long career in the theatre spanning about half a century, Albee has come to be recognized as the most vital and vibrant dramatist in America. To the general public Albee is probably best known by his play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) a play that pioneered a new trend in American drama. Over the years Albee has received an impressive number of awards including three Pulitzer prizes and two Tony awards to name but a few. Albee's plays move through various theatrical modes. To begin with, Albee establishes an absurd-seeming style and metaphysics in which everything is relative and nothing can be known for certain. Nicola Chiaromonte in his study depicted that "Edward Albee's first four plays were remarkable for an unusual ability to imagine and develop a dialogue that was both realistic and absurd: true to life, that is. At the same time, the playwright did not seem to know what to do with the situations he had created, except to end them with some abruptly introduced trick".

The contemporary drama has witnessed ceaseless experimentation in the hands of Absurd dramatists—Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, and Edward Albee. It has assumed complex implication as Absurd dramatists feel bewildered at the intriguing flux of existence. They remain desperate to devise adequate communicational forms to give expression to the deep rooted feelings of anger, anxiety and absurdity. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Kafka in *The Trial* (1925) deals with the painful reality of the modern life. Theatre of the Absurd was a term used to refer to a set of plays written primarily in France from the mid-1940s through the 1950s. In these plays, the

dramatists used illogical situations, unconventional dialogue and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence. There existed no formal “absurdist movement” in the theatre. Dramatists whose works fell under the category had a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose in life and to control its fate. The existential philosopher, Albert Camus, and other philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre used the term *absurd* to express their inability to find any rational explanation for human life. The dramatic works of certain European and American dramatists of the 1950s and 1960s have been referred to as the “Theatre of the Absurd”. This was so because they essentially subscribed to the theory proposed by Albert Camus, in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Diplomová práce in the study focuses on “a philosophical and psychological search for a healthy and optimal way of living in the contemporary world of the West culture, where the value of each individual is lost in an anonymous and materialistically orientated society. The introduction is devoted to a philosophical movement of Existentialism, which, through art, expresses feelings of man in such a society. Feelings of loneliness, fear, loss of past certainties, man’s finitude or wasted life are also themes of the Theatre of the Absurd”.

In fact the Absurd theatre derived inspiration from the existential philosophy of Camus, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre. According to existential philosophy, human life is enigmatic and absurd and man remains a victim, a sufferer, an alienated being from cradle to grave. This accounts for problems of communication in the plays of Absurd dramatists. When the plays of Beckett, Pinter, Albee are approached, we notice the desperate struggle of characters to communicate, otherwise incommunicable prices of existence. The plays of Albee, like those of Beckett and Pinter, represent absurdity of life especially the American life.

The advent of Edward Albee on the dramatic scene is in consonance with the pervasive mood of the chaos and disillusionment of life at large. Albee was profoundly influenced by then absurdist writers of France and England. The theatre was developed in France after the horrors of World War II as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values both of the traditional culture and literature. Martin Esslin coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd”. It would seem that Albee’s play depicts Absurdism and futility of life. Some of the major plays of Edward Albee are *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959), *The Sandbox* (1959), *The American Dream* (1961), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and *A Delicate Balance* (1966), , *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Three Tall Women* (1994). Like Beckett and Pinter, Albee seems to have recognized the basic problem underlying a communication that fluid nature of truth always evades concrete forms of expression. The silence and communication Gaps among characters are deliberate guises to express their inability to express their enigmatic existence. Shakespeare felt this when he succinctly said “The Rest is Silence”.

Hence the dramatic communication of Albee defies a structuralist mode of interpretation which designates the whole process of communication into “Signifier” and “Signified” nexus. Saussure gave this “unified field” theory who interpreted language in terms of signs. He said that human beings have “The Faculty to Construct a Language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas”. Even the structuralists like Barthes and Russian formalists Jacobson and Bakhtin radically broke away Saussurian aesthetics to interpret language and meaning. Jacobson stressed on the “Poeticalness” of language. He puts it succinctly “The poetic

function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Mikhail Bakhtin developed "Dialogic Criticism" and radically departed from Saussure's determinate forms of language. He argued strongly about indeterminacy, open-endedness and inconclusiveness of communication. Barthes, who followed in the footsteps of Saussure drastically, transformed Saussure's closed methods and through his deconstructionist approach, he revolutionized the domain of language and communication. He took text as a discourse, interplay of conflicting factors and forces. He focused his analysis on the reader's active role in production of meanings. He gave precedence to "Writerly text" over "Readerly text" which makes text an open artifact to be interpreted by readers or critics. The exploration and unfolding of meaning through deconstruction of the multiple layers of the text is an esthetic moment for readers. The critical exploration and appreciation of a text give moments of blissful "Scribe", "Scripter". Derrida, the champion of "Deconstructionist approach" out rightly challenged Saussurean linguistics of structuralism and "Refused to subordinate art to any form of logocentrism be it psychoanalytic, Marxist or Structuralist."

Post structuralist perspective comprises a "Deconstructionist approach" to a written text which seeks to explore the multiple, indeterminate, open-ended nature of a text. The relation between Structuralism and post structuralism is a relation of extension, critique and antithesis. From De Saussure's structuralist thought to Derrida's deconstruction-based poststructuralist philosophy, it is a linguistic vision that thinks the relation between the Signifier and the Signified, simplistically put, the relation between the word and the world. While Saussure does talk about 'pure difference' between signifiers in a language and also the arbitrariness of the sign, he nevertheless, thinks that there is a structure (order, unchaotic) in language which comes from the general system of Lang and plays its role in controlling the arbitrary problematic of the parole.

In the poststructuralist ambit, it is this 'pure difference' that is absolutized by Derrida who thinks that the Signifieds unreachable and similarity is not the operative process of language. He, in turn talks about a 'free play' of signifiers which proliferate endlessly. The 'transcendental signified' is an absence and the signifiers keep differing and deferring in a quest to reach their Signified, never to be. This is how the centre is dislodged from the structure as it is seen to be located both within and without. This decentring and a radical difference of meaning clarify the point of contrast between Structuralism and Poststructuralism.

While undertaking the present paper, "A Poststructuralist Perspective on the Selected Plays of Edward Albee", it is to be frankly admitted that no other perspective or theory may better interpret the dramatic communication of Albee as it befits the heart of the matter in Albee's dramas.

Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1958), performed in 1959, and was no less political in its criticism of the American way of life. The Zoo story is much too complex to be dismissed as mere political propaganda. Li Yi-qi in his study does the analysis of *The Zoo Story* from the view of existentialism. It introduces the cause of existentialism, the origin and development of existentialism, mainly introducing four major existentialists' idea and the focuses of research of existentialism. "The analysis is about two aspects: the first aspect is from the view of the practice of individual feelings in existentialism; the second aspect is from the view of the relationship

between people in existentialism. As the representative of Albee Edward, *The Zoo Story* is influenced by existentialism”.

Peter denies Jerry, just as the original Peter denies Jesus, Whose name also begin with a “J”. Both Jesus and Jerry are crucified in a way by the world which cannot or will not understand them. Albee’s Peter, like the educated play goers, has been living in a fantasy world from which he must someday be rudely awoken and is hardly aware of the reality that surrounds him. The Zoo Story takes its title from the fact that just before Jerry comes across the Peter in the park, he has also been to the Zoo that is also located there, The Central Park Zoo. He seems to be particularly proud and happy about this fact and in the very beginning of the play announces to Peter whom he has just met, “Mister, I have been to the Zoo”. This seemingly meaningless piece of information gains in resonance as the play moves inexorably toward its violent denouement because the Zoo is of course America, where half live like human beings and other half lives’ like animals . By a surprising twist and the conclusion of the play, Jerry impales himself on a knife which he forces Peter to hold in front of him to defend himself. The final sacrifice repeats the image of Christ’s crucifixion. There is however, a slight ambiguity about what Jerry means by asking Peter will see his face on T.V. Jerry has succeeded in exposing the reality as well as the absurdity of the myth of the American Dream:

Jerry: I think this what happened at the zoo [---] and now you know all about what happened at the zoo. And now you know what you will see in your T.V. and the face I told you about---my face, the face you see right now (184)

The play is thus, a virulent attack on bourgeois complacency and the emptiness of the false values of the American society. One comes across the same dehumanization, brutality, social and emotional gaps due to hegemonizing tendency of the bourgeois against the common men as epitomized through the character of f. Douglas in Eugene O’ Neil’s *The Hairy Ape* against the common men, tank. Albee through the sarcastic remarks is committed to expose the hollowness, emptiness and absurdity of the American myth. To sum up *The Zoo Story* assumes post structural stance in its conflicting, ambiguous, different, unresolved, contrary, multiple voices thereby baffling the readers.

Edward Elbee’s major play “*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)”, is perhaps the most powerful, deep and realistic representation of the American social reality during the tumultuous 1960’s. The play reflects Albee’s rebellion against the culture whose identity radically transformed during his youth. The basic theme of the play, then, is the collapse of the illusion of the American Dream, which is also the main theme of Albee’s Earlier Plays. It is however, in this play that Albee is able to obtain a breadth, which the shorter one-act pieces are unable to achieve. Lee Baxandall observes that Edward Albee’s theater continues to be controversial. The discussion centers around two questions: one has to do with truth and other with dramatic structure. The first runs as, is the image of human relations in America which Albee presents justifiable, because it is in some sense realistic or is his an essentially flawed or perverted point of view? Second is, are there valid grounds for the invented child in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and confused invents which leads to Julia’s death in *Tiny Alice* or is Albee artistically callow and unable to structure a play properly?” Clare Virginia Eby: “The author in the essay focuses on the relationship between

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George and Nick, who represent two competing but interdependent models of heterosexual masculinity”.

In this play, the playwright shows how the American way of life imposes false ideals on the individual, which result in his destruction. It presents a world of hatred, infertility and false illusions. The essential problem presented by the play is the breakdown of real communication between individuals. Albee feels that observing social convention and accepting a stereotyped role make it possible for people to converse without communicating, to live together while remaining strangers. This sense of alienation brings the play closer to the theatre of the Absurd. But it also not an Absurd plays in the same sense as the plays of Beckett and Ionesco. It does not insist on the ultimate meaninglessness of existence and the struggle to communicate. Albee is not concerned with whether man can communicate or whether communication is ultimately worthwhile. What Albee does attack is the manners and attitude of society that keep man from the communication.

Albee begins his diagnosis with an examination of the relations of husband and wife in an American family. The conventional roles of the American male and female, the euphemistic language prescribed by convention for social conversation, particularly in the presence of ladies, and the marriage tie itself seem to be parodied right from the moment the scene opens. The character of Martha is an unpleasant parody of the independent and aggressive American female. It is she who orders George about. The marital relationship of George and Martha is characterized, first of all, by George's failure to advance in his profession. The situation belongs to one of the most important features of the American Dream, that is, the success myth. The play therefore ends with George and Martha facing each other for the first time as two real human beings. The other two characters, Nick and Honey, too, are also unmasked and stripped of their illusions. This supports the view adopted by one that breaking of illusions is a necessity and Albee is insisting that human beings must face each other and the reality.

The message is reiterated at the end of the play:

George: (Put his hand gently on her; she put her head back and he sings to her softly) Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf.

Martha: I am George

George: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf---

Martha: I am---George---I am---(140).

Hence the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* shows the characteristics of a Post structural work where there is no finality, no resolution and no fixed conclusion. The play ends like the plays of Beckett and Pinter on dialogic and indeterminate tone which lends text an open ended signification.

A Delicate Balance, the play won Albee acknowledgements as the most significant dramatist in America and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize on 1st May 1967. Its setting recalls the social malaise of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the play might well be the story of George and Martha a decade later. The characters in *A Delicate Balance*, Tobias and Agnes and Harry and Edna are in later part of middle age. They have lost all the fire and prowess in marital combat which George and Martha so vigorously displayed. Whatever immense emotional and sexual relationship may have existed between them, has long since passed. In his plays, Edward Albee, a prominent

representative of this theatre in America, examines the influence of such a materialistic society on its basic unit- family and, consequently, on individual himself. Allan Pero concentrates his study completely on the drama *A Delicate Balance* and “concluded that it is a play about responsibility, a play about friendship, a play about a crisis of (usually American) masculinity, and a play exploring the “source” of that crisis (regrettably, that most usual of suspects), Woman herself. It has been less often read as a text that explores the problem of melancholy's relation to desire and the labyrinth of choices that inform that problem”. Albee himself contends that the play is about the loss of choice, or that Agnes and Tobias having, in a sense, missed their appointment with agency. The implications of this assertion require more attention, which brings me to Epictetus. The question posed in the epigraph points not only to a forgetting of the journey's intent – the inn is not a destination, only a point on the path that leads home – but also to the misrecognizing of the inn as a permanent abode. This misrecognition is not simply misunderstanding but should be thought of in Lacanian terms; that is, it is a kind of reconnaissance, misrecognition of their place in the text.

The play makes a deep analysis of the happy life of the Americans as one of the cherished goals of the American Dream. A family of father, mother and one or more children bound together by filial love is one of the central images of American myth. Albee, shows that the place of the domestic love, has, in fact, been usurped by self seeking and self centered egotism. The normal relationships of the parents and children and of wife and of husband have been replaced by considerations of materially and practically useful arrangements.

With the return of Julia to her parental home after breakup of her fourth marriage, there is similar appeal of love and community. As Clair points out what all want is “[---] warmth(92). Julia, however, demand as it as a matter of right possession. In the childhood she felt neglected after the birth of her baby brother, Teddy and characterizes the period. “My two years burn at suddenly having a brother (63)”. Immediately following Teddy's death Julia again senses the opportunity to regain her parents, recognition and would come home “all bloody” (102). But not, as a teenager, she continues the disturbing pattern. She fails to make her marriage work, surely in past because of incompatibility, but also perhaps, because she still years subconsciously for her parents, lone (136).

Despite the fact that Tobias and Agnes have been married for decades, they lack meaningful communication and essential contact.

Harry and Edna have arrived with a clear and urgent intentions to escape isolation that threatens them. But Agnes and Tobias fail to live up to the expectations of their friends in providing them the comforts they have come in search of.

Inevitably, Harry and Edna quietly leave but only after the recognition that they, too, in their turn would not accept Tobias and Agnes in their home. The play ends with Agnes's expansive welcome of the returning day, which will enable them to return old routine and its inherent isolation. The ending of *A Delicate Balance* disrupts the balance rudely by intrusion of extraneous forces into the cozy and congenial atmosphere of Tobias's family. Beckett's “Happy Days”, Pinter's “The Care Taker”, “The Birthday Party” also shows ample evidence of loss of familial warmth due to unfamiliar and unconcerned outside forces. In nut shell Albee like Kafka, Heidegger and Sartre

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believes in the inevitable insecurity and chaos and confusion of post modern life. No wonder, the breakdown of values in post modern society has led to disillusionment of the mass and consequent problem of communication and undecided and inconclusive nature of existence which behooves post structural literature. It seems that the characters of Albee lives in no man's land where relationship is fractured, life is disjointed, totally absurd and pathetic. Jeane Luere in his study focuses on Beckett's views on Edward Albees dramas by "recalling his own momentary elation over a freshly-minted manuscript, lifted one thin finger and exclaimed, "Ah, what you need is monologue—monologue---that's the thing!! .Many of Albee's critical successes from The Zoo Story to Seascape encapsulate monologues-in-miniature on dogs, cats, or coves".

The plays of Albee are conceived on various modes of communication- non verbal devices (pause, silence, gaps, dots, gestures, postures) and sub textual undertones thereby robbing an Albee text of a grand finale. Hence dramatic communication in Albee's plays is marked by ambiguity, ambivalence and polyphony. Like Beckett's and Pinter's characters, Albee's characters evades and avoid meaning or finality thereby coming closure to the post structural communication. Thus the plays of Albee understudy may be interpreted from a post structuralist perspective though it is a humble attempt to do so. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to criticism on Edward Albee as no researcher has interpreted his work from this perspective so far.

To summarize, the plays of Edward Albee present a disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the world. Though they often appear in the form of extravagant fantasies, they are, nevertheless, essentially realistic. They never shirk the realities of the human mind with its despair, fear, and loneliness in an alien and hostile universe. Therefore, unlike the Greek philosophy of strict rationalism or American philosophy of Logical Positivism, they depict a whole man. The realism of these plays is a psychological and inner realism; the plays explore the human subconscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence

The analysis of literary works on Edward Albee by various reviewers and critics, the present paper intend to analyze the post structuralist perspective in major selected plays of Edward Albee. It would also explore the psychological analysis of relationships and its impact on communication along with the comparison in Traditional, Modern, and Post Modern form of communication.

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