SOCIAL DETACHMENT: A CAUSE OF ALIENATION IN EDWARD ALBEE’S THE ZOO STORY

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ABSTRACT

Through introducing the concept of alienation, modern playwrights present a new type of tragedy on modern stage that is concerned with the feeling of detachment from other people and sometimes from within. The modern tragic hero is alienated from the world that is predominated with new conceptions of culture. This paper aims to provide an overview analysis of alienation and how social detachment could lead to in Albee’s The Zoo Story. In this paly, Jerry's sexual preference is one of the reasons for his discrimination which led to his alienation and detachment from the society. The issue of alienation should not be taken lightly because it was the cause of his death. Alienation drove him to his destitution. The paper will shed light on the concept of alienation and will try to identify the reason why the playwright, Albee, presented such type of alienated protagonist in The Zoo Story. It also tries to reveal the reasons out of which the character’s alienation spring and at the same time the consequences to which these reasons lead.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Detachment, Isolation, Queer, Suicide.

Edward Albee and Modern Tragedies

Edward Albee (1928-) is one of the most prominent modern American playwrights with works that reflect post-war American theater in the early 1960. Albee has been awarded many prizes for his tragic works such as Tony Award, Pulitzer Prize and Drama Desk Award. Albee was influenced by the existentialist movement and the absurd theater (1950) which designed for a particular plays to find the explain of what happen when human existence has no meaning and all communications break down. In fact, the writer also followed the steps of Samuel Becket which latter help him to convert and bring this influence into American domestic drama and produced his own style by followed Becket's existential idea in his plays. Alienation and the question of freedom were the main point for both the writers, he followed Becket's traces in the dramatization of suspicion (Kucuk 2008:1-5). Albee’s characters do
not have fixed identities, and they suffer from their identify problems and the criticize of others. Their lives based on illusions and they missed the line between reality and fantasy.

Albee was adopted at an early age and was raised by a wealthy family who provided him with good education but he was never able to fit in with the upper class and as a result had an uneasy childhood. Albee’s estranged relationship with his adoptive mother, Frances Coteer Albee, remained unconsolidated till her death," I was a very dutiful and good son. But she never quite approved of me or forgave me for walking out. When she died she almost completely cut me out of her will” (Mann 2003:9).Despite his adoptive parents request on him to pursue a professional career Albee was interested in theatre and the arts. At the age of 18 Albee moved out of his adoptive family's house and headed to Greenwich in the pursuit of a career in theater. In 1958 he wrote his first play *The Zoo Story* which instantly put him on the public’s eye and the limelight. Later on he wrote many successful plays like *The sand box*, *Who is afraid of Virginia Wolf* and many more others that are still raved about.

Albee is a representative of American modern tragedy whose vision of life is generally tragic. He appears to have developed an instinctive perception of what modern tragedy should be as it deals with the problems that are concerned with human desires and beliefs. He presents protagonists who are alienated from their society and sometimes from themselves under the impact of the modern conception and new culture of materialism and social classes. American modern tragedy playwrights, and especially Albee, give less regard to Aristotle's imperatives of hamartia (the character flaw or error of a tragic hero that leads to his downfall). The playwright’s indifference to the Aristotelian principles of writing tragedy reflects their attempt to create a form which is true to the realities of modern life in America. Of all the psychoanalytical themes that appear in the twentieth century of American drama, the Oedipus Complex, where fate plays a great role, is the most prominent. Next to it are the themes of sexual suppression, frustration, and aggressiveness (lazuli2013:2-3). In fact, the tragic plays to varying degree, serve as capital illustrations of father and mother figures, sexual frustration, guilt feelings, death wishes and incestuous drives.

Modern Tragedies, do not deal with the ordeals of Kings or princes rather they are concerned with the simple men who can reflect the chaos, moral perplexity and alienation in which modern man exists. This type of ordeal is a result of dangerous sense of deterioration of morals under the impact of the pressure of materialism and the change in one's beliefs and philosophies in almost all fields of life.
Alienation is reflected via the protagonists in many modern tragedies, and death in one form or another is the ultimate cost paid for a person's alienation from society and sometimes from one's entity. In other words, alienation leads to desperation which in turn leads to death. Symbolic death, suicide, and murder are the final outcomes of modern tragedies. The play is one of Albee's notable works and represents the peek of such daring plays that depict the true essence of modern man on stage. It presents the ugliness of materialism and the destitution of alienation.

The Zoo Story

Being modern, this one-act tragic play reflects man's awareness of his own troubles and in his struggle against his own circumstances that had obliterated his ambitions and led him to feel the sense of alienation.

The play tells the story of two New York citizens named Jerry and Peter who meet each other in Central Park for the first time. Jerry is a person who is looking for conversation partner and Peter a man in his forties who sits on a bench and enjoys his idle period while reading a book. Suddenly Jerry starts to ask Peter questions and although it is obvious that Peter is not interested in communicating with a man like Jerry, Peter answers because of his politeness. While they are talking Jerry gets to know a lot about Peter and his family atmosphere and Jerry begins to tell Peter about his living conditions and his family background. Peter asks again about the picture frames, wondering whether Jerry might have a girlfriend whose picture could be placed in one. Jerry responds that he has never had sex with any woman more than once, although he did have an ongoing relationship with another boy when he was a teenager.

The men banter briefly about the set of pornographic playing cards that Jerry admits to keeping in his apartment, but Jerry changes the subject, insisting he would rather tell Peter about his trip to the zoo. But instead of talking about the zoo, Jerry describes his landlady, a drunken, idiotic woman who is constantly trying to seduce him. He usually evades the seduction by convincing her that they slept together the day before and that he is not ready to do so again. Because of her drunkenness, she believes him. Jerry promises that he will tell Peter about the zoo soon, but first wants to tell the story of his landlady’s dog. Jerry reminds Peter that Peter has chosen to be there, and can leave any time. Peter uncomfortably agrees to hear the story, and Jerry launches into it. In the course of the play it becomes clear that Peter is not able to understand the messages of Jerry’s stories and Jerry behaves more and more
aggressively. An argument begins. Jerry provokes Peter to fight for his bench and threatens Peter with a knife. The knife is taken by Peter and somehow Jerry manages to wound himself deadly with it. While Jerry is dying he constrains Peter to flee because he does not want Peter to be caught by the Police. Peter carries out Jerry’s instructions and runs away. Jerry dies alone in Central Park (Rose 1962:10-17).

Queerness and Alienation in the Zoo Story

*The Zoo story* 1958, was considered offensive for its time because it contained discussions of homosexuality. Albee's presentation of the subject is not highly provocative by modern standards, but it shocked audiences when the play was first performed in the United States in 1960. The play was at first rejected by the New York producers and had its first debut in Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt on September 28, 1959. Later on, people started to realize the real message of the play conveyed and they started to identify themselves with the profound and miserable gist of its content.

The introductory part tackles the impact of the Queer approaches on Albee's attitude of writing. The theory, introduced in the early 1990 and gaining popularity in the 21st century, seeks to answer a series of questions about what is conceived to be normal, how the term normal come to existence, and who is excluded or oppressed by those notions or norms of normalcy. Queer theory states an understanding of sexuality that emphasizes shifting boundaries, ambivalences, and central constrictions that change depending on historical and cultural context. To queer is to challenge heterosexuality as a naturalized social-sexual norm and promote the notion of non-straightness, challenging the hegemony of "straight" ideology. A person who happens to be gay or "not straight" is thus labeled as abnormal and is deprived the recognition of normalcy. In such scenarios the issue of alienation comes in to play. Alienating a person "a being" for their sexual preferences is the root cause of social discrimination and the labeling of "otherness".

The play has two characters named Jerry and Peter. It highlights the alienated life of Jerry, who lives and dies in seclusion, with no recognition or sympathy from the people in his society. It also examines how Jerry seeks redemption through media, from which he hopes to get a name for his nameless existence.

The protagonist, Jerry, is portrayed in *The Zoo Story* as an alienated creature who is cut loose from the people around him and lives aloof with no real contacts. Moreover, he is totally neglected and ultimately dehumanized. The inhibitions and aloofness could have been
caused by various factors of social detachment. Hence, this paper focuses on major themes of character alienation, isolation, loneliness and frustration as well. In fact, major subjects in this realistic and symbolic drama of a lonely outcast who tries to make contact with another human being and who finally binds himself to the other in death.

The play commences with Peter who is sitting on the bench in the Central park of New York, reading his morning newspaper. The second character, Jerry, is a man who is disheveled and unsettled. The differences between Peter and Jerry suggest their discrepancy not only in stature and attire but also the type of life they lead. Albee states in the stage directions that Peter and Jerry's different worlds can never be redeemed. Peter is an ordinary publishing executive, who is leading a very calm and settled life, while Jerry lives alone, no family and no friends, this things led him to miss the concern with others and bring the sense of alienation to his own life (Selden, Wisdowson, Brooker: 252-257).

JERRY
I’ll tell you 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 …

JERREY
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? (Albee 74-80). 

looking deeply into the nature of this character, one can perceive that these causes may be private or personal conditions, i.e. They are related to Jerry himself more than being concerned with the social circumstances in which the character lives. Albee makes it obvious that Jerry’s sense of alienation springs from social reasons, and that society as a whole imposes a sense of alienation upon its member.

The character, Jerry, is from an unhappy childhood and a broken family. His mother Mr. Barleycorn was an alcoholic who left his father when Jerry was 10 years old. His father then took to drinking after his wife’s death and he died of an accident a year later. Jerry was an orphan at the age of 11. He was brought up by a pious aunt who died on the day of his high school graduation. As a result, he feels lonely and misunderstood and lacks company. The two empty picture frames that he keeps in his room and his relationship with women which is
restricted to prostitutes only build an image of an outsider who is utterly depressed. Looking in to Jerry’s personal conditions, it can be perceived that Jerry's early childhood quirk, i.e. his practicing of homosexuality with an older boy at the age of fifteen comes as a result of his family’s disintegration. In telling his family history to Peter, Jerry said that his mother had forsaken them and had taken the road of vice (Hussein 2007:60)

PETER
(stares glumly at his shoes, then) About those two Empty picture frames…?

JERRY
I don’t see why they need any explanation at all. Isn't it clear? I don’t have pictures of anyone to put in them.

PETER
Your parents…perhaps …a girlfriend…

JERRY
You're very sweet man, and you're possessed of a truly Enviable innocence. But good old Mom and good old Pop are Dead ... you know? ... I’m broken up about it, too.. I mean Really. BUT. That particular vaudeville act is playing the could Circuit now, so I don’t see how I can look at them, all neat and Framed. Besides, or, rather to be pointed about it, good old Mom Walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old; She embarked on an adulterous turn of our southern states. (Albee 179-188)

This indicates that his mother’s separation from his father and her later death leaves great gap in Jerry’s early life. Moreover, his father’s death by a bus accident had aggravated his sense of alienation.

Thus alienation lead us to investigate social reasons in this paper, the issue of homosexuality addressed at the midpoint of the play and which is the main focus of this paper. Albee himself is gay, and although he generally does not discuss his sexuality in public, he has never hidden the fact of his sexual preference, "those who are familiar with his work are generally aware of his sexuality"(Shams and Pourgiv2013:8).

Homosexuality is only discussed once in the text, when Jerry mentions his childhood relationship with another boy. Because he swiftly adds that he has since that time only had sex with women, modern readers might be tempted to write off Jerry’s dalliance as a minor detail. But according to play, the moment would have been so shocking to an audience in 1960 that it might well have colored their interpretation of the whole play. Certainly, when Jerry forces Peter to stab him at the end of the play, the moment is full of phallic significance,
there by suggesting that Jerry's entire purpose has been somehow a reflection of repressed
desires. In this way, the *The Zoo Story* can be seen as an allegory about homosexuality.

Jerry’s emotions were always repressed. He lacked the social interaction, integration from
his community and definitely lacked a stable home. Jerry knew that he was gay from an early
age but was ashamed to mention the fact that he had a relationship with a young boy.
Probably the only relationship he ever had:

JERRY

No .I wonder if it's sad that I never see the little ladies more than once .I've never been able to
have sex with, or, how is it put ?…make love to anybody more than once. Once; that’s it…Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen …and I Hang my head in shame that
puberty was late … I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l.I mean ,I was queer… (Very fast) queer, queer, queer… with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind .And for those eleven days, I
met at least twice a day with the park superintendent’s son … a Greek boy, whose birthday
was the same as mine , except he was a year older .I think I was very much in love… maybe
just with sex (Albee 214-222)

However, Jerry was afraid of the look of the society when he was a teenager because he
discovered that he was a homosexual. He explains how he felt at that time , he knew how the
other people would react to him when they labeled him as a homosexual. Jerry was aware
that he may be excluded from the society if the others learned of his homosexuality. So he
suppressed it.

Further, Jerry doesn’t mention anything about having any feeling for a woman. The reason
could lie behind his hatred for his mother and her promiscuity. The sexual undertones of *The
Zoo Story* offer a wide variety of interpretations.(Ibid) describes the play as a “suppressed
gay love story.” He writes that Peter and Jerry’s conversation reflects a mutual attraction, and
they consummate their relationship the only way that their repressive culture will allow them
to through violence.

In the 1950s, American society was socially conservative and not as liberal as it appears to
be now. At the time Albee wrote *The Zoo Story*, in 1958, homosexuality was thought by
many to be a mental illness. It was also illegal. In most states, consensual sex between men
was considered sexual assault, and both participants could be sentenced up to 20 years in
prison. If an individual was revealed as gay, he was at risk of falling out with his family,
losing custody of his children, being harassed by the police, and even being committed to a
mental asylum. These repressions might have led to violence.
The critic (Clum 1992:140) also sees *The Zoo Story* as a homosexual love story set deep in the closet of a repressive society. He notes that Albee portrays homosexual love as an innocent pleasure of adolescence, free of the tensions and misogyny of heterosexual relationships. Jerry speaks of his childhood fling affectionately, but seems tortured by his attempts at heterosexual relationships that followed. This interpretation is important because it ties the play’s sexual themes to its exploration of alienation in general.

People sometimes commit suicide when they lose their dreams, fall disappointed and have no contact to anyone who might help them when they fail to exceed the crises (Ohle2005:3) .In this play, as a lonely person, Jerry’s decision how to escape his isolation and put a meaningful end to his life. It is the ultimate attempt to attract the attention of society when he impales on the knife(Ismaiel 2009:6-7) .

**JERRY**

(With a rush he charges PETER and impales himself on the knife. Tableau: For just a moment, complete silence, JERRY impales on the knife at the end of PETER’S still firm arm. Then PETER pulls away, leaving the knife in JERRY.JEERY is moss ,on point .then Then he ,too, screams, and it must be the sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal .with the knife in him, he stumbles back to the bench that PETER had vacated .He crumbles there, sitting, facing PETER, his eyes wide in agony, his mouth open) .(Albee 525-530)

Anyhow, it seems very difficult for a gay man to build up a relation in his cold community. Jerry extenuate his issue after finding the proper solution to his troubled life. To die on others hand symbolically meaningful because, Jerry thought only through the death he will get the communication with the people and received their intention.

Finally, it becomes very obvious to consider *The Zoo Story* as a homosexual allegory. Albee's play is not about an 'event' but rather about the tragedy of this strange relationship of his community and how social discrimination lead a man to his grave.

**Conclusion**

The paper shed light on the main reasons which caused the alienation of the Gerry. Albee showed us how human misunderstanding and failure of communication between Peter and Jerry lead to destruction .However, Jerry is rootles person that feeling made him ashamed of himself because of the bad reputation of his family, i.e. his mother prostituted and his father was an alcoholic. Moreover being homosexual increased his sense of alienation that made
him isolate himself from his society. Even when he decided to suicide and put an end to his life, he cannot do it by himself, that is why he asked Peter in the park to stab him. Symbolically, Jerry was asking the help of the community because he did not want to die lonely. So, he believed that if he was killed by another person it would represent a kind of communication helped him to escape from his isolation, but he was disappointed. So he threw himself into the knife and was deadly injured. Accordingly the society was the main reason behind the character alienation in *The Zoo Story*.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**