

Existential Approach of Edward Albee in “The Zoo Story”

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Abstract

Edward Albee belongs to the younger generations of American dramatists. Like other younger dramatists, he displays existentialist impulse and *The Zoo Story* is perhaps the most successful existentialist play in the American theatre till date. It not only integrates recognizably existentialist themes and motifs, by symbolic extension of the local and particular manages to evoke convincingly the universal human situation and even the necessary metaphysical dimension.

Keywords: Existentialist, Motifs, Metaphysical, Impulse, Symbolic, American theatre.

The existential philosophers present a definite attitude towards life and its various problems. It expounds man's search for himself and his potentialities to establish his own values in the world. It points human situation in its totality and cares for basic conditions of human existence. Its message is latent in the fact that man's possibilities are into a preordained pattern but he exists first and then he tries to bring himself out of his conditions. Hence, he is the maker of himself. As a formulated philosophy of life, it discloses the mystery of human existence. It emphatically asserts that bitter realities of life find expression in the feelings of anguish, love, guilt, despair, dread and in the sense of inner freedom. It diagnoses man's predicament, believes in the primary existence, acknowledges his freedom and responsibility, lays emphasis on human weakness and insecurity and proposes to resolve all these realistically by taking recourse to one's own interior resource. It therefore can be said that existentialism is an attitude of looking at life. It begins with the problem of human existence and lays stress on man's concrete existence, his contingent nature, his individual freedom and his consequent responsibility for what he fails to make himself to be. It is, in fact, a passionate return of the individual to his own freedom in order

in the unfolding of its processes to dread out the importance of his being. It lays emphasis on the individual existence, an existence which postulates man as free from any natural or human standards in terms of what he must act. The existentialist is the creator of the world of his own experience and he does so through a choice of alternatives, a choice which sets him free from all other men but a choice which enslaves him to his own doubts, uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choice. His is a consciousness which must be saturated with the snare-like emotions of agony, despair, disgust and the feeling of being.

The two originators who introduced modern existentialism to literature and made it famous were Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. They developed it in two distinct directions – atheistic and theistic. For atheistic existentialists, the empirical man is quite capable to mould his life out of the odd situations in which he finds himself. No doubt, there are situations that can't be altered, but one has to accept them and shape one's life accordingly. Theists, on the other side, believe in the existence of God towards man returns. Since man is not a fixed or finished being, he goes ahead of what he becomes in the process of realizing God-head. Man always exalts his being in close correspondence with the world and worldly beings towards God. Thus, man is a communicant being and he establishes rapport with other individuals and ultimately with an all-embracing being through self-transcendence. It is possible only when there is something for which he makes efforts. It is God or Transcendence for which man makes struggles and soars high, higher and the highest. This marks spiritual actualization in the human range. Contrary to theists, atheists have faith in full potentialities of man and as much proving or disproving of God's existence do not take place for them. Thus, man's struggling for Transcendence (theists) or his struggling for making himself by exercising his own free choice (atheists) is the very core crust of the existentialist thinking.

Since existentialism brings within its purview the problems related to concrete human existence, existentialist thinkers have often found their best mode of expression in imaginative literature in drama, fiction, creative prose and poetry. This is true to philosophers like Sartre, Camus as well as to writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Rilke and such others as give expression to the existentialist sensibility chiefly in their literary works. In post war Europe, a complete dramatic movement, latter called 'the theatre of the absurd' emerged basically as a result of the existentialist double focus on absurd-man-in-an-absurd-human condition. "Existentialist literature tends to emphasize certain recurring themes, man separated from an absurd world; the individual estranged from society; the individual's isolation and subjectivity; his consequent feeling of anxiety, anguish, despair, the individual facing his own nothingness, or confronting his guilt, his assertion of personal freedom through irrevocable choice, particularly in extreme situations, limit situations and crisis situations; death consciousness and the need of defending oneself against it; the victim hero who creates his own values from within."

The Zoo Story is an absurd as well as existential play. It explores in existential terms the life situation of the modern man, the meaninglessness and absurdity of the human situation. The complete breakdown of values, the utter incapacity for creative action and the ennui of routine life are considered the malaise of the modern man. The absurdist view point and generalized question associated with existence self have been at the very heart of the inspiration of the play. The play may also be read as a picture of the problems and the conflicts of an existential character.

The Zoo Story deals with the experience, decision and irrevocable action of Jerry, the existentialist man who expresses himself paradoxically but significantly as a permanent transient. Jerry is opposite to Peter, conformist representative of the American middle class, who has been living a settled life, has a good job, a comfortable home, the average number of children and is regarded as a respectable member of society. Peter is shown sitting on a bench in Central Park on a Sunday afternoon. He is reading a book. He takes it for granted that it is his own secure and private corner, his bourgeois property. Jerry, who has the opposite traits of Peter, has no family and has been living in a shabby rooming house with various other social riffraff, brooding over his own rather sordid past. Jerry is against the society and its norms which Peter embodies. This society and its norms, according to Kark Jesper, are a threat to genuine human existence.

Jerry is a social outcast. He has experienced the existentialist agony of total isolation and discovered the meaninglessness of concepts such as 'sense', 'order' and neat organization. In Jerry's opinion, both society and entire human conditions are as frustrating as his image of the Zoo where everyone is separated by bars from everyone else. The animals are separated from animals and similarly men are separated from animals. There the cages stand for social conventions and false values, while the animals symbolically represent different categories of human beings. Jerry is, therefore, deeply concerned with the fundamental human problem of establishing contact with objects, with animals, with people, with ideas, and ultimately, perhaps with God in human form.

Jerry tries his best to make contact with the ferocious dog of his landlady but he meets failure. Jerry's effort becomes highly meaningful as a concrete existentialist experience. Jerry first gives hamburgers to the dog to eat and shows his love and later on, he poisoned him to kill him. Jerry again meets with failure, the dog on recovery gave him a long snare which was a point of contact but then, withdrew altogether allowing Jerry his love passage. Jerry fails to understand whether even aggression is not a way of showing love. Having learnt from this incident that a simultaneous combination of love hate is the only teaching emotion, Jerry finds Peter sitting in the park, on his way back from the zoo in a last desperate attempt at human communication.

Jerry suddenly goes to Peter sitting on a bench in the park and tries to engage him in conversation. Peter very politely but reluctantly avoids Jerry who carefully manipulates him with his love hate technique. Jerry starts conversation with personal questions some of which are quite

uncomfortable ones. Jerry goes on to tell his own past experience, again somewhat embarrassing to Peter. Jerry then tries to be close to Peter by tickling him disarmingly, and later on goes to provoke him with insults and blows into an open fight. The final upshot of all this is that Jerry knowingly thrusts himself on the knife and thus kills himself. Peter is made to hold out in self-defense. Peter is thus violently shocked out for it was beyond his imagination.

Jerry's killing himself must be looked upon not as negative escape from life, but as a positive existentialist choice which succeeds in conveying to Peter the superior consciousness of the absurd. Just as Peter will never be able to forget absurd fact he has involuntarily killed a man, so he must, henceforth acknowledge the existence of 'unaccommodated man', and grow to know the fact of isolation and frustration. From Peter's standpoint, it is a horrifying existentialist experience: the sudden revelation of his absurd situation as a civilized man and a genuine insight into the completely contingent nature of life. Jerry embraces death happily. He is satisfied in having ultimately established human contact, in having deprived Peter of his bench, and in convincing Peter to an existentialist awareness. The tragic fact here is that one human being comes to know of the problem of the other human being only at the cost of a life. Like the 'Ancient Mariner' in Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' who stopped the wedding guest, Jerry has made out of Peter 'a sadder and a wiser man', who must now assume the burden of the absurd.

It is interesting to observe that the theme of loneliness, of man's alienation in a world ravaged by two world wars is a dominant theme which the modern playwrights have been delineating in their plays. The play reveals a sharp perception of man's alienation in a world of spiritual importance, or a social order in which there seems to be painful breakdown of human communication. On the simplest level, *The Zoo Story* is concerned with human isolation. The world is a zoo "with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals," i.e. men separated from both from each other and from their own basic animal nature (as Peter one of 'the people' is, until the end of the play, separated from his own animal nature).

In the play Jerry is presented as an isolated person, completely alienated from the rest of the society. He tries to establish communication with various persons including a dog through fair and foul means but fails to do so. As Albee describes in his description of the dramatic personae, Peter is "neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely." He is, in fact, in no way distinctive. Peter is the modern version, in middle class stereotype, of everyman. His is the New Yorker life to which most middle class citizens consciously or unconsciously aspire. In him is blended perfectly the brightly packed emptiness of the modern man. The bars which separate Peter from his own nature and from other people are the material goods and the prefabricated ideas with which he distinguishes himself from others. He has himself carefully constructed his isolation.

Jerry is a desperate man who is in search of someone with whom he may establish some sort of communication. He enters the park and tries to come close to Peter through conversation. Peter would prefer not to talk to Jerry but is too polite and too afraid of anyone's bad opinion, even Jerry's, to ignore him. When Jerry starts talking to him, he tries to avoid talking about any subject that has real relevance, anything that has roots penetrating the carefully prepared masks which he presents to the world, and even to himself. When Jerry trying to establish some real contact with Peter, questions him about his having more children, he shows no interest in the conversation and tries to change the topic. On Jerry's urge to have a talk with Peter, the latter agrees to it. Jerry starts with a meaningful reference to the weather and drifts on to the question which leads Peter to speak of his T.V. sets, his parakeets and cats, his residence in the Elegant East Seventies, and his position as an executive in a publishing house with Eighteen thousand year, a wife and two daughters. Jerry's further questions reveal that Peter is incapable of producing any more children. This enrages Peter and he again tries either to answer his question or change the topic. But Jerry keeps, pressing Peter for more details, saying, "...everyone in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk, like to get to know somebody, know all about him."

Later, Jerry tells Peter about his own life. He speaks at length of his own dull and monotonous life, alienated from the rest. He tells that he lives with many other people in a four-storey, brown-stone, rooming-house but he has no intimacy with any one of them. He dwells with peculiar relish on the depression and almost revolting details of his rooming establishments – its dwellers, the dark queen, her garden or paramour, who "all he does is to pluck his eyebrows, wear his Japanese kimono and go to the John", and the woman living on the third floor keeps crying all the time...muffled but very determined. He tells Peter about two empty frames. His parents are no more in this world and apparently they did not mean much to him when they were alive: I have no feeling about any of it that I care to admit. Since he fails to make contact with human beings, he tries to have a friendship with his landlady's dog, but here too he meets with failure: "We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other." The need to win the confidence of someone, for understanding, has now become the more urgent theme: "If you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere...with animals." Ultimately, he visits a zoo to find out the way how men and men and men and animals maintain to live close to one another.

As he narrates his story, Jerry for the first time sits on the bench beside Peter and demands Peter to move over. Peter moves a little, but Jerry keeps asking him to move further until Peter is crowded on to the edge of the bench, a symbol of possession. Peter defends himself. Jerry takes out a knife and loses it to Peter to make the fight more evenly matched and as Peter holds it in self defense, Jerry impels himself on the knife and thus kills himself. Jerry dies but he reaches beyond his own self, commiserate with Peter urging him to run away from there. Jerry returns the book to Peter, wipes the finger prints from the blood stained knife. He is thus

successful in forcing some sort of contact with a man who is completely alien to him. His final words scornfully mimic Peter's exclamation at the disaster, 'Oh...my...God'.

Jerry's inability to make contact with his fellow human being in the play is suggested by showing him and Peter talking on the issue which lacks the common interest. Neither Peter is interested in Jerry's problems nor has Jerry regard for the type of life Peter lives. They not only represent two socio-economic poles but they also present an emotional contrast. Peter is happy within the confines of his protected life. He represents the type of people who live in their own paradise without caring for the darkness and terror found around them. Jerry, on the other hand, is a social outcast who has difficulty in forming his own character and in being familiar with other people of society and even with a dog. In him, we see the remnants of a person who apparently once had an infinite capacity for love and compassion. Having tested the knowledge of the futility of life that has neither certitude nor love, he is now reduced to a state of utter weariness. The acrid sense of isolation drives him to establish contact with a dog: "...it is just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere with animals." Jerry faces the difficulty of winning confidence of any of his fellow being. When his efforts of making contact with his parents, neighbours and dog are frustrated, he tries to come close and have a talk with an alien. In Jerry, the playwright has portrayed a character of the modern man incapable of establishing a lasting relationship with mankind. In the absence of this relationship, man becomes an alien in the scheme of life. Jerry's tragedy is not just an individual case. He is symbolic of the alienated modern man found everywhere in this universe. He is not alone that yearns to be the object of love but incapable of giving love to others in the normal sense. He is shown in a world in which everyone is separated by bars from one another. The confrontation between two strangers reveals an awareness of the wide discrepancy in our society and provides us a disturbing insight into the complexities and difficulties of human relationship.

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