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Claustrophobic Tension: A Nauseous Outburst in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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Abstract: This paper is an endeavour to make a study of the tension between the society and the individual self in the celebrated play *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee; and this tension, at the end of the play, behoves a sickness like nausea which brings the death of the main protagonist Jerry to get rid of the claustrophobic existence in an absurd world that seems like a zoo. Herein, the play represents a society, which indicates the topsy-turvy condition of 1950s America where the post-war disillusionment and the McCarthyism were occurred, as a form of macabre ideology of larger social self through which the little self of Jerry, is dominated. Jerry, being a denizen of purposeless absurd world, tries to make a relation between this larger self and his little self; but again and again all has gone in fiasco. He is alienated not only with other people but also with animals; and victimized by deadening loneliness like a 'lone wolf'. Jerry tries to find a real meaning of life and wants to escape from 'death-in-life' condition of living but repeatedly, he is hurled in an alienation of no exit. At last, the paper shows that alienation becomes a nauseous disease for Jerry; and in an outburst of it, he commits suicide which is very much philosophical.

Keywords – Nausea, Claustrophobic, McCarthyism, Lone wolf.

Introduction

In his epoch-making work *Don Juan*, Canto-IV, Lord Byron was so loquacious to utter through the mouth of Don Juan that – “But the fact is that I have nothing planned / Unless it were to be a moment merry” (Byron 3). Edward Albee is one of those sui-generis dramatists who, by shuffling the nauseous sweetness of success and by abdicating the thought of profit and loss,



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moulds drama open-heartedly with his own pleasure by capturing the contemporary moment of America. Extolled or denounced, exploratory or imitative, optimistic or nihilistic, he is questionably the major playwright to whom the whole world was elastic enough to give the stature of brilliant literary dramatist like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller. That is why, Harold Clurman, in a *New York Times* article on November, 1966, states that during his lectures in foreign he was asked about his opinion of Edward Albee who aroused the greatest interest in America. His answer was so apropos and beyond a few generalization, it was that – “Albee is 38; I shall be able to offer you a more considered judgement when he is 58!” (qtd. in Rudisill 1). So, the point is that Albee was an ingenious playwright in the process of evolution. And, his actual critical awards attest his reputation in 1963 when he was awarded the *New York Drama Critics' Circle Award* for the best play of the year; the *Outer Circle Award* for Outstanding American Playwright of a Broadway play and also several awards. But his dream reached its culminating point of success when his paradoxical position in American Culture was summed up by the Kennedy Centre's honours ceremony of 1996, at which he was lauded by President Clinton – “Tonight our nation – born in rebellion – pays tribute to you, Edward Albee. In your rebellion the American theatre was reborn” (qtd. in Bottoms 1).

Once Friedrich Nietzsche declared that Art is the great stimulus to life and somehow Nietzsche's declaration became the aphorism of Edward Albee's artistic creed which reflects very overtly the ethos of 1950s American life. At a time when American modern society was thrown into a stream of progressive degradation and when the entire atmosphere is surcharged with disillusion and disintegration, Albee came forward to elucidate in his dramas the sordid paraphernalia of contemporary life with its spiritual ennui, boredom and hectic despondency. The disgusting and catastrophic European Phenomena namely the ‘Second World War’ caused havoc by providing illimitable insult to the human dignity, purity, morality and spirituality. The people became self convicted by showing their existential crisis, psychological imbalance, moral dilemma and their indecisive action through their absurd performances that ultimately gone in futility. The contemporary American lethal world of Albee suffered much from such or above conditions that



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made the contemporary people entrapped within a world that created much pain, agonies, disillusionment and self-negotiation. Disillusionment became an undiagnosed cancer whose cells are always engaged in a continuous enhancement, it metastasized from one to another. And the American disillusionment, fragmentation of self and quest for identity are ignited again by the political fears of the McCarthy era. However, Edward Albee also started writing at this very moment when the United States were undergoing a shock awakening from bad dreams of this 1950's political fears of the McCarthy era – that “Scoundrel time” (qtd. in Koreneva 1) as Lillian Hellman put it. Though it is very much difficult to measure it as a joy of spiritual liberation, it will not be wrong to call it a great disillusionment with reality. ‘McCarthyism’ is the practice of making unfair allegations or using unfair investigative techniques, especially in order to restrict dissent or political criticism. The term refers to U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy and has its origins in the period of the United States known as the Second Red Scare, lasting roughly from 1947 to 1956, just before the two years of the publication of Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*. It characterized by heightened political repression as well as a campaign spreading fear of influence on American institutions and of espionage by Soviet agents. During this era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers and became the subject of aggressive investigations and questioning before government or private-industry panels, committees and agencies. Even, it is difficult to estimate the number of victims of ‘McCarthy’. The number imprisoned is in the hundreds, and some ten or twelve thousand lost their jobs. All meaning, all hope, all reason of life have seemed as nothingness which attacked the very demure concept of American dream which was rooted in the second sentence of the “Declaration of Independence” (1776) which states that “All Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” (qtd. in Elias 3). But, this happiness becomes uncertain and dream remains only as a dream because it has lost its affinity with crude reality. And, in this topsy-turvy and gruesome situation, Edward Albee had caught and expressed the essence of the change of the American life by representing the collapse of the American dream more profoundly and fully than any other American playwrights of



that time. Thus, his first play *The Zoo Story* seems as the best product of that particular time for it reflects the horrible vagueness and the bleak despair of modern American man who finds himself in a universe where living has become meaningless and nonsensical as empty chatter.

Just before turning thirty, Albee decided to prove himself by taking few weeks to write his first play, *The Zoo Story*, a short drama that was first performed in 1959 in Germany at the experimental branch of the Schiller Theatre of West Berlin. Early the next year, it was paired at the Provincetown Playhouse in a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*; and the two plays ran for nineteen months. The play was read by friends of Albee and circulated unsuccessfully from New York, to Florence, to Zurich, to Frankfurt, and finally to Berlin for its belated world premiere. The play consists of one act only, and it contains two characters, Jerry and Peter. The play begins with Peter who is sitting on the bench in the Central Park of New York, reading his morning newspaper. And, when Jerry approaches, Peter would prefer not to talk and Jerry is trying to establish some real contact with Peter by asking personal questions about his having more children, Peter withdraws from the conversation, furious that Jerry might have spotted a chink in his armour.

Jerry: And you're not going to have any more kids, are you?

Peter: (a bit distantly) No, No more. (Then back and irksome)

Why did you say that? How would you know that? (3)

So, it is apropos to convey that the play is a quest for communication of Jerry with the society. Like so many voices suppressed and ignored by 1950s attitudes, Jerry has a desire to tell his own story. The newspaper *Darmstadter Echo* once stated a bit of prophetic view that "the monologue of a desperate man, imploringly looking for human contact and friendship, is an experiment and perhaps a discovery for the theatre" (qtd. in Rudisill 40). This view is very much inevitable for Albee in representing Jerry as a victim of the disillusionment of 1950's America. Like Estragon and Vladimir of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Jerry, a New York vagabond, also becomes a patient of 'Aphasia' which means an inability to comprehend and formulate language because of mental disorder. For a human it's very important to communicate and share their happiness, grief and



ideas, but Jerry does not get sufficient opportunity to communicate with fellow humans. Being a completely isolated individual, he sees the world as a zoo where everyone is separated with each other. He admits that – “But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him” (3).

Thus, Jerry becomes the perfect replica of the people of modern America as well as modern world. And, the untold story in the play is that the life in a zoo is analogous to the life of the people in 1950s America as well as the post-war world where communication is not possible, mutual empathy does not exist and people are unable to come to terms with their true condition. For this reason, Martin Esslin was so eloquent to say that Albee's personal vision of the world in *The Zoo Story* becomes an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world. And for this lack or difficulty of communication with the big societal self, Jerry's inner little self is trapped within it. It tries again and again to come out from the cocoon but there is no outside of it, all is within. The little self of Jerry is captured within an American society which seems like Dante's “Inferno” and it is enclosed within the claustrophobic hell of Jean- Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* which indicates that – there is no exit.

In increasingly frantic attempts, to establish a connection with Peter and make him responsive of the sterility of his existence, Jerry narrates the allegorical ‘story of Jerry and the Dog’. His failure to communicate with any human being started his attempts with the dog. As he explains, “it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!” (10). When the landlady's dog rushed to attack him, Jerry, at first, liked the dog because the animal paid him some attention. Jerry decided to establish a friendly relationship with the dog, so he offered him six ‘perfectly good’ hamburgers. The dog devoured all of them. Jerry continued offering such food to the dog for five days more but there was no change in dog's attitude. He was as usual—“snarl, sniff; move; faster; stare; gobble; RAAGGGHHH; smile; snarl; BAM” (8). So, finally he decided to kill the dog. One day he offered the dog one hamburger with ‘a murderous portion of rat poison’. The dog fell ill and the landlady, being scared, ‘snivelled and implored’ him to pray for the



animal. Jerry did not actually intend to kill the dog. He exposed this real intention to Peter: "... I didn't want the dog to die. I didn't, and not just because I'd poisoned him. I'm afraid that I must tell you I wanted the dog to live so that I could see what our new relationship might come to" (9).

The dog survived and as Jerry expected, a new relationship between him and the dog emerged. Jerry was happy in his new relationship with the dog as he discovered that it was an understanding, a compromise that all his life he sought with humans. And, from this incident, Jerry learned that neither 'kindness' nor 'cruelty' can independently create any effective connection, but when they are combined, they could work as a 'teaching emotion'. In that McCarthyism time, there was only cruelty, human kindness had lost its ground; and the lack of communication was evoked in every individual self as it is seen in Jerry and for this reason, he wants to make a relation with the Dog rather than the society. That is why, in an interview, Albee admits, "I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story*, to a certain extent, is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, ultimately failing and trying and failing" (qtd. in Mann 34).

In *Politics*, Aristotle recognizes that "human beings are essentially social: the life of a person is lived in common with other people, and the institution of that common life is the city or polis" (qtd. in Bloom 89). So, a person who is unable to share in common life with the people of a "polis" is ostracised in alienation. Moreover, this "alienation", according to Harold Bloom, "originally meant estrangement, in the sense Celia applies it in *As You Like It* when she takes on the name of Aliena, 'the stranger', for her sojourn in Arden with Rosalind, whose assumed name is Ganymede" (Bloom XV). But, alienation in the time of post-war world in general and in the time of 1950s America in particular took in the meaning of existential dread which is conspicuously exhibited in this drama through the character of Jerry. Jerry's communication with other people will give his existence; but Jerry cannot do it properly. His identity is in an existential crisis which throws him in isolation. Even, for this lack of proper and timely communication with other people Jerry's childhood was marred with bitter experiences which engendered his frustration and alienation. His mother left the family 'on an adulterous turn' when Jerry was ten and a half years old. After a few weeks, his father



was killed by a city omnibus. Jerry, being an orphan, moved in with his mother's sister. This lady also died on the stairs of their apartment on the afternoon of his high school graduation. 'Nemesis' came down in Jerry's life. His own tragic life-story seemed to himself, "a terribly middle-European joke" (5). Thus, all these facts created a New York vagabond named Jerry who at a certain age discovered himself all alone, confined in his own 'cage' like a room isolated from other people of the civilized world. However, Jerry lived in a brownstone rooming house on the upper West side of New York City, between Columbus Avenue and Central Park, in a poor neighbourhood. He does not know much about his neighbours, and he does not know all of them. Even, his neighbours also feel themselves isolated and lonely though they live among a crowd. Jerry says that the people in the apartment have strange behaviours. The colored queen, for example, always wears a Japanese kimono and has a strange habit of plucking his eyebrow, the woman, who is living on the third floor, cries all the time behind the locked door. Even, the landlady is also very strange for she always tries to seduce Jerry in the entrance hall. These strange behaviours reflect the people's anxiety and despair; these suggest that they have already completed their life but death still now does not come to them. They are living in a 'death-in-life' condition which is a characteristic of alienation in modern society. For this reason, Jerry couldn't enjoy a healthy social relationship with his neighbours in the rooming house. This also had severe negative impacts on his mind. According to Matthew Roudane, who quoted a 1974 interview with Albee in his *Understanding Edward Albee*, the playwright mentioned that he got the idea for *The Zoo Story* while working for Western Union: "I was always delivering telegrams to people in rooming houses. I met [the models for] all those people in the play in rooming houses. Jerry, the hero, is still around" (Roudane 30). So, there is not an iota of doubt to convey that Jerry, being an inhabitant of this modern 1950s America, becomes a 'lone wolf' i.e. an existential trait which indicates a person who has a silent conversation which is replete with endless crisis.

In 1938, Samuel Beckett was stabbed on the street of Paris and nearly died. After he rejected the solicitations of a pimp who went by the name of Prudent, the man attacked Beckett with a knife. The wound was serious – Beckett ended up with a perforated lung – but he later



dropped the charges against Prudent, partly because he liked the man's response when Beckett asked him why he had stabbed him: "Je ne sais pas, Monsieur. Je m' excuse" i.e. "I do not know, sir. I'm sorry" (qtd. in Guha 140). Beckett found such an answer fascinating and it becomes the skeleton of his existential works which probe the seeming purposelessness of existence. Why are we here? What's the point in living? What is the purpose of anything? All these questions become very much cabalistic in moulding Beckett's purposeless world where self is entrapped as animals are entrapped in a zoo. And, this Beckett's stance, which is taken to be pessimistic by many critics, has become an example for many young writers. Albee is one of them among his American followers. In an interview, Albee confirms Beckett's influence:

Sam Beckett invented twentieth-century drama and made all sorts of amazing things both possible and impossible for the rest of us. Possible because he opened up so many doors and windows for what could be done, and impossible because we all realized we couldn't do it as well as he did (qtd. in Kucuk 22).

Thus, inspired by Beckett's existential themes, Albee handles specific issues in connection with the society, and he believes that they are inseparable. So, he manages to create, as critic Paolucci says, a "new dramatic balance of public issues and private tensions" (qtd. in Kucuk 23). And, this "new dramatic balance" is clearly reverberated in *The Zoo Story* by interpreting the purposeless condition of Jerry in the jungle of the New York City. Jerry, being a "Being or Dasein" of Heidegger, can't create his essence that is his own value and meaning of his life. In this perspective, the French philosopher Sartre was so eloquent to argue that all existential thought is summed up in the phrase 'existence precedes essence' which he draws from Heidegger's following statement: "The essence of Dasein lies in its existence" (qtd. in Kucuk 29). Through this claim, Sartre segregates his view from an established principle of metaphysics that 'essence precedes existence'. Sartre writes in his work *Existentialism is a Humanism* that man first of all exists, confronts himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. The essence of something is whatever makes it what it is. But, Sartre's view means that human beings exist — are born and are conscious of their lives — before they really are anything. No crucial, necessary ingredient defines what a human being is.



Human beings quite literally start as nothing. Christopher Panza and Gregory Gale, in their book *Existentialism For Dummies*, elucidate Sartre's notion very neatly with the instance of a 'watch'. According to their analysis, a watch has a set function, it exists to tell time. If something didn't tell you the time, you wouldn't call it a watch. So, telling time is a necessary feature of being a watch; that's what makes it what it is. This function already exists in the mind of the watchmaker before he actually creates any given watch. The watch's essence — what it is to be a watch — precedes its actual existence because that essence, that purpose, was in the mind of the designer before the watch came into being. But, in the case of human beings, it is complex. Sartre dramatically claims that if God doesn't exist, this order is reversed for human beings. Because God didn't design us, we weren't created with a plan in mind, as the watch was. Unlike the watch, we weren't meant to serve a set function. When we're born, we're simply there, with no reason or meaning. No designer had any essence in mind, so we exist before that existence has any meaning, purpose, or definition. That's why, existence precedes essence. A human being is essentially a creature that creates its own essence. And, it is true to say that this view is also applicable for Albee's protagonist Jerry. But, in the drama, Jerry's isolated existence can't precede his essence because of his lack of communication with the society which seems to him as a zoo where his self is thrown to suffer. This 'thrownness', a term coined by Heidegger, means the facticity of its [Dasein's] being delivered over and it is the cause of the anxiety of Jerry's life. For Jerry both society and the entire human condition are absurd and as frustrating as his image of the zoo. His little self is tortured again and again by the larger self of society. Frantically, he is searching the way to get rid of this tedious society but there is no way to be free as Friedrich Nietzsche said in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that – "You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist" (qtd. in Harvey 21). And, because of this no exit condition, Jerry is haunted by anxiety that gives him nauseous feeling and its result is his suicide.

Therefore, it is important not to forget that man's inability to comprehend the significance of his own existence is revealed in his feelings or moods of anxiety because it emerges from nothingness. And, Albee's characters seem to lead a life which is based upon the absurdity of the modern



America and the consequent is meaningless and futility of human action. Like the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon of Beckett, Albee's character Jerry realises the absolute truth that – 'Nothing to be done'; and by doing nothing, Jerry feels a void in his life that leads him to anxiety. Herein, Albee portrays the nothingness that lies underneath the modern life, and his character is inevitably anxious when he has to recognize this void at the centre. In the drama, Jerry is ill at ease from the start, and the stage directions that inform the way he tells the story of the dog and himself clarify his anxiety. Again, another story, which involves Jerry's life at the rooming house he lives in, tells of the alienation and the lack of communication he experiences from the society. His anxiety, while he is telling these stories, stems from the fact that he perceives the absurdity of his life and nullity of his existence. And, according to Sartre, the human being feels 'nausea' thinking of his own existence which is bullyragged by anxiety. Sartre defines it as "a pure apprehension of the self as a factual existence" (qtd. in Kucuk 57). It is an insipid taste, and the human being cannot get away from it.

Conclusion

'Nausea' is a medical term which means a sensation of unease and discomfort in the upper stomach with an involuntary urge to vomit, but a person can have nausea without vomiting. Again, an espial on the etymology of the word 'nausea' shows that it has been derived from the Greek word 'nausia' which means 'feeling sick'. But, Jean-Paul Sartre illustrates this term from the existential perspective in his novel *Nausea*. The novel describes a character named Antoine Roquentin who, like Jerry, is seen as an individual sufferer from depression and the nausea itself is one of the symptoms of his condition. Both of them are victims of larger ideological, social, and existential forces that have brought them to the brink of insanity. As Roquentin's nausea arises from his near complete detachment from other people, Jerry's nausea emerges from his isolation and lack of communication in the 1950s modern America. And, this nauseous feeling irritates Jerry through the whole drama. As a result, Jerry commits suicide to make his little self free from this absurd and nauseous condition. Thus, by committing suicide, Jerry



shows that life in the New York City is not worth living; it is a choice that implicitly declares that life is too much. His suicide offers the basic way out of nausea, the immediate termination of the self from the labyrinth of the larger self. That is why, Albee at age forty-three could say in a *New York Times* interview: "I had an awareness of death when I was 15, but I turned 36 or 37 before I became aware that I, Edward Albee, was going to die. The realization did not fill me with dread. I simply became aware of the fact that this is the only time around for me" (qtd. in Vos 7). Jerry, like his creator, realises the necessity of his death and he has done it as his creator felt.

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