

“NON-CONFORMIST ABSURDIST: EDWARD ALBEE’S EXPERIMENTATIONS IN DRAMA.”

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Abstract:

Appraising the theatre of Edward Albee is an exercise in recognizing the emergence of new talent. Martin Esslin’s attempt to include Albee under the umbrella term ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ as Esslin feels that Albee “comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism” (Esslin, 1969 267), is also protested by Albee. Albee’s literary career spans more than half a century exhibiting diversity in themes and techniques. His plays have social roots in American family system and theatrical roots in Samuel Beckett with the typical handling of his own. Therefore, the present paper attempts to investigate Albee’s use of various themes and techniques as a protest against European and also American Theatre of the Absurd setting his own individual style of drama. Further, the paper probes how Albee continually defends his decision to experiment, least caring for public acclaim. With the help of select plays, the paper tries to explore how Albee has transformed the genre, reorienting his plays towards the dramatization of philosophical questions of current interest.

Keywords: Edward Albee, Theatre of the absurd, protest, experimentations.

“Protest as a Technique: Edward Albee’s Experimentations in Drama”

American experimental playwrights refuse to group themselves under the rigidly defined school of art. At the same time, they do not imitate European experimental model. They experiment with various themes and techniques but in a highly individualistic manner. Edward Albee belongs to this credo. Albee was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Existentialism of J.P. Sartre and the literary

movement of the Theatre of the Absurd, especially that of Samuel Beckett. Nevertheless, he transmuted this influence into the American domestic drama and produced his unique style. Although he was the successor of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill, who perfected domestic drama his name was listed among Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, who wrote in the vein of Absurd Drama. He is described as "a deeply serious, highly erudite figure, very much a member of the literary establishment..., a writer of many faces, many moods" (Bottoms 1). Most of the plays of Albee have domestic settings. They present an attack on the cruelty, complacency and hollowness of the American scene. Albee adapted the experimental form of the European artists to interpret American situation. In the process, he neither followed European model nor American dramatists of twentieth century.

Martin Esslin includes Albee under the umbrella term 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. Esslin feels that Albee "comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism" (Esslin, 1969 267) while Robert Brustein locates him within the theatre of revolt. It is so because Brustein terms the theatre of revolt as, "impotent and despairing" (The Theatre of Revolt 26). However, Albee's drama, according to Bigsby does not reflect the ironical despair which is the mark of the theatre of revolt as the faith which Albee proclaims in man would be entirely absent in European absurdist (Confrontation xvi-xvii). Albee himself, too, protested his inclusion in the tradition of the theatre of the Absurd by Esslin. Therefore, the paper aims at exploring how Albee protests against the set traditions in the field of drama refusing to fit in a particular school of art realising the insufficiency of the existing techniques. Thus the present research paper is based on the hypothesis: Albee uses various themes and techniques as a protest against European and also American Theatre of the Absurd setting his own individual style of drama. The paper also aims at exploring why Albee protested against the set norms and how he achieved it in his overall dramatic repertoire.

C. W. E. Bigsby, Anita Maria Stenz, Anne Paolucci, Rutenberg, Mathew Rouden, Bruce Mann, Mel Gussav, Amacher et al are the galaxy of critics who have appraised Albee's works through varied perspectives. However, more amount of critical exposition is from a thematic point of view and very few probes into structural aspects of the plays. It is, therefore, worth a while to investigate how Albee protests against existing techniques popular in theatre.

The second generation of the Theatre of the Absurd follows the trace of the absurdist playwright, Beckett, in most of the subject matters and style. Each absurdist writer has analyzed these themes and used these techniques in his own way. Especially in the

European countries, after the World Wars, people lost their faith in religion, in conventional establishments, and they also lost their hopes for the future. This situation was not the same with America because “In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose. The American dream of a good life... [was] still very strong. In the United States the belief in progress... has been maintained into the middle of the twentieth [century]” (Esslin 225). As a result, there are not so many absurd plays in America as there are in Europe. However, Edward Albee uses the subject matter and the form of the Absurd drama in his own American way.

The aim of this paper is to study Edward Albee's affinities with Absurd drama while following his own agenda and how he evolves a different approach by a realist representation of the middle-class American society in his plays. He aims to bring forth social criticism to display the suffering of lost and lonely characters of that society. Although Albee adopted many techniques from the Absurdist drama, he recognized the insufficiency of their vision. Limited in depicting human existence as meaningless, the dramatists of the European theatre of the Absurd found themselves at a dead-end and merely revelled in their linguistic and theatrical skills. Albee, however, prefers to go beyond this dead-end to an existentialist's commitment to intimacy, through the stripping of illusion (Kolin and Davies 3). Albee's style refrains from being as surreal as that of many Absurdist dramatists, but his plays reflect the philosophy that life is inherently absurd. Although his plays may seem at first glance to be realistic, the surreal nature of Albee's plays is never far from the surface. For Albee reality serves only as an “invitation to the surreal and the fantastic” (Hirsch 16). It is to be noted that on the surface his plays are realistic, but they always incorporate some fantastical elements or allegorical characters such as the Angel of Death.

It is a well-recognised fact that Albee was influenced by the Absurd Drama of Samuel Beckett whose works involve existential concerns. Albee follows Beckett's traces in the dramatization of uncertainty, alienation and the question of freedom. Albee's characters do not have fixed identities, and they suffer from their identity problems. The notion of the 'Other' enhances this uncertainty. The ambiguity of existence presents another problem for these characters. Their lives are based on illusions, and the line between reality and fantasy is absent. Alienation of the human being from the self and the others is another existential theme that Albee deals with. However, to portray the complex human issues, Albee had to protest the existing form and themes of the plays. No two plays of Albee are similar in form while there is a relentless evolution in his ideas about human experience.

Unlike Miller and Williams, Albee's concern is not about the failure of the American values but about the deterioration that characterizes these values. The reason being, the persistence of these banal values renders the human situation totally absurd. However, like the European absurdist, Albee does not think that the human condition is ontologically irredeemable. The Zoo-like separatism in the human situation, for Albee, is either a failure or evasion of human relationships as he believes in transcendence.

If Albee's linguistic and structural resourcefulness is what brings him closer in spirit to the avant-garde impulse of the theatre of the absurd, it's his sustained critique of the contemporary American reality that demonstrates his affiliation with the realistic tradition. It makes Albee an absurdist with a difference which is put rather succinctly by Gareth Lloyd Evans, "It's Albee's commitment to a surgical analysis of certain aspects of American society which debars him from acceptance as a complete and pure absurdist" (American Connections 197).

It is worth analysing few of the texts to prove how Albee brings out the above-mentioned protest in his dramatic oeuvre. Fair justice will be done only when the topic will be analysed in a thesis. However considering the restraints of this research paper, only two prominent texts are analysed with the passing references to other plays. The two selected plays gained Albee a prestigious Pulitzer award viz.: *Seascape* of 1975 and *Three Tall Women* of 1991.

Albee uses stylistic devices like repetition, parallelism, and counterpoint to substitute for the lack of plot in the play, *Counting the Ways*. He uses piano pieces by Satie, and Sonata like movement to underscore the theme of estrangement, alienation and failed communication. Albee's use of several techniques such as repetitions, interruptions and fragmented utterances reveal lack of communication among the characters. The speeches in his plays are "idle talk". His characters speak in monologues. Even when they seem to talk to another person, they are indeed talking to themselves. They sometimes use stories to explain their situation. It is an indirect way to tell something about them. Albee uses flashback, the reminiscences of the shy boy especially to show the lack of sentimentality in love which is the reason of a lack of affection in the couple's present life. This lost affection is comic and absurd. They remain devoid of tenderness and feelings due to their essential hollowness and weariness. Symbols like love tests, chairs, beds, flowers etc. used by Albee serve the purpose of exposing how characters are devoid of sentiments. These symbols lack romance as do the characters.

While handling the themes of death and ageing in his Pulitzer Prize-winning play entitled, *Three Tall Women*, Albee uses a fresh experimental form of play in terms of content and style which is different from his earlier plays. The story of an elderly

woman who reminiscent of regret and compromise make the play wholly realistic. The playwright asserts, “*Three Tall Women* is an absolutely naturalistic play about three ages, three women who happen to be three ages of the same woman in an impossible but realistic convention with each other” (Albee 8-9). By splitting the protagonist, A into three different characters, ‘A’ aged 91, ‘B’ is 52 and ‘C’ is 26, representing three stages of life, Albee portrays graphically the evolution of one woman’s identity. The juxtaposition of three characters enlightens the audience of A’s personal compromises, infidelities, remorse and helplessness towards life’s inevitable finality. The play is a sagacious critique of and a prudent commentary on senility, its consequences on the protagonist as well as others in her life. It deals with her attitude towards mortality and her mental condition while facing impending death.

The characters in *Three Tall Women* are not identified by name, but by letters A, B and C which reveals a critical emphasis on American society, the society that has reduced the identity of human beings to mere letters. One comes across such nameless characters in *All Over* too, wherein characters are identified only by their functions within the work - The Wife, The Daughter, The Mistress, The Doctor, The Son, The Best Friend, The Nurse, Photographers, The Reporter etc. Albee refers to all these characters only in terms of the Man who is a coma.

The lack of a name is a relevant factor for the play and their characters; it intensifies the factors of de-individualization. Thus the play blurs the individual traits, indicating that the characters are generic and can be as common as any other. The characters A, B and C, which actually are the manifestations of three phases of one woman, represent several other women of the same social and economic status of A. Edward Albee uses this technique of not giving them names to dilute the individuality of characters. In doing so, he seems to adopt a form of criticism of society predominantly supported by the cult of individualism. Besides, this technique helps Albee to universalize the subject he is dealing with the play.

Albee’s *Seascape* is the first play with the interspecies meeting: Charlie and Nancy, a human couple and Leslie and Sara, the newts i.e. a couple of sea lizards. The play embodies the encounter of the human and newts which is hugely entertaining--suspenseful, exciting, moving, surprising, where the newts find human ways incomprehensible and “reject modern civilization”(Amacher 166). The two couples quiz each other about the nature of their lives, venturing into intimate topics that highlight evolutionary process covering discussion on marriage customs, flight and aerodynamics, childbearing and rearing and racialism. However the conversation takes the toll of a physical fight ending in reconciliation, but the newts decide to go back to sea. But Nancy prevents them saying “You’ll have to come back...sooner or later,”

(Seascape 135) and the play ends on the optimistic note with Leslie's words- "All right. Begin" (Seascape 135).

The meeting is a unique experience to Charlie and Nancy, strengthening the bond of love between them. Although Leslie and Sarah too undergo a similar type of experience, Albee is more interested in the civilized couple to keep their flexibility and curiosity burning. Charlie is indeed reasserting Darwin's theory of 'survival of the fittest' in the following sentence: "Mutate or perish. Let your tail drop off; change your spots or maybe just your point of view" (Seascape 123).

However, Leslie and Sarah experience the divorce between them and their familiar environment. Leslie and Sarah feel like outsiders in their own surrounding: ". . . all of a sudden, everything . . . down there . . . was terribly it wasn't comfortable anymore . . . we didn't think we belonged there anymore" (Seascape 116). Interestingly enough, Albee here is speaking about Darwin's natural selection, "which is a gradual process by which species adapt to their environment" ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Natural selection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_selection)). It is indeed Darwin who speaks through Charlie when Charlie tells the newts, "there was a time when we all were down there, crawling around, and swimming and carrying on . . . (Seascape118).

The play concludes on a positive note, "All right. Begin" (Seascape 135). It is a beginning in the true sense for both the couples. They are all set to begin the death of the old life and the birth of the new. Leslie and Sarah will die as lizards and be born as humans whereas Charlie and Nancy will die and brand new individuals with transformed attitudes and outlooks will be born. Thus through the language of symbols, Albee brings out his major theme – acceptance of death and also acceptance of life as being transient.

To conclude, Beckett's work would reflect irony; Albee's plays generate faith in the possibility of redemption. Albee has always defended his experiments with the dramatic form, least caring for commercial success. His persistent efforts to develop increasingly more personal form of playwriting are an indication of his protest. He has developed his techniques beyond the dramatic form of his predecessors, reorienting his plays towards the dramatization of philosophical questions of current interest. There is as much variety in the theme of his dramas as there is in the form of experimentation that created them.

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