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Lack of Communication and Reconciliation: A Study of Metempsychosis in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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Abstract:

The present paper quite emphatically maps out the difficulty in communication caused by mental repression under the grim, absurd, violent and pessimistic atmosphere. Though the play *The Zoo Story* is dejected into the grim and violent story, it sparks illumination of positivism and ray of hope. This paper aims to convey the message of reconciliation through the process of metempsychosis for the materialised and compartmentalised American society. Albee through his presentation of the characters in the crux of communication generates a kind of 'teaching emotion' to strike the elite class to approve the value of existence and needs of suppressed and marginalised lower class.

Keywords: Communication, Reconciliation, Metempsychosis, Compartmentalised, Marginalised.

The reputation of Edward Albee lies in the realm of literature because of his acute presentation of the issues, faced by the individuals of American society after the Second World War. In his literary compositions, Albee by presenting the clash of ideas amongst the characters has critiqued the new material and commercial life in American society during his contemporary time and called for adherence to the values and ideas in human relationship. Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is stamped with the violence, grim atmosphere, crisis of identity, class differences, sense of isolation, and lack of communication and finally an attempt of reconciling the fragmentations in the very context of American society. The novel quite brilliantly explores the sense of loss and impact of the absence of family role and the American materialistic society on the behavioural performance of individuals.

The play *The Zoo Story* begins with the interaction between Peter, a man of forty who placed himself on a bench reading a book and smoking a pipe and Jerry, a man of thirty who is physically thin and dressed up shabbily. It is found at the very beginning of their conversation that Jerry tries to communicate with Peter, but Peter remains silent. Jerry exhibits that he needs to unfurl his suppressed emotion to someone else. Jerry's innermost attempt to evacuate his feelings and his ultimate attempt to kill Peter gives a touch of absurdity of human mind and human existence in such modern materialistic world after the end of Second World War.

Communication is extremely needed to upgrade human sensibility and social values. Without proper communication, human expression of emotion remains incomplete. The play *The Zoo Story* accounts an effective communication to uphold human sensibility and social values. Jerry, a tramp of New York ends his life after being edged out; but before his death, he lightens the humanity by sharing his knowledge of stark reality to Peter, a well-paid publishing executive who lacks real-life experience representing modern as well as capitalist society. The story though reveals the optimistic tone; it still presents the society in the milieu of sadness and agony of humanity. Albee retaining the view of self-awareness argues in an interview entitled *Understanding Edward Albee*, conducted by Matthew C. Roudane in the following –

I am concerned with being as self-aware and open to all kinds of experience on its own terms – I think those conditions, given half a chance, will produce better self-government, a better society, a better everything else. (8)

Matthew Roudane sees in *The Zoo Story*, “the potential for regeneration, a source of optimism which underlines the overtly aggressive text and performance” (42-43). In the play, the death of Jerry signifies much more than martyrs him as a Christ figure. Albee uses the savage final tableau on the drama's characters and its audience. The communication accomplished through Jerry's violent death follows an American tradition identified by Richard Slotkin in his exploration of American myth, *Regeneration through Violence*. Slotkin identifies a ‘frontier psychology’ running through American literature:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of



regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. (33)

Jerry's boundary line is Central Park where he opposes the establishment. His experiment upon Peter breaks the frontier of civilised communication and proves that people, when confronted with an outrage, can change their imprisoned zoo-like condition.

Lack of proper and timely communication with other people disturbed Jerry's childhood with bad experiences that enlarge his frustration, depression and sense of isolation. Throughout minute reading of the plot, one can understand properly the reasons behind the abnormal behaviour of Jerry. His mother left him and his family on an adulterous turn in his childhood time when he was ten and half years old. After some days, another disaster came in the name of death of his father who was killed by a city omnibus. As a result, being an orphan, Jerry was carried to the house of his mother's sister. Again, the tragedy came to the life of Jerry, when his mother's sister died on the stairs of their apartment during his graduation period. All these incidents as well as accidents ultimately make him a typical vagabond with disturbed and depressed sentiment, who did not get any enlightened motivation throughout his life. Jerry's childhood period assimilates the childhood of Edward Albee to some degree. Albee's personal experience reflects some disturbances of his life when he used to stay with his adoptive parents. Michael E Rutenberg in his *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest* gives a vivid account on Albee's birth and childhood:

Of Edward Albee's birth, it is only known that he was born on March 12, 1928 somewhere in Virginia. His biological parents gave him up for adoption two week later to Reed and Frances Albee and this transaction took place in the District of Columbia. Albee's relationship with his adoptive parents was fraught with discord and he freely admits that he was a 'problem child'. (3)

Jerry was completely separated from his surrounding and he could not connect himself to the present social structure. He lived in New York City, between Columbus Avenue and Central Park. The place where he lived was not suitable for him due to his lack of communication. *The Zoo Story* is a typical example of complete failure of communication as the characters in their crucial phase could not reach the praxis of the readers' understanding. Gap of communication that creates a space of irritation in the psychological sphere of the protagonist Jerry is well evident in the play thus:

Jerry: "I've been to the zoo. (PETER doesn't notice.) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE TO THE ZOO! (1)

This is the beginning line of the play in which Jerry shouts and Peter does not care for this. Albee to show such miscommunication and unhappiness has used the repetition of same expression and capital letters. Peter could not understand the cause of Jerry's irritation and gradually he gets trapped in the network of Jerry's words which is described in the following dialogue –

Peter: "I...well, no, not due north, but we...call it north. It's northerly." (14).

Lack of effective communication disturbs Jerry's mind and ultimately creates a strong intention to communicate with the people. His internal crisis always haunts him and makes him withered and disillusioned. To come out from such mental stress, he tries eagerly to talk to the people and to overcome the sense of loneliness, Jerry also tries to engage forcefully to the societal discourse. Jerry's restlessness, frustration and sense of loneliness are reflected in Peter's dialogue addressed to Jerry:

Peter: I didn't mean to seem...ah...it's that you don't really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions and I'm...I'm normally...uh...reticent. Why do you just stand there? (84)

Jerry's tension, confusion and lack of confidence always disturb his psychic balance and make him apart from logical communication. Jerry's gap of communication makes him ferocious and animalistic and ultimately relates him to an animal showing his sudden attempt to murder Peter. The exchange of dialogue between Jerry and Peter is basically based on question –answer type, but the moment Jerry's confession is completed, he wants to die. The play gradually proceeds from realism to semi-abstract metaphysical world.

Albee's personal vision of life and his surrounding world takes a turn to a difficult space of communication between human beings, which is well reflected in his play *The Zoo Story* through the clash between Jerry and Peter. Lack of proper communication on the part of Jerry creates an unavoidable desire to communicate people and finally finds its way out in the in the form of violence – committing suicide in the Central Park. Throughout his life, Jerry did not any proper space for communication as he remained alone and friendless. Whenever he tried to talk to someone, he became nervous and started conversation in a fragmented way. Jerry articulates the nature of his communication in the following manner-



Jerry: I don't talk to many people-except to say like: give me a beer, or where the join is, or what time does the feature go on, keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know things like that. (23)

Jerry always attempts to inform others about the problems of existence and invisible individual disturbances and he visits the Central Park to share his suppressed emotions. He found Peter there and tried to outlet his emotion before him. But Jerry's communicative process is beyond understanding as it is fragmented. When Jerry is almost done, Peter shouts: "I... I don't understand what...I don't think I... [Now almost tearfully] Why did you tell me all of this? (44). The reaction is satiric as Jerry replies-

Jerry: ...of course you don't understand, [in a monotone, wearily] I don't live in your block; I'm not married to two parakeets or whatever your set-up is. I am a permanent transient, and my home is the sickening rooming houses on the West Side of the New York City, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen. (45)

Jerry's animalistic attitude is well reflected in his developed relationship with the dog. Though he wanted to kill the dog initially, but could not. His plan was unsuccessful as he did not completely lose the dog – the only animal that was not indifferent to him. A new type of relationship is developed in a mutual understanding. Jerry explained to Peter:

Jerry: I loved the dog now and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love and I had tried to kill and both had been unsuccessful by themselves. I hoped...and I don't really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations...I hoped that the dog would understand. (42)

Jerry was happy in his new relationship with the dog. This relationship helped him to realise that it is such compromise that he sought all through his life with human beings. Jerry's realisation through his new relationship with his dog is documented in the following:

Jerry: Whenever the dog and I see each other we both stop where we are. We regard each other with a mixture of sadness and suspicion and then we feign indifference. We walk past each other safely; we have an understanding. It's very sad but you will have to admit that it is an understanding. (43)

To Jerry, the world seems to be a zoo where people are captured in their respective cages like wild animals. They don't know to share their emotions and feelings with others. Jerry takes the responsibility to share his emotions with the materialised and mechanical world where there are no rooms for sentiments, feelings and imagination. He wants to communicate such person i.e. Peter who lacks the practical knowledge of life and lives a balanced life. Jerry sums up Peter's Character in one line: "You're a very sweet man and you're possessed of a truly enviable innocence" (31).

The image of Jerry's brutal death does communicate with Peter and the audience by exerting the satiric tone against upper class society that lacks emotion and feeling. Thus, the play *The Zoo Story* creates a grim story with negative atmosphere such as isolation, alienation, loneliness, poverty, insecurity, lack of communication, violence and suppressed sexual desire. Under such negative aspect of life, Jerry dreams of a better society that will give a space to common people to outlet emotion freely and to think freely.

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