CHAPTER V

THE PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING: THE INDIAN PEDAGOGIC SITUATION

The author 'means' and the receiver understands: interpretation, in its business of negotiating between various parties, places and the text (both written and performed) is at the centre. To understand, one must re-live, 'empathize' with an alien experience (*Erlebnis* = lived experience). This process of understanding can never be completed – it is in drama that we come closest to the conditions under which understanding our experience may begin: but it begins to escape us even as it takes place. Each moment is perilously in the danger of being separated from the last. According to Elinor Shaffer:

.... A play poses the hermeneutic dilemma even more starkly when seen in performance than when read, though every act of reading can only take place over time and so is subject to the same problem. Thus the written text is pressed in the direction of the oral text, the performance text, the spontaneity of the text of life itself. Not only are there texts to be read that are not written (those of history and culture), but the model for the text itself is performance1.

Hermeneutics or the art of interpretation has emerged as the method of humanities as distinguished from the method of the natural sciences, and in the
twentieth century, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology and communication theory have further enhanced and refined its scope. While much of the work done through hermeneutics relate to poetry and fiction, not much development is seen in elucidation of theatre and drama, to clarify obscurities and distortions arising out of ‘ageing’ and to preserve a text despite changes in language, attitudes and cultural boundaries. It therefore, would be meaningful to look into the workings of hermeneutic theory and see how it could help us traverse the cultural / spatial / temporal / geographical / linguistic boundaries that we come across while studying the drama / theatre of a practising playwright in America from our locus of understanding in an entirely alien world. Having already tried to thematically and pragmatically interpret Albee’s work in the previous chapters from a spectrum of standpoints, we have also looked at the phenomenology of the text / theatre gap and the problems it entails in our work. The problem of understanding the plays and the ontological basis of our interpretation needs to be analysed before we look into our own presuppositions in our stance regarding our subject. This is one of the salient features of modern hermeneutics – to extend the meaning of text – to establish facts about past events, to grasp the nature of the milieu in which they took place, the principles, motivations, and emotional make-up of the actors may all be studied as part of a wider ‘text’.

J.G. Herder (1744-1803), leading figure of the German Enlightenment, who evolved the phrase ‘empathy’ or *Einfühlung* (which was to effect every area in theory and interpretation) addressed himself directly to drama, showing how Shakespeare’s plays represented a dramatic world where everything was
essential and interconnected. His approach led not just to an evolutionary theory of culture, but also suggested the hermeneutic reading of a cultural world as 'text' with a significance attached to the whole. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) attempted to establish the authenticity and inner structure of the *Dialogues* (of Plato), and the relations between them – the reciprocal movement from the parts to the whole and back again is a version of what was to be called 'the hermeneutic circle'. 'Translation' is presented as a fundamental mental element in all understanding and communication even within the same language. 'Understanding' itself is at the centre of Schleiermacher's theory – involving the 'reliving' by the audience of an alien experience, the authorial intentions must be reconstructed imaginatively, along with the historical milieu. This reconstructed understanding (*Verstehen*) problematized the 'concept of 'empathy' because *meaning* would shift with each reception. The interpretive community became an active player in hermeneutic theory: it had to overcome fragmentation and alienation to understand any event or experience.² Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) who was Schleiermacher's biographer also contributed significantly to hermeneutic theory developing further the idea of 'Erlebnis' (lived experience) – a conscious grasp of experience through creative imagination and capable of precisely expressing its nature. Every life situation, when its full nature is understood, corresponds to an art form – 'immanent form'. Elucidating 'lived experience' Dilthey looked into how the inward experience of the artist was illuminated by the historical facts, events and views and how the unique quality of a moment of historical time could only be understood through such
an experience. This double movement is another version of the 'hermeneutic circle.' Dilthey gives a hermeneutic definition of drama as the extreme case that brings the limits of understanding into view.

If I read a play, it is as with life itself. I stride onwards, and the past loses its clarity and distinctness. So the scenes are lost in obscurity. The principle is: only in so far as I maintain the connection, do I achieve a unified overview of the scenes, but then I have only a skeleton. The perception of the whole I approach only through taking it up into my memory, so that all the connecting moments are gathered together.

As pointed out earlier, drama comes the closest to our lived experience.

The hermeneutic notion that the artist grasps his own inner experience and creates from it the rules appropriate to it was developed by Ludwig Tieck, the German dramaturg and translator of Shakespeare. "Every life situation, if its true nature is grasped is an art form. Only when embodied in a form can it be grasped, even by its creator." Hermeneutics, in salvaging the impermanent, the temporal and the fragile asserted the coherence of a transient mind. Tieck's plays show the condition of the self always threatened with the loss of its own presence, significance and continuity and constantly requiring its own reconstruction. Shakespearean characters, Tieck shows, rapidly shift from tragic tone to the comic and back; and dream, fantasy and the marvelous are pervasively present, constantly reinventing themselves. Hence, Shakespearean
dramatic practice and its reinterpretation marks an important milestone for hermeneutic theory.

Georg Lukacs, better known for his sociological approach to fiction, in his first published work *The Evolution of Modern Drama* (1908) deals with the ‘new drama’ which is historicist, bourgeois and individualistic – contrasted to the drama animated by communal, religious feeling of previous eras. But he overlooks the fact that new theatre derived a great deal from the reinterpretation of Shakespeare, like Dilthey before him. Modern drama is drama of the will. Formation and continuity of the self are problematised, “the bare fact of being able to will at all was a manifestation of personality and brought about the clash with the surrounding order of things that had previously required external action.... The bare fact of being begins to turn tragic.”6 This, as we know, is exemplified in the work of Beckett – as also in that of Edward Albee.

As drama increasingly becomes an affair of the spirit, it increasingly misses the vital center of personality.... the intersecting point of man and his destiny do not necessarily coincide, supplemental theory is brought in to contrive a dramatic linkage of the two.7

This problem becomes a major motif of modern drama.

Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* analysed the state of Being-in-the-World and the human condition and did much to elaborate on the ontology of the hermeneutic circle, not methods of explication, nor did he write
specifically on drama (apart from Hölderlin) Jean-Paul Sartre strove to unite the left wing hermeneutic critique (of Lukacs) and the existentialism of Heidegger through both his philosophy as well as his various plays. Hans Georg Gadamer interpreted Aristotle’s mimesis that was directly relevant to the theatre in *Truth and Method* (1960).

Until the 1990s, Paul Ricour of France and Jurgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School were the leading theorists in hermeneutics. Ricour looks at the hermeneutics of demystification and decoding – throwing off disguises of meaning. His theory of metaphor helps him mediate between decoding consciousness and restoring symbolic expressions – very useful in theatre studies. Habermas’s hermeneutic theory is a critique of social practice and cultural expression as seen in *Knowledge and Human Interest*. How does language encapsulate modes of socio-cultural control of ‘world vision’ of the public? Can techniques of social control (including manipulation of meaning of language through the media) make a mockery of rationality? Can art, especially theatre (a public art) survive to play a critical role? Can theatre authentically communicate? These are some of the questions Habermas raises in his theory of hermeneutics, referring directly to theatre/drama studies.

Victor Turner, an anthropologist, has interesting observations to make on performance to formulate his theory of an “anthropology of experience” – “... Through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of socio-cultural life, is drawn forth. A performance, then is the proper finale of an experience ...."
Recent hermeneutic theory suggests application (not 'understanding' or 'explication') which is represented by 'translation'. This, of course, lays itself widely open to debate. Application could be performance itself, in which adaptation encounters the contemporary audience through whose response 'a text in our time' is created. Hence we find that always, hermeneutic theory has been dynamically, closely related to praxis, extremely sensitive to socio-historico-cultural changes and concerned with communicative processes. Hence it is the theoretical framework most suitable to the needs of the theatre, having developed from the same set of conditions as modern drama.

How then, does one go about the hermeneutic problem in drama? How does it effect our understanding of the text(s)? How does the text / performance dichotomy help / hinder the hermeneutic process? Does cultural distance / cross-cultural inputs make an impact upon our reading and understanding – and if so – in what way? The American context of our dramatist and his varied European influences must be referred to along with the other questions being addressed above to find what kind of reading / understanding strategies are available and possible. Do we still find 'holes' in our understanding of his drama despite attempts to situate both the author and ourselves – the readers? Keeping these questions in mind we shall begin to examine the theoretical aspects of our situation.

The questions of hermeneutics of drama arise within the text / performance relationship itself. Performance itself may be seen to be an interpretation of the written text. Stanislavskian formulations on acting technique show the actor's business as essentially hermeneutic. The actor's
reading arouses his/her enthusiasm, his/her will to play the role. He/she then searches for psychological material from his/her own and other peoples’ experience to ‘recreate’. He/she must next feel the ‘lived experience’ — and create invisibly for himself — and ‘empathize’ with ‘alien’ life.

He/she must then, ‘physicalize’ it, visibly create for himself/herself and finally ‘synthesize’ it by putting together his/her inward experiencing and external physicalizing of it, for the others. Hence we have the actor’s reading that may be treated at par with current hermeneutics and reader-response theory.

If performance may be read as one interpretation of the text, then so can it be seen to be a way, a means to get outside hermeneutics, as Benjamin Bennett suggests. If interpretation operates between audience reception / understanding and authorial intention / meaning – the service it renders is merely to create an even greater need for itself because it “… far from approaching its ostensible goals, in truth only defers them indefinitely.”10 So we have, (a) meaning and understanding undeniable in operation and (b) they are also unattainable, unassertable, impossible to localize and verify, always deferred. The hermeneutic circle is not vicious, not a refutation of understanding. This is based on the assumption that actuality of purposeful and successful communication cannot be denied. And such an assumption is based on – nothing whatsoever. (God exists : no he doesn’t. So why the necessity of argument at all? Hence the concept infiltrates in the character of an ideological system).
If the incomplete (or ideologically defective) dramatic text falls short in adequately representing the work, then it follows that performance in the theatre contributes to constituting the very object (the work) of which it is an interpretation. This reflects the fundamental hermeneutic paradox – the object of interpretation is always constituted in part by the very act of interpretation. In the case of a novel, the act of reading and understanding is anticipated by its sign-systems, interpretive in nature. But with drama, the paradox is deployed on the level of conscious experience – it acts out the hermeneutic paradox. We know we interpret when we see a play – we only receive it as readers of a novel. Another important mental habit is that of detaching a performance from the work. The flaws we detect in a play may be in the acting, the set etc. But such flaws, detected in a novel, are defects of the novel.

Next we look at the content of significance of the relation between words and things in drama. In Waiting for Godot when Vladimir and Estragon argue about turnips and carrots and finally discover a carrot, which Estragon proceeds to eat up, we in the audience come to ‘significant communicative achievement’ in the agreement – ‘yes, this is a carrot’. This kind of agreement is not available to the reader. We see the carrot in the act of being eaten, not to be ever repeated again (the same act with the same carrot). The reader only finds a verbal sign: ‘a carrot’. In the theatre the opposite experience is also true. When Jerry goads Peter to stab him / impales himself upon the knife, the reader finds that is that – Peter murders Jerry. But on the stage, the slightest nuance or suggestion of haste on Jerry’s rush towards Peter will tell an altogether different story, and the entire interpretation of the play.
hinges upon the body of the actor on stage. Interpretation can never be strictly detached but always implicated in the nature of its object. Conversely, it continually frees itself of the problematics of text, word and sign, free of its compromised and renewable subject. These opposites form a paradigm that show from opposed directions the depth wherein critical self-consciousness is involved in the structure of the dramatic stage, in that the difference between the word and the thing provides the transition to the problem of interpretation and its object.

The dramatic text is incomplete until performance. Once in the theatre, confronted with actual performance which we recognize as mere interpretation, we are again made aware of the now absent, obscure, shadowy text paradoxically now representing the work precisely by its absence. Even under the ‘spell’ of performance, we measure the performance by our conception of the play: we may not escape our situation as readers of the play. So why the performance? The tension between the virtual reader (individual consciousness, thinking process and understanding of the text) and the actual spectator throws up the question that could be answered thus — “... the ancient ceremonial quality of drama must be retained or renewed; the performance must not only interpret the work, but also realize it as a ceremony that asserts human order on a universal scale.”

On one hand we understand the work as individual readers, as spectators we receive an interpretation of it. On the other, because performance generates meanings that belong to the work (unavailable to the
reader) as we see in the example of Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we recognize that,

... true understanding occurs only via performance, whereas the situation of the reader makes available at best, a defective, verbally conditioned *selection* of meanings, which is to say, something very like a particular interpretation of the work.\(^\text{13}\)

Hence, Bennett points out that in a dramatic text, the relationship between understanding and interpretation is reversible, and that priority to understanding becomes problematic. While performance is an interpretation, it is also something more fundamental. E.D. Hirsch says, "Understanding is silent, interpretation extremely garrulous."\(^\text{14}\) This is the mental activity by which we grapple with a text, before we make any attempt to communicate our thoughts understanding.

The moment we start to communicate, verbalize, even to ourselves, we start interpreting. Hence, performance is an interpretation, but we initially need to separate the work from it by finding an area of silence amidst a flood of sensory signals, where performance as performance says nothing, but simply *is*: our means of tackling a work (silent in understanding opposed to the interpretive gesturing of the stage). Meanings of certain issues discussed above may be revealed only in performance, which are not there for the reader, yet we recognize that these have been there all along. The reader might infer the existence of meaning arising from the meeting of words or things (on stage) – these meanings are the results of a definite non-silent interpretive
process (like a director creatively visualizing a performance). For the reader, words and things do not meet – the carrots and turnips are not there – only words between pieces of text, until one can, consciously, silently, quasi-verbally be able to dissociate one’s situation as a reader. Perhaps words on the page only have significance, not definite meanings as generated on the stage. But even a naïve spectator is a virtual reader of the text which is for him/her the locus of understanding of the work as opposed to the performed interpretation. But realizing that the play may be understood outside his own locus which is not available merely on reading, will constitute a definite event – “a clear contour in the overall experience of drama”\(^{15}\). Both these manifestations of the relationship between understanding and interpretation remain effective for the spectator and the quality of paradox as discussed above remains its unique feature.

Can then interpretation and understanding remain separate? “An understanding is explication”\(^{16}\) says Gadamer, who speaks of the “hermeneutic conversation” as opposed to the idea of elucidation of a given static meaning, or to the assertion that a text speaks “for us” only when brought to speech by our interpretation.\(^{17}\) Hirsch’s stand on “authorial intention” however, that opposes the other point of view causes serious discomfort to any ‘creative’ reader-spectator because it negates him altogether, placing before us an intellectual hierarchy wherein the ‘writer’ will automatically occupy a higher place than the reader-interpreter, all but cancelling his participation.\(^{18}\) Gadamer struggles with the indispensable but inevitably vague sense of direct participation in tradition, our sense of the sweep and totality of human
intellectual existence, of humankind as the 'seat' of 'memory' and also itself a perpetually creative source of perception. Hirsch objects to these arguments saying that this will lead us to affix any meaning to any text. While it may not be denied that understanding may be basically indistinguishable from interpretation as the pivot of ceaseless intellectual activity regenerating human order continuously. But such truths may not be practicable nor available to the individual thinker. Hence, Hirsch's position of some kind of determinacy of meaning, the separation of understanding and interpretation may be useful to adequately find working solutions. Benjamin Bennett seems to find the answer in ceremony that would allow us to salvage the situation in intellectual tradition as individual thinkers in a communal activity, that could embody a larger truth. Modern drama then would aim at ceremony in this sense:

In the significantly collective or communal setting of the theatre, our individualized condition is affirmed; yet at the same time, for a while, it is also ceremonially superseded or circumvented, in order to reveal our existence at the level of the human race as a whole, at that level where understanding and interpretation are interchangeable, where the tradition of interpretation of a cultural phenomenon is the phenomenon itself, as an object of understanding; at the level of existence in relation to which our individual thinking, judging, questioning, discussing, formulating, do after all make sense as participation in the total human work of meaning. A dramatic performance ... is ceremony in the sense of a shadowing forth, almost a direct experience, of the huge
historical action, at once an understanding and an interpreting, by
which humankind at once creates and comprehends itself and its
world.\textsuperscript{19}

If understanding and interpretation are thus invariably inter-involved,
then performance also is a means of getting \textit{outside} the hermeneutic circle.
The materiality of theatrical performance resists its simple inclusion in
hermeneutic space. We anticipate semiotization on stage – a chair (or a body)
is always destined to become \textit{the} chair (which it never does) in a larger textual
or ritual signification, and its resistance to thus being fully textualized (it is
only a chair) is its materiality (this is close to Artaud’s concept of staging
materiality). The slightest stumble (or a sneeze, or a hiccup, or a fart for that
matter) by the human body which is a ‘semiotic explosive’\textsuperscript{20} are subject to
scrutiny: and performance is carried out by them. Bennett says,

\begin{quote}
Precisely the discipline of acting keeps us aware that the acting
bodies – by what we vaguely call a ‘change of mind’ – can at any
time arbitrarily disorganize the semiotic fabric their acting creates
... the system of hermeneutic space, in the living body of the actor
is radically warped and compelled to contradict its own founding
postulate.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

All attempts to go beyond the text, and beyond interpretation must
need deal with Antonin Artaud’s manifestoes for the stage. He lashes out
against repetition in \textit{The Theatre and its Double}, saying that an expression
does not have the same value twice, all words once spoken are dead after
being uttered; functioning only in the moment they are being uttered. A form, once used must be replaced and the theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made can never be made the same way twice. He rejects all ideological theatre (in the popular, not the Nietzschean sense) seeking to transmit a content or deliver a message that would make a discourse’s meaning un-intelligible for its listeners; a message that would not coincide with the stage, that could be repeated without it.22

Another well quoted indictment of interpretation is Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” for whom the ‘valuation’ of a work of art by its content exerts extraordinary hegemony. What this overemphasis on the idea of context entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation. And then again, interpretation itself is not an absolute value, but subject to the historico-cultural context. It is itself subject to interpretation. Sontag illustrates her point; the production notes of Elia Kazan’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*: the sensual and vengeful barbarism that was engulfing Western culture was Stanley Kowalsky; Blanche Dubois was western civilization itself – delicate, dim-lighting and all refinement, only a little worse for the wear. Because now the context was revealed as the decline of western civilization, it became acceptable: which would not have been the case as a play about a handsome brute and a mangy belle. Sontag here suggests that the sensory experience of a work of art should not be taken for granted, and a clear, direct form be evolved that is not conducive to interpretation but appropriate for sensory, luminous experiencing. “The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is,
even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means."23 .... “In the place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art.”24

As to how this is possible is another matter, and one which Sontag prefers not to discuss. Sontag’s own essay in the same book expresses surprise at Geilgud’s “…effrontery in presenting a Shakespeare play absolutely nude, without any interpretation at all…”25 and in the very next breath criticizing Peter Brook’s ‘over interpreted’ version of King Lear. Beckett’s art is another, which after Shakespeare’s interpretation industry, generated vast amounts of explication, criticism and theory – owing perhaps to, again, a text-dominated kind of play. Scornfully, Beckett declares –

We have no elucidations to offer of the mysteries that are all of their (the critics) own making. My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.25

He has an ambivalent attitude to the problems of the closed text and the open performance. He is a dictatorial author, even exerting influence now from the grave as it were, about his fastidious stage direction. But he is open to the inevitable change and uncertainty of the theatrical process. His last play What Where ends with the words, “Make sense who may. I switch off.”27

Edward Albee too, has made several such severe indictments of the critics and their interpretation of his works as we discussed in the previous
chapter and it must be remembered that more often then not, authors are extremely unwilling to ‘let go’ of the ‘meaning’ of their plays. For example, Albee, when *Tiny Alice* confounded the critics and the audiences after a few days in production, called a press conference to apprise them of what the play *actually* meant. These illustrations only go to contribute to the fact that once unleashed upon the stage, the play does escape most attempts to pin down its ‘meaning’ – by the critics, audiences, or the author himself.

Saul Bellow denounced those “comfortable people playing at crisis, alienation, apocalypse and desperation”\(^2^8\) reacting against the thinly intellectual constructs of modern European writing. Albee faces absurdity both in terms of existence and in terms of the life of society that he is part of – which has spawned men who;

...tend to become aimless and gradually submerge their individuality in the social character of their society ... people are led and directed and often can no longer act as individuals. Such persons have experienced that depersonalization which is so strikingly a trait of modern mass culture. Appearances have become the goal; the facade counts, not what is behind it and yet not even a facade is respected for long\(^2^9\)
says eminent sociologist Hendrik Ruitenbeek. Albee’s characters have also succumbed to such a facade, like the Beckettian characters have cowed down under the indifferent universe: metaphysically there is a difference. Albee self-consciously grovels in the stasis and is aware of the inertia of his
characters and his plays: but he is unable to ever show any progress whatsoever in his dealings with his universe and almost always returns where he began. Some of his characters do seem to bear the burden of the unrelenting world like Brother Julian in *Tiny Alice*, but most of them are the wallflowers that their world has made them and there is no relief from that stasis as we have seen from the examination of the plays. In many ways, Albee’s theatre is also melodrama, constantly probing and looking into its own processes, workings and strategies, and continually experimenting with itself and the audience. Plays like Box-Mao-Box and the later, hermetic pieces show Albee’s concerns with the writing-production-reception process itself, while always remaining within the confines of its self-created stasis. The need for individualization of characters is not felt by him, and he habitually names his characters ‘He’, ‘She’, ‘Himself’, ‘girl’, ‘long-winded lady’, until we lose their identities in the stasis he creates for them. Some of his characters become reduced to mere mannequins, with no direct action emanating from them, merely moving the way they are steered by the puppeteer (writer?)

Albee is more interested in the way we constitute the real – it is difficult to conceive of psychological plausibility of his characters. They deny their own three dimensionality, seem radically uprooted and speak a language that is hardly naturalistic. He seems more interested in orchestrating their voices, their rhythms and tone, dissonances and harmony. Spiritually empty, stagnating, inert and attenuated, Albee’s plays successively explore the condition of stasis. Deliberately, he tries to avoid the fecundity of the theatrical mechanism, the potential of language and actor semiosis, although
he does experiment with the visual metaphor in *Box, Listening* and with surrealism in *Seascape*. As C.W.E. Bigsby points out, "This is a language, though, which it seems, has to be purified, pedantically refined until, finally, he takes refuge in words from which the taint of humanity has been all but evaporated."\(^30\)

Hence the entire tableau of Albee's plays partake of the whole gamut of Western / European thought, usage, visual metaphors and music to generate their façade and self-fashioning. Albee has always been a self-proclaimed 'arty' playwright, trying to shun the lure of Broadway and its temptations. All these factors contribute to the making of his plays and indeed, it is all these factors that eventually make him a difficult dramatist for 'foreign' readers, who find it extremely difficult to situate him as part of the western (American) literary canon.

**Pedagogy : The Indian Student**

Having examined at some length, the dramatic text, its basic ontological problems, the performance text and the hermeneutic problems caused by reading / seeing dichotomy *per se* as well as in the interpretation of Edward Albee's plays, we must now look at our own pedagogical situation. Because the very nature of the subject we choose to focus on is so dependent upon pedagogical questions – the very *raison de être* of literary studies all over the world are so inseparable from classroom activity – we can never escape the manner in which it exerts its own kind of pressure upon our arena. The other question leads us to our situatedness as we study English – or
American – literature(s). The question of cultural context figures in any attempt to deal with ‘understanding’ any text notwithstanding its genre. But when we narrow down the focus to the study of a foreign drama in the Indian classroom, a wide spectrum of questions are thrown up, ranging from the basic postcolonial, historicist ones that are generalized in nature, to the sharply contoured ones that would relate to drama studies, the question of the lacking visual, the lack of the ‘livedness’ of drama and so on. This is the situation of a postcolonial Indian student ‘reading’ an ‘alien’ drama – of whose cultural context he / she is made aware of through ‘background’ reading only, with no cultural baggage that would help in context reconstruction. While the whole situation is itself ontologically defective, as already discussed in earlier chapters, the confusion becomes severely compounded by the complete lack of visual help – hence all drama studies practised in the classroom is actually a partial exercise.

It would be necessary to look at the background of English literary studies in India before one tackles the question of drama – especially that of an esoteric American dramatist like Albee. Every year, thousands of Indian students enroll in graduate and post-graduate courses offering English literature. The rush for English seems to be declining, among the brighter lot of students, in favour of the more lucrative courses in the sciences, information technology and even economics. The reasons are not far to seek. English is mandatorily taught through the length and breadth of Indian schools, hence jobs may easily be had as teachers at various levels. Because national policy has retained English in the education system and in other walks
of life, the English departments have a job to do. Why then, one asks, language and not literature be the legitimate skill-learning locus of English departments? It may be agreed that it is impossible to acquire language skills without reference at all to all that is best generated in terms of that language—its literature. Perhaps, again, there still seems to be no justification for churning out a constantly burgeoning number of post-graduate students with masters degrees in English literature. It is often pointed out in recent times at various fora that English literary studies is already a dead area, consumed by the now widely used umbrella term—culture studies—which might seem bizarre to some, because specialized departments of history, aesthetics, sociology, politics and so on already exist on their own merit. Still, note must be taken of their tendency to overlap, with English departments being made the site for the playing out of their politico-ideological games of every hue.

Meenakshi Mukherjee comments—

   Literary studies do not exist in some pure realm of aesthetics and ideas, but in the world of institutional structures and political forces, conditioned by history and ideology.... English teaching in India cannot be re-examined without correlating the literary text that is taught in the classroom with the social text in which the teacher and the taught live.

   There is a group of practicing teachers who still believe in a ‘transcendental’ text—outside history and politics and looked upon as the site where truth, value and culture exist in terms of the ‘universal’; unchangeable
and constant. This universal text becomes the unquestioned ‘God’ in the classroom. Although still undeniably present in most Indian classrooms, this attitude is now radically being questioned. Various seminars have started to look at such issues and the postcolonial theories of reading have obviously found a most fertile playground in this context. The earlier group of teachers would only look at the generalized aesthetic issues involved in their reading of the texts: not at all bothering to go into the questions of their own relatedness. The newer breed of teachers however, would prefer to problematize the entire phenomenon of English literature teaching in India – if undertaken without reference to the local issues / context of the time – without taking any stand at all. How then, should one go about the business of teaching an ‘alien’ literature in India, given our historical and cultural baggage? Is one actually expected to ‘enter’ into the culture of the British, to internalize its values to be able to imitate our responses from the model ‘British’ reader/student? Perhaps one may also station oneself outside that culture, and see the socio-cultural formations within the text from a perspective stance as self-reflexive so as to be able to analysis our own given situation and the relationship with the canonized text. These, then, are some of the important ontological and epistemological aspects of the issues at stake within the debate. Mukherjee says:

> Although the English teacher was seen as doubly determined by the mammoth academic system that flattened out the individual, and by the burden of the colonial past,
paradoxically she was also invested with the potential power of making visible the scars and fissures that history had produced in our culture.\textsuperscript{32}

The role of the teacher has never really been clearly defined where English literature is concerned. We do not deal with events and ideas that partake of life and society, but with "verbal artifacts,"\textsuperscript{33} with mimesis — representations of things that mostly originate in a foreign culture. Literary texts may be used comfortably by say — French / German teachers to teach language skills. But English, alas, is not foreign enough. Neither, on the other hand can we take for granted the student's familiarity with the alien cultural context or grasp over the basic language, its nuances in usage in the way that a teacher of Assamese / Bengali / Hindi can. The rather amusing anecdote related by Mulk Raj Anand about how an Indian teacher of "The Daffodils" thought that it was some species of bird (!) here comes to mind. We simply cannot expect to see in our 'mind's-eye' the same correct, visual tapestry of the images of any text the way a naïve (English) speaker/reader can. The Barthean / reader-response theorists who recommend the taking over of any text may perhaps look at such a situation and consider whether — authorial intention aside — the daffodil is indeed some kind of a bird? Thus at hand is a complex situation, even when we are still at the level of speaking broadly, without genre specification. The problem is further compounded when we speak of the pedagogical situation in India where the teaching of drama is concerned. The hermeneutic problem of 'reading' drama is further
complicated by the total lack of any visual knowledge about the context of the play which is in the first place meant to be ‘seen’.

The *text*, to put it baldly, is god in the classroom. All academic activity, all search for meaning, all interpretation centres around the text. But given that drama *is* a definite and distinct literary type, even when taught in class, we wonder what happens to performance in pedagogy. Obviously, the text that students ‘look’ at / study is different – with stage directions and the convention of dialogue and ostensibly, no overt authorial voice nudging our consciousness with this comment or that, except through a chorus. And this text we must remember, is merely ‘read’, not actually seen as performance and received by the audience. At the most, we may have what we may term ‘classroom performance’ by the teacher explicating the text.

Such a reading of a dramatic text will no doubt involve some amount of the hermeneutic tension that exists between meaning as a function and meaning, here and now, for the reader or the audience. But in the same way as non-theatrical literature would do – not in the manner that theatre as the “intense focus of paradox, the place where a significant, or indeed constitutive paradox of literature become an art in its own right, the art of drama …”

Hence the problematics of the stage and its paradoxes do not even make an appearance in our pedagogical context.

P. Rajani, in an essay entitled “The Teaching of Drama” tries to look at some of these problems of drama in pedagogy while she does not at all consider the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of the situation, she does talk of the classroom teaching merely becoming an academic exercise – not
"an account of a living experience."

The drama which acquires a life and meaning of its own on stage without any critical discourse on it that is "not in some sense the sketch of a production is not likely to enhance our understanding." Rajani advocates the creation of the 'atmosphere' of performance, "A good teacher must possess the ability to lift a play from the page, so as to imaginatively envisage a performance when all that is available is the printed word." This we know, is easier said than done, given the ramifications of the ontological/epistemological problematics involved. Through "effective reading", she says, the teacher must get "under the skin of the character and experience his thoughts, emotions and feelings." Because drama is not a monologue, students must pitch in with interactive reading with a little bit of practice outside class hours. Hence, she opines, a classroom reading could at least simulate performance.

The teacher and students reading the play together experience a certain moment and recreate it for the rest of the class who react in just the same way in which the audience in the theatre reacts to a performance. Drama is basically a community exercise, the actors during the course of their performance create an impact on the audience and the latter by its reaction influences the quality of performance.

She suggests the combination of voice inflection, diction and tone with suitable bodily postures (not acting / gesturing proper), for example – stiffening of the body, leaving it limp, eye movements and so on to render a
possible 'performance-like' class. Adjuncts like lighting, stage properties, costume, sound and the like could be explicated beforehand, along with information about the author, his contribution to drama, backgrounds, style and language. "I am not trying to run down literary criticism as employed by most teachers in their lectures on drama. I am only attempting to place a premium on the practical demonstration of drama in the class to authenticate the situation. This is something that can be done by the method called play-reading." In a very interesting pedagogic exercise, P. Rajani has suggested a few very practical pieces of advice to drama teachers who must need necessarily cope with the lack of the theatre experience. While such teaching methods are ultimately all that the teacher has recourse to (apart from film/video performances which we shall discuss in detail in the next chapter), it must also be remembered that the situation has its own inbuilt defects or shortcomings. As pointed out earlier, the cultural context and distance is one factor that has not been recognized in this critic's treatment. It is sometimes true that even a play displaced deliberately from its cultural moorings is extremely effective: for instance, Mahesh Dattani's production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with a dhoti-clad Prospero mouthing the Shakespearean dialogues has been highly appreciated. In the same way, Shylock, the red-haired gargoyle of Shakespeare's own time is, in the post-war period, a tragic hero. Jan Kott, the well known Polish critic, in his now classic *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964) has shown how a text may be displaced and yet take root in a completely alien context through the way we read the text / the way the text reads us. That is why the hermeneutic activity
is forever in flux, forever changing. Having accepted that, we must also, at the same time, do well to keep in mind that this still does not give us any reason to exclude the context altogether from our readings of drama. A daffodil is after all, a flower, not a bird.

P. Rajani’s solutions, however, simplistic or reductionist as they may be, provide an example of the closest approximation a teacher may hope to have, of a performance sans theatre and in this lies the value of her suggestion. In teaching of the drama of the modernist / post modernist / avante gardeist type however, the Indian teacher is bound to come face to face with numerous epistemological problems as well as those generated by the academic-critical theories that have problematized all existing techniques of text / performance evaluation and explication by its displacement of the word – language itself. Without going into the nitty-gritty of that critical debate, we must however, admit that all manner of reader-text-author-world relationships and hermeneutic theory, the problem of understanding, aesthetic movements and so on have become altered as a result. Keeping such changes in mind, we as teachers of drama must proceed.

In the same collection of essays, B.S. Chandrika also tries to assess some approaches to drama in pedagogy and deals with some troubling areas of teacher-student interaction – namely what we refer to as the proliferation of ‘bazaar notes.’

(The students) ... find these guides easier to follow than what they describe as ‘the pedantic rhetorical critical material.’ ‘They
simplify things for us, ma’am’, ... I was reminded of Beckett’s comment on the critical interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*. ‘I don’t know why they have to complicate a thing so simple!’

She too, hits against the need for the teacher to fulfil those secondary conditions for better understanding of drama.

Now the easy availability of audio-visual material lessens this difficulty.... Visual impressions are of great importance in drama. The main problem that our students have to cope with is the fact that they are not able to see the plays enacted on the stage. However, exhaustive the teacher’s description may be and however, imaginative the student may be, one’s vital understanding of a play becomes complete only through visual perception of the performance ... Even if I talk for an hour on Kathakali, Kerala’s famous dramatic art form, to a foreign friend, he may not be able to visualize it....

From the generalized problems of the study of English dramatic literature to the particular instance of American drama, the teacher again has to contend with new paradigms, cultural contexts and so on. American literature, as a separate entity, distinct from English literature is being taught at Indian Universities since a few decades, but only, in most cases, as optional papers in graduate and post graduate courses. The U.S.I.S. (United States Information Service), in this regard has done a great deal to popularize the course through providing reading material, audio-visual support, visiting
lecturers, and the establishment of some excellent libraries that cater to the need. The existence of the A.S.R.C. (American Studies Research Center) now rechristened I.A.C.I.S. (Indo American Centre for International Studies) at Hyderabad has been able to provide research scholars with a great deal of support in terms of material, availability in the form of books, archival material microfilm as well as audio-visual aids. This, while having generated a lot of doctoral and post-doctoral activity, has enabled the teachers to provide a semblance of back up in their attempts at teaching American literature courses. We have indeed, come a long way from the notion that American literature is still in its infancy, or worse still, non-existent. Gerhard Friedrich remarks:

Suddenly removed from the intricacies of European systems and instead confronted with the vastness of a virgin continent, men had here to face and settle anew the essential problems: searching out their own basic nature and purpose, their proper relations to strange fellow mortals, the good or evil of the elements, the very substance of earthly existence.44

Hence the entire perspective of its literature must be seen keeping this context in view – leading to its very distinctive flavour.

Beginning from the colonial and revolutionary literature that are rich in sermons, autobiographies, diaries, journals, captivity narratives, political and theological tracts, to the postmodernist and avante gardeist literature of various creative genres, American literature has traversed a vast territory. Do we consider the non-canonized texts as ‘universal’ or maintain the
distinctiveness? Carl Van Doren, in *What is American Literature* (1935) emphasized its universality, as did Longfellow and others. But in this regard, a basic problem is that English (British) literature students tend to carry over the baggage of concepts and terminologies into American literature. Internalized jargon and applications lead to indiscriminate usage, sometimes completely mistaken. The romantic period, the renaissance, and such other historical concepts meaning completely different things in the two literatures tend to overlap in the critical vocabulary of the Indian students to further confound an already confusing situation.

Where American drama is concerned, again one faces the problem of critical accusations regarding lack of seriousness, tantamount to negating the literary value of American drama. Leading American drama critic, Robert Brustein says - "American Drama, no matter how serious in intent, is very rarely readable, for our plays are often stage mechanisms which seem oddly wan and listless on the printed page." In the light of our earlier discussion of the text/performance dichotomy, a resonant comment - and not a very encouraging one. Given the necessary lack of live performance, or the pleasure of the spectacle, the nearest approximation to get visually closer to the medium is perhaps through (what is still considered a completely separate genre) film and television performance that could at least 'enliven' the spectacle and enrich our visual knowledge of an alien cultural fabric, if not actually substitute the immediacy of an actual theatrical performance. Again, in a somewhat simplistic solution, R K. Gupta says,
One way to bring literature closer to the life of the students is to choose, whenever possible, illustrations from their own social environment, and encourage them to establish, whenever they can, relationships between the problems and concerns they read about and those of the people around them or their own specific interests. For example, I have found it useful to discuss Arthur Miller's study of family relationships in such plays as *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* in the context of family relationships in India... 

Given the paucity of resources at hand, most teachers have perhaps invariably resorted to such methods to find a way out of the quandary. But take a play like *The Zoo Story* with its rootedness in American life, along with its philosophical/theoretical moorings in Western society, and the problem is not all that easy to elude. Manhattan, the Fifth Avenue, 'Parakeets' (for parrots), openly sexual overtones that are non-conventional (gay/homosexual) and so on, that crowd the images evoked in the play, even if it actually is set at a park; may never find any one-to-one simplistic reduction to our context. The same may be said of most experimental, avante garde drama.

This lack of background / context at one hand, and on the other, the proliferation of manifold information through the various media have led to various preconceptions (and misconceptions) of American life and people amongst the Indian students. Chiefly through television, they now have access to various facets of America. Cultural stereotypes have hence taken form in no time at all, which a teacher may have to sometimes dispel. [To this end, the
A.S.R.C./I.A.C.I.S. has been running a number of “American Civilization Courses” to indoctrinate the Indian students/teachers about the various aspects of American life. Cultural stereotypes not only tend to be false but are harmful and, at times, downright pernicious. They can lead to suspicion and misunderstanding... Literary and cultural studies can help in removing these stereotypes.” Hence the notion of the money-flashing, liberated, loud and vulgar ‘hip’ American must needs be seen vis à vis the colonial history, the religio-socio-historical backgrounds, the frontier experience, and the rest that made it possible for the emergence of writers of the stature of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville and the entire galaxy of American classics.

These are just a few of the plethora of problems faced by the students/teachers of American drama. One is to teach serious drama to students who have never even heard of Broadway, its mammoth mechanics, leave alone Off, and Off-Off Broadway (that we actually deal with in terms of experimental theatre) and have serious misconceptions of its ‘pop’ culture (with no idea of American folk/blues/country traditions), have never been exposed to its ‘original’ art forms (jazz) and are unaware of its multiracial culture, (with a tendency to focus on the white skinned American). In such a situation, over a period of three years, I asked a sample of students opting for the American literature course (an average number of twenty students opted to study the course out of a total class strength of a hundred and four students) to answer a prepared questionnaire with a few basic questions related to the areas touching
upon American drama. The format was as under; in the form of multiple choice questions:

#1. Which is the literary genre you like best:
(a) Poetry
(b) Drama
(c) Fiction
(d) Non-fiction

#2. Are drama and fiction
(a) Similar because they tell a story
(b) Dissimilar because the text looks different
(c) Dissimilar because there is no narrator
(d) Dissimilar because it is meant to be performed

#3. In reading drama, do you feel the need to see what you read?
(a) Yes
(b) No
(c) cannot say

#4. Background reading in drama is
(a) very important
(b) important
(c) not important
5. Rate the following dramatists in order of your personal preference:
   (a) Shakespeare
   (b) Bernard Shaw
   (c) Samuel Beckett
   (d) Edward Albee
   (e) Arthur Miller

6. Have you ever seen a play being performed in the theatre?
   (a) Once
   (b) More than one
   (c) Never

7. Where did you see the play (s) (Tick more than one if applicable)
   (a) At school/college
   (b) Professional theatre in the vernacular medium
   (c) Mobile theatre/folk theatre
   (d) English language theatre
   (e) Experimental theatre

8. Did seeing the play (s) make you
   (a) realize the difference between reading/performance
   (b) enhance your understanding of the play
   (c) made no difference whatsoever

9. Have you seen a film on any play that you have read?
   (a) yes
   (b) no
# 10. How does the film affect your reading of the plays?
   (a) It becomes less boring
   (b) Visual experience makes the play come alive
   (c) It makes you understand the play better

# 11. Do you agree that a film can supplement your reading/understanding of a dramatic text?
   (a) yes
   (b) no
   (c) Cannot say

# 12. Have you seen an American play in performance?
   (a) yes
   (b) no

# 13. Which of the following are you familiar with (Tick as many as applicable)
   (a) Hollywood
   (b) Broadway
   (c) Jazz
   (d) Pop/Rock music
   (e) Blues/Country music

# 14. Tick the names of the personalities you are familiar with:
   (a) Madonna
   (b) Michael Jackson
   (c) John Gielgud
   (d) Sir Laurence Olivier
   (e) Richard Burton
   (f) Bob Dylan
# 15. In reading Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, you

(a) Understood what it was about

(b) Thought it needed some explication by the teacher.

(c) Felt the lack of the visual understanding

# 16. *The Zoo Story* was about

(a) Man's need to communicate and its failure

(b) Failing relationships

(c) The decadence of American culture

# 17. In *The Zoo Story* you could (Tick more than one if applicable)

(a) identify with the situation of the play

(b) discern the inertia, the stasis in the world evoked in the play

(c) was utterly bewildered by the play and its issues

# 18. In reading the plays of Beckett/Albee, you

(a) feel utterly confused

(b) empathize with the situation/characters

(c) disagree with the stances completely

# 19. In your comprehension of American drama, do you

(a) feel insecure in your understanding

(b) feel secure because of extraneous help (bazaar notes etc.)

(c) feel ambiguous about your reading
# 20. Have you ever seen (even in pictures)

(a) Daffodils

(b) Dogwood

(c) Tulips

In the respondents' answers, some very interesting conclusions could be drawn. Out of the total of sixty (twenty students per class \times three batches) which were randomized in our final assessment, because of similar student background and educational qualification – they were all in the final year of the two year M.A. (English) class and had opted for the American literature course. They had already completed their three year (B.A.) degree course with English (major) with the same optional paper. The answers realized were as follows:

# 1.  

(a) = 25  

(b) = 20  

(c) = 15  

(d) = 0

# 2.  

(a) = 20  

(b) = 20  

(c) = 2  

(d) = 18
# 3.  (a) = 25  
(b) = 25  
(c) = 10  

# 4.  (a) = 30  
(b) = 25  
(c) = 5  

# 5.  (a) = 1  
(b) = 2  
(c) = 4  
(d) = 5  
(e) = 3  

This was the final average score.

# 6.  (a) = 25  
(b) = 5  
(c) = 30  

# 7.  (a) = 15  
(b) = 6  
(c) = 6  
(d) = 2  
(e) = 0  

# 8.  (a) = 8  
(b) = 20  
(c) = 2
# 9.  (a)=50  
(b)=10  

# 10.  (a)=13 
(b)=22  
(c)=25  

# 11.  (a)=55 
(b)=0  
(c)=5  

# 12.  (a)=0 
(b)=60  

# 13.  (a)=48 
(b)=3  
(c)=3  
(d)=50  
(e)=10  

# 14.  (a)=58 
(b)=58  
(c)=2  
(d)=3  
(e)=3  
(f)=10  

# 15.  (a)=0 
(b)=51  
(c)=9  

V = Q
While not having actually statistically analyzed the available data, the results are apparent and significant for us to reach a few conclusions as to the direction into which our pedagogical situation takes us. Drama was a surprising second in preference, scoring over fiction in the genre gradation, but the students were not very clear as to the distinction between the genres, still, an equal number of students were alive to the basic differences between them – the lack of narrator and performance. There was ambiguity in their need to see or not to see the play they read and awareness as to the importance
of background. Shakespeare remained the unambiguous ‘top scorer’ in the
students gradation of their personal preference, followed by Shaw, Miller,
Beckett and Albee. This, one feels is significant as it shows how the old,
canonized, universals still remain high on the scale whilst the modernist / post
modernist / absurdist / experimental writers like Beckett and Albee lagged far
behind even Arthur Miller who, one ventures to suggest, remains more
‘comprehensible’ to Indian students. It was more shocking to realize that these
students (about half of them) had no exposure to theatre whatsoever, in any
form; and the remaining fifty per cent had only one fifth of their number who
had seen live performances more than once. Most of those who had seen
performances had done so in school or college; a few had seen various forms
of vernacular / folk / mobile theatre. No one had ever seen any experimental
theatre, and only two students had seen an English language play. Of the
students who had seen performance, only two (out of thirty) felt that it made
no difference to their understanding of the play – the rest thought that it had
made significant enhancement to their reading. A good ninety percent had
seen a film adaptation of a play they had read (this probably referred to a
classroom screening of a Shakespearean play) and most of them thought that it
had supplemented their reading / understanding of the text, making it visualize
the experience and hence ‘enliven’ it. But no student had ever seen any
American play in performance, despite some exposure through the various
cable movie channels available these days. Hollywood was fairly well known
to them as was Pop and Rock music but the number of students familiar with
Broadway, Jazz, Blues and Country music was amazingly dismal. Madonna
and Michael Jackson topped the list of personalities the students knew, followed by Bob Dylan. Three of the best theatre/film actors were nearly missing from their list of familiar names. These were the results of some of the random questions set to the students regarding zones of familiarity and comprehension that leave us convinced that teachers and students studying drama/literature in English and of America worked within a vacuum that calls for serious reassessment and reorientation of the way in which these courses may be taught.

Of the four direct questions on Albee’s work, student response was also on expected lines – no student claimed (thankfully) to have understood the play (The Zoo Story) and while only nine students thought visual understanding was necessary, fifty one of them decidedly needed explication from the teacher. In terms of interpretation too, thirty four students were utterly baffled by the play, twenty two could grasp at the non-happening/inertia/stasis of the play and four could even identify with the situation – such comprehension is of course highly suspect: a doctored response? Chaotic confusion is the commonest response to the idioms of Beckett and Albee and only a few (almost an equal number) could either completely empathize with or emphatically reject the plays. In the penultimate response, the serious teacher is shocked to find that forty one students out of the sixty actually feel secure because of explicatory bazaar notes and the like in their comprehension of the play. The rest are either ambigious or insecure about their understanding. These are some interesting revelations one comes across even in an almost casual, random questionnaire response.
The last question was asked as a deliberate test of the students visual knowledge — a take off from Mulk Raj Anand’s joke — and the result is self-explanatory.

The text, then is available for all and the teacher assumes the mantle of actor, director, interpreter and critic all rolled into one. Her role has all the potential to become hegemonic in its own turn as she exerts pressure and her will over her audience much in the same manner that an actor on stage would do; only this is further enhanced by the fact that she will also explicate, analyze and interpret the performance and the text. All this, in the knowledge that there is no visual remedy, no communion in spectacle, no collaborative multimedia exercise and a vast vacuum of cultures that set us apart from our object of study.

Notes


4. Ibid.

5. Ludwig Tieck, Buch über Shakespeare 293-372.


15. Benjamin Bennett *Theatre as Problem* 80.


25. Susan Sontag, “Going to the Theatre, etc,” in *Against Interpretation*, *op. cit.* 140-162.


42. B.S. Chandrika, “A Learner-Centred Approach” in *Provocations (op. cit.*) 211.


