CHAPTER 5

SELF-REALISATION AND RECONCILIATION:
CONCLUSION

This is the final Chapter of the thesis which centralizes the arrangements made in the proceeding chapters and presents conclusive remarks about the social issues dramatized in Edward Albee’s plays. Albee, of all the contemporary American playwrights, needs to be considered as the synthesizer of Euro-American dramatic durations. He presents a beautiful blending of realism, fantasy and absurdist modes of writing. Despite his obvious link with the absurd tradition, he strongly believes in the social responsibility of both the play and the playwrights and very often, therefore, tends to be didactic. His plays, nevertheless, cannot simply be regarded as discourses in stark realistic-naturalist tradition.

Edward Albee’s plays, in fact, convincingly dramatize his indictment of American culture in particular and human condition at large. He sharply projects the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in American society and American psyche simultaneously.

The plays discussed in earlier chapters clearly indicate the missing dimensions of American society which make its people miserable. The characters, quite naturally, therefore, are continually in quest of authentic self and authentic social order where sanity, integrity and happiness prevail, in its real sense.

The researcher’s intention in this thesis was to prove the assumption that there are two types of American Dreams in the American society as portrayed in Edward Albee’s dramaturgy which on the cultural level may be termed as the “inner“ and “other-directed
in the words of David Riesman.” In his book of “lonely crowd”, they include the ‘Old American Dream’ and the ‘New American Dream.’

The ‘Old American Dream’ representatives carried the old values. Grandma from The American Dream turns out to be the American Adam, who stands close to nature and whose inner values, “the contents” are more important than the outside looks. George and Martha from Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, embody the founding couple of the United States of America. Their inner strength to sacrifice their child and to face the truth seems to come from their close connection to history.

As regards the ‘New American Dream’, the characters especially in The American Dream seem to stand for this type of dream since they all live a life where only the outside look matters. They are not able to carry a meaningful conversation and they cannot pay attention to what they say and what others say. As they do not pay attention to what the ‘other’ says, they talk to themselves. Their utterances are interrupted, and questions are not always answered. They misunderstand each other, and restate what they have said. They do not stick to one subject matter at a time; so, their speeches are inconsequential. Nick and Honey in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, also symbolize a life in which the outlook dominates, and while Honey is an insignificant “Mousie,” Nick is a flop. They both represent an unproductive and desperate future in the ‘New American Dream.’ What is, however, more sarcastic in their lives is that they live as socialized animals who can never understand each other.

It can however be noted that both the old and the new American dreams are not only ‘canonized’ but also criticized by Edward Albee, who is “a popular figure, a touchstone in criticism and curricula.”
Albee notes that what is wrong with the myth of *The American Dream* is the notion that this is all that there is to existence! The myth is merely a part of other things. Becoming wealthy is fine but not an end to everything. There are many problems in existence in the world these days which money and power cannot solve. With his statement, therefore, Albee legitimizes and, at the same time, exempts his characters of leading a meaningless life.

Albee is a crucial figure in postwar American theatre who managed to penetrate deep into the substance of human life. Existential aspects resonate throughout modern literature, but Albee elaborates on them in his work with consistent care. Obsessed with the idea of stripping away illusions within human experience, he dramatizes the human need to break out of his or her self-imposed isolation and to establish contact with his or her fellow men. Albee’s heroes have all failed in some or the other fundamental way. They have betrayed the values to which, even now, they are capable of pledging an allegiance. They are human beings who became detached from a reality, as it disturbed them. They have sold out themselves not only for wealth or success, but for an untroubled existence; they wanted to preserve their own innocence. They were unwilling to recognize that pain is a natural result of a free existence. Instead, they have drowned their moral convictions in alcohol and a sterile intellectualism, as George has done in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, or they have simply permitted the slow disintegration of human responsibilities, as Tobias has done in *A Delicate Balance*.

With a profound understanding, Albee, who reigned over the American theatre in the 1960s and the 1970s, captures anxieties of a man living in the twentieth century. Again and again, Albee writes
about the lack of communication, existential hopelessness and inevitable isolation. Albee’s main area of inquiry in most of his plays is failures in human relationships. The empty games and bitter arguments, in so many of his plays, are a substitute for genuine contact and highlight the urgent need of love.

Albee’s characters are alienated beings, and his alienation is inner and outer. Their conformism alienates them from themselves; thus, they refer to themselves as if to another person. Some of them are castaway characters who do not have a home or a family. Beside this, they are skeptical about God, which contributes to self-alienation. In the society that Albee portrays, people are indifferent towards each other. Although they have a family, they live in separate shells. He deals with the alienation of the elderly, too. They are not wanted at homes; so, they are excluded from the society. The prejudices of other people also lead to loneliness in these plays. They reflect their sense of estrangement even in their narratives, too. As a result of being alienated, they have excessive behavior patterns. They attack and criticize each other. Love and death, which may be remedy for their loneliness, are absent in their lives.

Albee also explores the alienation between married couples. His couples lack sexual desire, which is another cause of alienation. Domestic and the superficial relationships disguise alienation for a while during the course of the plays. Albee’s interest therefore lies in a fundamental sense of alienation, which is his view of the general human condition.

The figure of the child is portrayed in Albee’s alternating families and makes it the subject of an exemplary performance by one generation for the benefit of another. The traditional structure of a
The nuclear family (heterosexual matrix: parents and young children) is challenged and converted into alternating forms of post-nuclear family structures: the couple with an adopted, narcissistic adult in *The American Dream*, the couple, their married, grown-up daughter, and a sibling-in-law in *A Delicate Balance* and solitary confined individuals in *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*?

In *The Zoo Story*, this thesis has shed light on the problem of alienation in big American cities especially in the mid-twentieth century which was perhaps the main reasons which caused the alienation of the protagonist Peter. There was the absence of personal contact, feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, isolation, separation and discontent in the American society. Albee pointed out how human misunderstanding and failure of communication between Peter and Jerry led to their destruction. Jerry was a ‘root-less’ person controlled by his feelings which made him ashamed of himself because of the bad reputation of his family, *i.e.*, his mother was a prostitute and his father an alcoholic. Jerry is thus a caged man. His existence is similar to that of the caged animals in the zoo. He lives physically but he is dead spiritually. He is treated as an animal. His presence is felt, but no one cares for him. He is cut loose from the flux of the human civilization. He lives on the margins of his society. His apartment serves as his cage. He even does not know the names of his neighbors. He calls them by titles or descriptive words.

Moreover being homosexual increased Jerry’s sense of alienation that made him isolate himself from his society. Even when he decided to commit suicide, he couldn’t do it by alone, that is why he asked Peter in the park to stab him. Symbolically, Jerry was asking the help of the community because he did not want to die lonely. So, he
believed that if he was killed by another person, that was to represent a kind of communication that could help him to escape from his isolation, but he was disappointed. So he threw himself into the knife and was killed. His death is a protest against the deplorable and unjust circumstances that shade modern man’s life and cage him. Thus he wishes that his death might add meaning to his meaningless life. Accordingly, it can be observed that the society was the main reason behind the alienation of his characters in *The Zoo Story*. Whichever way we consider *The Zoo Story*, it remains a challenging play, a representation of human condition. "To be or not to be", we have to stand up and take up the challenge of our daily misery.

*The Zoo Story* further stresses the need for man to break his self-alienation and complacency and to make contact with his fellow men. For Albee, true human relationships are very essential. Therefore, he tries to attack the indifference and sterility of contemporary American society. The Zoo Story carries a message for people living in modern life who are bound within individual walls. All in all, this play challenges not only American life in the mid-twentieth century, but also the void of life in modern times. The absurdity of life, as depicted in the play, can be overcome by building the awareness that humans are social beings, therefore they need to build positive and meaningful relationship with others. In order to live in harmony, however, people need the nerve to break the bars and walls limiting their lives.

The motif of solitude is present in almost every play by Edward Albee. It can assume various forms: it can be lack of human contact, or it may involve a sense of alienation from other human beings. His characters invent bogus forms of community to mask the fact that they are alone. They have difficulties coping with all the losses that afflict them during their lifetime.
By reflecting contemporary existentialist concerns, Albee fits into the category of the *Theatre of the Absurd*. He mercilessly reveals false illusions, concentrating on alienation within family relationships and showing the desolation and anguish of human experience. In his gloomy world, family ties do not exist and friendship ties are only illusory. Self-manufactured illusions are a vehicle to screen off the unpleasant feeling of loneliness and emptiness. Thus, in Albee’s plays, the shedding of comforting illusions and of easy solutions may be painful, but once it is over, it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief.

Albee’s characters live in an illusionary world. His characters conform to the society and become inauthentic beings. They try to build a peaceful life, which is just so in appearance. This apart, Albee’s dichotomies like day and night, being drunk and sober, point out the tendency of his characters to live in illusions. Moreover, Albee uses a surface realism; so, when it comes to shatter the illusions of the audience and make them face the realities of their lives, he is even more forceful. His characters are indecisive or reluctant at the scenes that they are to make a choice. They reject being responsible for their past and present deeds. Even though they opt for withdrawal from life, it does not eradicate their anguish. They know that they will be responsible for what they do and also what they do not do. Albee extends this theme further by analyzing the characters’ abuse of their responsibilities and rights. His characters do not care for others.

The characters, who are irresponsible to each other, distort the rights they have, and their rights turn into demands that they impose on the other characters in order to attain them.
Although Albee favors being a man of action, his characters, who do not have any expectations for the future, are passive agents. They appear to believe that their lives will not be better than it is at that moment. Thus, they choose inaction or withdrawal. When they avoid action, they are content. When there are no changes, life is the same old routine, which they are familiar with. Acting to change anything frightens them, and even an action is performed to secure inaction.

From the very beginning of his career, Albee, he has been a defeatist and a pessimist, but not a nihilist. On the contrary, he is a stern moralist who believes that there are right values and wrong values. Albee is a committed writer: his plays challenge the audience and bring to fore the realities of the present generation.

In this Thesis, it is demonstrated that, Albee provides the necessary artistic fix American theater sought in the 1960s, an infusion that would elevate the American theatrical imagination and help a newer generation of playwrights. Whether reviled or celebrated, Albee's plays explore the depths of the human psyche. They portray people who are unable to communicate with one another, achieve intimacy, or recognize that they have spent their lives paying homage to false gods, such as social status and material comforts. Yet his works are more than just harsh indictments of contemporary society; they also serve as cautionary tales that are grounded in the playwright's deep-seated hope that people will learn to strive to live their lives to the fullest before it is too late.

Edward Albee shows the connection between a collapse of social structure and the failure on an individual level. If people are to survive as autonomous individuals in our contemporary, impersonal mass society and accept their responsibility toward their life and other
people, they must strip themselves of all pretenses. Albee attacks the present sophisticated society, which tries to evade the pain of real communication.

Edward Albee’s plays are about raising one’s consciousness. He himself celebrates Albert Camus’s views concerning self-awareness. No other words can express it better than those of Camus and, therefore, it seems plausible to quote him here to make the point explicit:

> Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse to consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows . . . . Everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it.²

To raise one’s consciousness, Albee, however, believes that human imperfections and weaknesses must be freely confessed if the individual is ever to make a genuine attempt to establish a necessary relationship with those around him. If these truths are painful, they are also the only basis on which one can credibly begin the reconstruction of personal and social meaning.

Albee’s characters, like the playwright himself, suffer from arrested development; they are the people, who have had to create a “beanbag,” who have had to hide their own insufficiencies and failures and now they are left to find their own way. In finding their own way of living, they draw blood. Albee’s plays, in fact, aim to shock the audience out of complacency; they are a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity. Therefore, even his most negative portrayals are handled with sympathetic insight into the complex totality of human motivation. He challenges his heroes to bear
life with dignity, mobility and responsibly, simply because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence. In short, Albee believes in the value and dignity of man. His heroes suffer, dwell in an absurd world, but realize the opportunity for growth and change.

It may however be noted that Albee offers no guarantee of order, comprehension, survival, or love. Each one of his characters takes advantage of powers of consciousness, which varies from play to play but the point remains fixed: Albee’s theatre consistently stages the possibility that his heroes, and perhaps the audience, through the process of engagement can become more honest with both their inner and outer worlds.

Language is a way to avoid confrontation, change unpleasant topics, escape from real issues and dominate others. Albee uses less fragmented language to give the sense that his characters seem to have some communication. Furthermore, Albee does not devaluate language so much. His silences and pauses are fewer and shorter but they do complement his realism.

Albee targets the materialist and consumerist society in his work. His characters regard money and wealth as the most important criterion in life. His female characters are fond of shopping, and they believe that they can relieve themselves from the deeper worries through consuming. The characters marry for pragmatic reasons. Even their children, who are expected to be a source of satisfaction, become properties. Furthermore, they can do any job including prostitution in order to be richer. As they entirely depend on money, they expect to be rewarded by being paid when they are asked for help. An economic problem can affect them as much as a problem in their family.

Due to their materialism, Albee’s characters experience loss of values. They do not trust each other. Couples cheat on each other, and
they do not treat each other with affection. Besides, they are not respectful to elderly people. Hospitality becomes an artificial value in their homes. No one can bear the presence of a visitor or even a relative in his or her house. As the values are lost, their relationships are not based on strong bonds. The characters do not know anything about their neighbors or relatives. They do not communicate with each other, or try to have a good time together. Couples do not have sex in its fullest sense as they are isolated from one another, and perhaps as they do not love their spouses. Moreover, they do not want to bother themselves with another character’s problem even if he / she is their own child. Love is replaced by hatred on several occasions, and they would even want the others to be dead. They do not have true friendships. When the demands of friendship oppose their own benefits, or when it disturbs their comfort, they become strangers to each other. Therefore, they are to endure their existential plights on their own.

Albee is optimistic in his playwriting as he believes that there is still a chance for individuals to face the reality of their condition and to act in a self-aware way. He believes that a better society will be formed only by awakened individuals. Albee adds his social concerns to these universal problems.

It can also be pointed out that the plays of Albee discussed in the foregoing chapters have a solid autobiographical basis, a core on which the dramatic blind spot and the homographesis are mostly built on. However anachronistic it might sound, the reading of drama through autobiography calls for the “rebirth of the author.”

Albee’s plays are linked by a basic theme which is human relations within the family, with special regard to the figure of the child
or an elderly figure who bears an “ironic self-preferentiality”. *The Sandbox* and *Three Tall Women* portray the figure of the Young Man who is prominent among the gay characters of Albee’s families. The playwright took the “people of his imagination” and portrayed (himself as) the Young Man. Among the suggested gay characters is the absent Teddy from *A Delicate Balance*, the twin brother of the Young Man in *The American Dream*, and Billy in *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream*, Agnes and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*, and Stevie and Martin in *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?*, constitute basic family constructs for Albee. In a ritualized transaction they symbolically stand for the characters of his adoptive parents. The female characters that are mostly based on the figure of Albee’s adoptive mother are strong-willed, dominant ones whose lives are inextricably linked with that of their mates.

In many of Albee’s dramas the couple function is more important than the parental role; in most cases wives and husbands take precedence over mothers and fathers and engage in adulterous liaisons. The American, urban family model comes under a serious textual scrutiny in the plays of Albee where the prognosis for progeny is as dire as it is compelling because whatever the form, parents maim their children consciously or unconsciously. The family and familial relationships in Albee’s plays, in their final meanings emblematize the disintegration of human dignity and deterioration of human values. His plays, therefore, all the absurdity and directionlessness notwithstanding are a quest for an order on authenticity in the human life.
ENDNOTES: