CHAPTER VII

SUMMING UP

ALL OVER
The HEALTH of a nation, a society can be determined by the art it demands.¹

Albee 'is the product of his culture'. He reflects every strength and weakness of the culture, both as an artist and as a human being. It would be no exaggeration to say that Albee has emerged as America's 'first dogged culture watchdog'. The proof of this fact is that of his steady and valid presence on the stage for four decades till now, ever since he wrote and produced The Zoo Story, (1958). Thrice winner of the Pulitzer prize, the first time in 1967 for A Delicate Balance, Seascape in 1975, Three Tall Women 1994, it looks as though the best is yet to come from this seventy plus year old playwright whose avowed mission in life is to make the American part of the universe sit up and take notice of its illnesses through the transforming power of art. Art is not a mere escape or
entertainment, which it had been in America till the early 20th century. Albee frequently uses his lecturers to describe how he believes the art can be a catalyst for change. He says “The job of the arts, is to hold a mirror up to us and say: “Look, this is how you really are. If you don’t like it, change.”

Albee belongs to the charmed circle of a few sensitive and cultivated minority called philosophers who are gifted with an awareness of the meaning of the problems afflicting society, for as Tonlin would put it, “The philosopher is one who abstracts the real issue from the tangle of emotions that cling round it.” Historical, philosophical and dramatic unity of vision is seen in nearly 25 plays of Edward Albee from The Zoo Story to his last one.

Edward Albee was the first dramatic satirist in his generation who vociferously attacked American self-complacency that had become an integral part of the American social structure. The age that is represented in his plays is conspicuous by its moral depravity, emotional and cultural sterility, and intellectual void and spiritual nullity. All the institutions of society-social, political and religious, as recognized by Albee, have collapsed; the ethics, politics and private life of man have proved to be corrupt and bereft of meaning. Albee’s plays show “what a sad and shabby time we live in.” The world according to him is threatened by moral vacuity and intellectual stupidity; civilization having lost its goal is at its ebb tide.

Edward Albee is not merely a social critic, but he is rather ‘a demonic social critic’ as he describes himself. He is truthfully bitter in his attack of a social system which fails in its duty of creating responsible citizens. He presents characters which must strip themselves of all
pretence if they want to survive as respectable individuals and accept their duty towards others. The effect he seeks in this role is to make man review his present state and struggle to amend it. In The American Dream and The Death of Bessie Smith, and The Play About the Baby, the characters are vain, vacuous and false. Cruelty and violence dominates their lives. The portrayals of Mommy, Mrs. Barker and the Nurse, and the Boy and Girl reveal the horror of life that Albee reiterates in his plays. These characters are representatives of a society that has lost its moral and social values and is fast moving towards inevitable destruction.

Albee is a progressive writer whose criticism of society is not just meant to reveal a die hard attitude but also to encourage and recognize change or improvement as his later plays suggest. The metamorphosis of Albee's mind is in direct relation to his plays. There is a transition to be seen in Albee, from intense bitterness and satire to a mellowed acceptance of society at large. He has been able to rise from personal to impersonal, from a subjective involvement to an objective detachment with his characters.

Exploration of the human mind rather than the portrayal of the superficial layers of humanity have been the central issue in many of Albee's plays. The search for identity is a recurrent theme in most of his plays as we find in The Zoo Story, Tiny Alice, All Over, The Lady from Dubuque, Finding the Sun, and other plays of Albee. The search is carried out through family relationships which concern both real and imagined parents and children, and weighed by the impact of death on survivors. Since time weighs heavy on man and "THE WHOLE WORLD IS FLYING APART!!" Albee feels that the search for the self creates an awareness of the realities of existence and enables man to seek a meaning in life.
Edward Albee's primary target is the foundation of the family, its matriarchal structure, the waning away of the older generation and the emasculation of the third generation. The reason for dying middle class life and the disharmony in families have been traced back by Albee to the disturbing social condition prevailing in their time. The family unit, for him is a symbolic microcosm of society which yearns for security, understanding, communication and love. Albee's families are stripped off essential unifying bonds. For his characters the emotion of love and kindness are not the basis of any relationship. The institution of marriage, more than anything else is a farce, in which there never exists any lasting bond based on faith and affection.

By placing American middle class family at the heart of his works, Albee has created a picture of the American society and the American way of life. The playgoers of his generation have been called on to "sit and watch ... (to) have so clear a picture, see everybody moving through his own jungle ... an insight into all the reasons, all the needs." Although some of the Albee's plays present bachelors like Jerry, Jack, Julian and others and celebrate celibacy, his concern has been family unit; he once stated, "I've nothing against marriage. I think it's a perfectly possible way to love."

The family which is the source of safety and security has been the source of struggles and psychological tensions. In the American society the family itself is in a 'delicate balance'. Although the fundamental lack of love and stress on wealth and status, conflicts of temperaments and infidelity of the spouse have posed a threat to the family structure, the family unit has been usually preserved. Emphasis has been laid on the ideals of the family life. Albee tries to restore the affection between
husband and wife, parents and children and speak for the family solidarity; they are keen to prevent family disruption. Individuals' over estimation of false social values which caused emotional, economical and sexual friction in them affected their family and marital life. Many families, on the verge of disintegration are due to the husbands desire for romantic interludes even after middle age, reflecting the current permissiveness of the society. Sex has been a problem in families, as one finds in The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Delicate Balance, The Goat or Who is Sylvia?

Albee has identified the failure of contemporary Americans in their family life to be the cause of the failure of the American society, culture and in general the decline of the Western Civilization. Albee does not mean to criticize the family and marriage as such, but his dispute against the American family, becomes a commentary on all human relationships. He demonstrates through this bizarre drama The American Dream the danger of accepting too readily the values that society puts on people in the family and marriage as well as in the name of class, race, religion and politics that are well substantiated in Tiny Alice and The Death of Bessie Smith. Peter Wolfe states, “By dwelling into the tightly knit family group (or the group that recognizes itself as a family), Albee enables himself to dramatize in greater depth a social organism which is disoriented at its source”7

Deeply outraged by his personal experiences of unhappiness, disillusionment and disappointment, Albee makes the American society of his creative world suffer the same sense of helplessness, impotency, callousness and indifference. However, with time, the seething anger and volatile hatred of a matriarchal society was replaced by a mellowed
acceptance of the family as an important unit of society. His attitude
towards family became more favorable and as such his later plays directly
reveal an improvement in the delineation of family. Members are no longer
critical of each other, or apathetic towards others feelings but make efforts
to bring harmony and cordiality in their relations. The earlier mother and
father figures developed from destructive agents to mature character
capable of making their own decisions. The non-living and inhuman
Mommy of The American Dream turns into the love-dominated wife-
mistress of All Over. This is a dramatic evidence of Albee's shift in views.
The dull submissive Daddy figure of the early plays contrasts sharply with
the authority figure of Tobias in A Delicate Balance. Tobias' miraculous
change can be seen from his non-involvement in family affairs to a
decision taking father and husband.

Albee has exploded the illusion of American civilization. He has
captured in modern terms the dramatic power of man, man destroyed by
his own acts still clinging to life, still in search of meaning. In The Lady
from Dubuque, Albee has depicted the fateful struggle in man shattering
realities of life in solving the basic problems of existence. Albee calls
attention to the fact that unless a man is dead to an unreal life he can
never be awakened to a new, real life.

Albee's keen interest in the psychological, social and physical
aspects of man led him to observe his condition in both states -life and
death. As a result of being under illusion, the lives of Albee's protagonists
are spiritually barren. It is not that they are confronted with physical death.
Albee asserts that the nature of death and illusion are inseparable.
Generally, Albee's characters seek to escape their death in life situation by
destroying the very illusions they have imprisoned themselves in. Jerry,
the Nurse, Martha and many other protagonists are all victims of their illusions. They strive to come out of their cramped, warped environment by breaking those barriers which obstruct their confrontation with reality. For Albee, their illusion is a mask which separates man from man and from truth which ends in death to a certain extent of the potential creativity of the individual. Preferring the end of life rather the living state of death or the spiritually withered life, Albee’s characters find solace and peace in physical death. From *The Zoo Story* to *Tiny Alice* death becomes a means by which Albee’s characters free themselves from their illusions willfully, they show courage and hope for better times like George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

The world which Albee observes is entropic. Its basic impulse is a disintegrative force. His subject is what Agnes, in *A Delicate Balance*, describes in a nutshell: “the gradual ... demise of intensity, the private preoccupations, the substitutions.” That is to say, he means alienation by the ‘demise of intensity’, institutionalization by ‘private pre-occupations’, illusion by ‘substitution’. He takes into account the way in which relationships dissolve and how individuality collapses. Bigsby points out that Albee’s concern is “to establish the connection between personal relations and public policy, as he is to balance what is given with what can still be changed.”

One observation about Albee is that he never completes his plays, that is, he ends the play abruptly giving room for ambiguous thoughts. The action never takes beyond perception, because Albee doesn’t want to give his audience any comfort or reassurance, no desire to reinforce complacency. He presents his point of view and after having done it leaves the play with the audience so that the completion should be carried
out by the audience in the line that Albee has already drawn out. He does not choose to dramatize the social and moral world which he has advocated, and therefore his plays remain open ended.

Albee's career as a writer has been accompanied by an increasing concern with the practical medium of theatre. From the outset he championed theatre in America and has actively promoted new works, both his own and that of other, predominantly younger dramatists. In more recent years he has become active as the director of his own plays. In 1963 he felt that the ideal performance was the one he had experienced in his own imagination: "There is only one true, correct, hard, ideal performance of a play, and that is mine, and I saw it when I was writing".10 By 1978, when he was engaged in a tour of five of his early plays, he was no longer prepared to leave the 'ideal performance' as the property of the writer, and evidently felt dissatisfied with the sort of directions to be seen in the theatre: "I think I can get clarity and precision, by directing myself. The direction may not be flashy but I'm not really interested in flash".11 The qualities which Albee speaks of complement is his articulate style of writing.

Edward Albee's greatest achievement and contribution to American drama is his powerful language and the weaving of musical form and dramatic structure. He revolutionized the language of the American stage with his repartee, monologues and dialogues. Box and Quotations and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? exemplify his skill in creating musical dramatic structure. He has assimilated and used innovatively all the known dramatic techniques from realism to meta-theatre and has preserved for posterity, a unique dramatic record of American theatre. The younger playwrights are influenced by him in his mode of writing. The works of
Sam Shepard and David Mamet are very much similar to Albee's plays. Music plays an important role in his plays for he feels that it is only through music emotions can be communicated.

Albee can be classified with theatrical experimenters whose work jumped the boundaries of American Drama. Beginning with the reviews of Albee's earliest works, Albee's has gathered a wide variety of critical opinion, many commentators note Albee's inventiveness and insight into society and human nature while at the same time responding negatively to the tone or structure of his dramas. For example, although The American Dream was faulted by some as defeatist and nihilistic, it was also praised for its savage parody of traditional American values. Albee commented: "Is the play offensive? I certainly hope so; it was my intention to offend—as well as amuse and entertain." While several of Albee's plays written since 1962 have failed commercially and elicited stinging reviews for their abstract classicism and dialogue, many scholars have commended Albee's commitment to theatrical experimentation and refusal to indulge to commercial pressure. His failures at the box-office can be well known as his critical successes. "His plays tend to be dark and challenging; the themes of solitude, loss and death recur throughout his works."

Like Ibsen and Strindberg, Albee has identified only sickness and loneliness in existence. Unlike nihilist who believes that life is nothing, Albee values life and its standards he tries to find meaning in life by focusing attention on the human condition in the modern world. Albee has been given admission to the group of absurdist by eager critics like Esslin, for his first two one act plays, The Zoo Story and The American Dream are concerned with the problems of alienation and search for self. Albee believes that man must find meaning in his absurd existence, as
Jerry endeavor even at the cost of his life. The playwrights like Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Adamov are satisfied with exposing the absurd lives lived by men, unaware and unconscious of the reality. But, Albee is convinced that the individuals’ absurdity is their own making. “We manufacture such a portion of our own despair.” and he re-affirms his belief that change is possible if the human situations are confronted. By leaving some space in the Box, he suggests that still there is hope for orderliness and harmony in the world. His most optimistic play Seascape ends with an invitation to his contemporaries to begin the march towards the change.

With all his success, Albee might easily be expected to retire, but his indefatigable nature and interest in social issues continues to motivate him to create higher art. Despite having been explored extensively, Albee’s mysterious mind still leaves some untrodden and unknown areas to be discovered. Albee’s work consistently demonstrates a commitment to these ideals as he continues to challenge audiences intellectually and morally. He continues to create and work towards projects that give them better choice. He remains today one of America’s most celebrated and influential playwrights and a true friend of the American theatre.

Albee has once remarked that “till the society changes, plays will be written criticizing the American way of life.” Perhaps we can best sum up Albee’s reputation as a controversial playwright by noting more modestly that, although he has been “condemned by some and worshipped by others, Edward Albee is clearly the most compelling American playwright to explode upon the Broadway stage, since Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in mid-forties.”

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