A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL
ISSUES IN SELECTED PLAYS OF EDWARD ALBEE

ABSTRACT

The present study aims at exploring the contemporary social issues imbedded in the selected plays of Edward Albee. The issues Albee weaves in his dramatic productions, explicitly or implicitly, indicate their socio-political and religio-cultural itineraries which signify the nature of American society and also the directions it is moving in. An exploration of the contemporary issues in Albee’s plays deserves special critical attention not only because of their accuracy and urgency in terms of their relevance and contemporaneity but also because of their corresponding and engaging integrity, dramatic strategies and linguistic devices which determine the tone and texture of his plays and distinguish his prominence at the national as well as international level. Albee is one of the very few American playwrights who are internationally recognized for their ingenious contribution to the world of drama. Albee, like Jean Paul Sartre, believes that drama holds the responsibility of acquainting modern man with himself and also with the ultimate significance of human conditions in the cosmos that betrays absurdity. His plays incessantly assert a will to come to grip with meaning in life, to surmount the indeterminate vacuity, sterility and insipidity of the quotidian.

“Tireless striving”, to borrow Tagore’s poetic expression continually “stretches its arms…” in Albee’s play and assumes the status of a quest, a romance as is seen in Goethe. Albee combines in the different versions of absurd dramatic tradition, and stands prominent among the best of the American and international playwrights like, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and a host of noted playwrights from different countries in the world. This study, nonetheless, centralize its focus on the fact that an absurd play essentially stands contraindicated to stark realism or realistic-naturalistic narrative or dramatic devices. Albee’s plays, despite their disjointed relationship with realism, are inextricably grounded in the social issues which ultimately define the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of human existence.

The study is carefully planned in five chapters:

Chapter - 1

Dramatic Tradition: A Perspective

This chapter primarily traces out certain important events which took place in Albee’s life right from his childhood, because these events directly or indirectly had a great impact not only on his personal life, but they also played a role of crucial importance in shaping his perception and creative vision. His acute sense of isolation after he was adopted by millionaire parents and brought to New York from Washington, had resulted in his retreat to solitariness, to imagination and incessant reading. In 1944, therefore, when he was sent to Choate his passion for reading was intensified and it is here that he wrote a 538 pages novel. His interest in multiple forms of literary expressions, multiple styles and creative strategies, evident in his plays, was continually sharpened with the passages of time. The impact of places, milieus and cultural vicissitude is also pinpointed here.

This chapter also systematically traces out a trajectory of American drama and its changing tradition with a focus on the tradition of absurd drama in America as well as in the other European countries. The statements made in this chapter are supported
by anathematic secondary and primary source material. Analytical survey of the predecessors, contemporary and European playwrights is also made here so that a proper perspective on the study is created. Critical discussions on Albee’s contemporary playwrights, their thematic and generic concerns facilitate this chapter to pinpoint the distinguishing features of an Albee play and its ingenious engagement with the contemporary social issues, its inextricable link with the absurd tradition of drama notwithstanding.

Chapter II

Reconciling the Contradictions

Introduction justifies the need for the study in terms of the problematic taken up for exploration. The following chapters present an in-depth analysis of the major themes incorporated in Albee’s plays which signify his vision of the contemporary reality that characterizes modern ethos with all its implicit and implied associations. The discussions, also provide a creative rationale for the kind of linguistic strategies and technical dramatic devices he employs to embody the complex matrix of interpersonal and social relationships along with the disconcerting inner yearnings, agony and angst his characters are continually confronted with. The labyrinthine situations his characters are invariably placed in ultimately reflect upon the precarious human condition. This chapter, therefore, explores multifarious dimensions of the prevailing reality and its constraints.

Discussions here also underscore the social structure of the American Society and the dichotomy between the rich and poor strata, Albee’s The Zoo Story, The American Dream, Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Delicate Balance, The Goat, Every Thing In The Garden, Seascapes, The man who has three arms, Marriage play, and Three Tall Women provide an engaging picture of various social issues.

Struggle between rich and poor has a very long history in literature as in society. In society one can find two groups, economically prosperous, enjoying a high status and on the other hand people are also poor and can hardly make the two ends meet. Conflict between rich and poor is the common theme in most of Albee’s plays. The theme is the reflection of real and hidden struggle which takes place in the American society.

The American disparities and disjunctions ruthlessly shatter The Delicate Balance of relationships. Imbalanced and ill-suited familial, interpersonal, and even sexual relationships, his plays establish, cannot and will not be conducive to self fulfilment and also to the promotion of a healthy and sane society. Insights, therefore, are borrowed from other allied disciplines like sociology, psychology, psychoanalytical, and cultural studies to comment on the urgency and authenticity of the thematic patterns of Albee’s plays. His contemporaneity is farther commented upon with the corresponding accuracy between his themes and dramatic techniques and stage technicalities. Each one of the selected plays offers illustrious dramatization of the most important social issues engendered during the modern era, both in the chronological as well as terminological sense.

Chapter - III

Confronting Estrangement and Alienation

Albee’s preoccupation with theme of alienation and estrangement places him in the central American and European literary as well as intellectual tradition. European intellectuals, thinkers, philosophers during this period were intensely
addressing themselves to the issues of existential problems and the problems of isolation and alienation in an absurd cosmos.

Intellectuals like Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Soren Kierkegaard philosophized the existential predicament of man constantly grappling with vacuity and futility in the apparently absurd and meaningless world. Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God had been a guiding and governing stream of thought for them, except for Kierkegaard, who found faith as a leap out of despair. Camus’s The Myth of Sisyphus and Martin Esslin’s The Theatre of Absurd pinpointed the creative and critical directions of the absurd in literature and especially in drama.

The theatre of absurd emerged as a dominant mode of creative expression. The novelists like Kafka, Gunter Grass, Saul Below, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, John Updike, and a host of American, African-American and European writers produced absurd fiction. This creative stance also had a great impact on drama, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adams, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Robert Piquet, N. F. Simpson and others had written plays with the absurd creative and dramatic modes. Edward Albee enjoys a position among the American Playwrights dealing with the existential problems and the problems of alienation in the different contextual situations. This chapter, therefore, attempts a comprehensive critical analysis of his plays like The Zoo Story, The Sand Box, The American Dream, The Death of Bessie Smith, Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Tiny Alice, A delicate Balance, Everything in the Garden, Box and Quotation’s from the Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, All Over, Escape, from the various points of view.

Each one of the selected plays is carefully and comprehensively analysed with a focus on the problematic taken up for exploration, with the textual references. Care has also been taken to authenticate the analyses with extra textual reliable source material. Albee’s critique of the aberrations of American society, failure of relationships, and moral disintegration of family are specially underscored here. Intrinsic problems of human existence, an utter loss of the self, his devastating sense of alienation, his fears and frustrations, his romantic yearnings are also highlighted in order to pinpoint the urgency and the contemporaneity of Albee’s thematic preoccupation. The entire gamut of discussions here attempts at its best to bring out the socio-psychological, religio-cultural and philosophical significance of the issues Albee dramatises in his plays.

Chapter IV

Modes of Expression: Dramatic Devices

Albee has been internationally recognised as an ingenious creative artist. His dramatic art, as has been extensively discussed in the preceding chapters, embodies most of the major social issues which define the nature and texture of modern American society. These issues in his plays are dexterously weaved through highly loaded linguistic and dramatic devices. Albee very subtly employs myth, metaphor, symbol, and allusion in such a way that these linguistic devices appear to be natural and integral part of his text and dramatic production. He also, successfully employs the contrasting modes of fantasy and realism in order to project his holistic vision.

The silence indicates breakdown of communication, and conveys the emptiness that pervades familial relationships and elicits mystery around events in the past and the present. Albee’s dramatic strategies attribute his plays of distinguished modes of presentation which leave ways open for the audience to freely access his plays and their richness drawing upon their own socio-cultural experiences.
Albee also incorporates certain linguistic and dramatic devices which signify the complex structural designs of an absurd play. This chapter thus attempts a careful critical statement on the dramatic art of Albee with selected plays at the centre.

Chapter V

Self- Realisation and Reconciliation: Conclusion

This is the final chapter of the dissertation; it centralises the arrangements made in the proceeding chapters and presents conclusive remarks about the social issues dramatised in Albee’s plays. Albee, of all the contemporary American playwrights, needs to be considered as the synthesiser 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.

Albee’s plays, in fact, convincingly dramatise 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.

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