

Cultural Pragmatics in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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ABSTRACT

This article engages debates on how changing cultural values impinge on the behavioral patterns of an individual by considering social actions as distinctly mobile engagement with the environment. Cultural Pragmatics is essential for a close examination of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. This article attempts to investigate how intentions of interactants are culture driven and culture related. People are led to a state of disorientation due to collapse of cultural values and discontinuity of conventional view points and beliefs. The speaker's discourse highlights the character's inability to communicate to suggest the emptiness of hackneyed social intercourse resulting in psychopathological diseases among individuals.

Keywords: American; Cultural; Interactants; Psychopath; Relationship; Society; Values.

INTRODUCTION

In a National Symposium on Pragmatics, Prof. He Gang considers cultural pragmatics to be a branch of pragmatics. Pragmatics is a discipline of interpretive science which is designed to understand utterances in a context from context-dependent point of view. While defining cultural pragmatics, he says that it is a branch of pragmatics, which examines how a culture-loaded utterance could be effectively understood. It is a kind of interpretive model of understanding which offers concepts, guidelines and patterns of understanding culture-related and/or culture-driven intentions of interactants. To uncover the secrets of interactants, it is necessary to activate our knowledge of American culture for a complete understanding of the text. I strongly refute Derridian maxim *il n'y pas un dehors dn texte* (there is nothing outside the text) because I contend that a complete understanding of *The Zoo Story* is only possible if we explore the American culture in detail. About cultural identity Stuart Hall writes that it is

A matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power (Rutherford, 1990, 225, emphasis in original).

Albee produced this work in the second half of twentieth-century when substantial political movements like Black Civil Rights, second-wave Feminism, and Queer Movement, which were based on the claim about injustices done to certain factions, began to change American culture. Jerry became the prototype of American youth, "nothing finally saves people from the horrific loneliness in society; neither parents, nor neighbors, relatives, nor friends. All relations are doomed and will last 'for about an hour'. Love is even short-lived and ephemeral" (Harehdasht, Hajjari, Shahidzadeh, 2015, 17, emphasis in original).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Albee portrays post existential strains to depict deformities prevalent in the American Culture. What haunts Albee's characters is the enormous uncertainty in their lives which makes their existence burdensome resulting in listless individuals. I feel that the major cause of nihilistic attitude in the characters of *The Zoo Story* is the change in family structure. The traditional family structure was built on a family support system. In extended families grandparents, aunts and uncles used to support and contribute to the well-being of a family. Physical, emotional and economic support made family impregnable. The extended family system was replaced by nuclear family system which comprised of a father, mother and children. The definition of "family" is changing dramatically. Homosexual relationships, single parent household, adoption of children have become more common.

The collapse in traditional family structure has made Jerry a castaway. He is a child of a dysfunctional family with an alcoholic father and a mother who eloped with her friend. Though the society is in the phase of transformation, still it is following some norms and conventions. So the society expects an individual to follow its norms and conventions in one's private as well as public life. The individual, like Jerry, who is a result of a complex family structure, is hardly acceptable to the American Culture. His homosexuality is unacceptable to the society. He is left with no choice but to suppress his desires or to accept exclusion from the society. Jerry tells Peter that he has discovered that he is "h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l" when he was a teenage (Albee, 1960, 25). The dash after each letter is reflecting the resistance on the part of American Culture which has not yet fully realized the rights of a minority group. He refers to his homosexual experiences with a Greek boy and adds: "And now; oh, do I have the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour" (Albee, 1960, 25). He has to suppress his homosexuality in order not to be declared redundant from the society; but this result in making him stranger to his own-self. Hence the identity of the individual bears the pressure of cultural forces strengthened by the norms of the society.

Jerry does not know about other members of the community who are residing in the same rooming house in which he lives. He says that there is a Puerto Rican family in one of the rooms, and adds that he does not know how many children they have. There is "somebody" living in another room; the word somebody tells indifference that he feels for others and others feel for him. This results in isolation of Americans. It is not only Jerry, but Peter also, whose life is without "the cleansing consciousness of death" (Albee, 1960, Intro. 10) is an isolated individual like The Young Man in *The American Dream*. That is why he, in search of peace of mind, comes to the bench in Central Park on Sunday afternoons. Jerry violates Peter's isolation and peace on the park-bench by forcing him to listen to his private life. He tickles, pokes and punches Peter to have more space on the bench. The bench which becomes the crucial point of contention represents a complex web of contradictory desires and anxieties of this highly competitive world. He goes on with his zoo story while humiliating Peter's bourgeois world. Peter, on the other hand, is annoyed by this treatment; but Jerry goes on. He punches Peter on the arm, hard, and shuts out loud: "MORE OVER!" (Albee, 1960, 40). Urging Peter for fight, Jerry "slaps Peter" and "spits in Peter's face" (Albee, 1960, 46-47) He uses verbal violence too. During the fight, he embarrasses Peter; "Imbecile! You are slow-witted" (Albee, 1960, 42). It is an

attempt on the part of Jerry to make a contact with the other character but he fails. The American society is responsible for his unusual behavior pattern because it treats him like an alien.

The play ends on a murder/suicide of Jerry because he "no longer wishes to return to his rooming-house status of totally unfeeling and widely departed guarded people and atmosphere" (Gholamzadeh, 2009, 17). Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus" questions the value of life by using a myth as a metaphor for life. The mythological figure of Sisyphus is sentenced to roll a giant boulder continually up a mountain to the peak. Sisyphus will never be able to stop his effort as the boulder would roll back down the mountain into the valley. Similarly Jerry is segregated by the dwellers of New York, where he is bound to pass a solitary life in a confined space, left with no alternative except to kill himself or to get himself killed in face of futility inherent in the world. Life has no value except the one created by man himself. Man's effort is seen as futile, both through the characters of Jerry as well as his counterpart Peter. It is meaningless to find the ultimate truth since the advances in science daily prove the futility of beliefs or opinions once accepted as irrefutable. Just as Sisyphus' endless and pointless labor, modern men spend their lives by working pointlessly from nine to five in offices like Peter or survive in rooming-houses on unemployment allowances provided by the welfare states like Jerry.

Jerry is living in an age of moral confusion. Collapse of cultural values and discontinuity of conventional view points and beliefs led him to be a misfit in the society. He finds himself in a situation where he feels himself cut off from his roots. He is utterly lost; all his actions in the eyes of the world have become senseless and useless. He is world-weary but highly articulated. In his menacing but extremely reckless description of his possessions, Albee voices his own anger. The language used is cutting and aggressive to attack the social, political, economic, and religious notions prevalent in the society:

toilet articles, a few clothes, a hot plot a ... a can opener ... a knife, two forks, and two spoons, one small, one large; three plates, a cup, a saucer, a drinking glass, two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books, a pack of porno graphic playing cards, regular deck, an old Western Union typewriter that prints nothing but capital letters ... a small strongbox without a lock which has in it ... what? Rocks! Some rocks ... I picked up on the beach when I was kid. (Albee, 1960, 23)

Through this longish description of his private property Jerry "wants to give voice to the people of

his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society. With his isolation and painful sense of alienation, Jerry wants his story to make a difference; he wants to earn his marginalized story a memorable place in the larger narrative of society” (Bailey, 2003, 34).

Jerry regards the death of his parents as vaudeville. He says, “good old Mom and good old Pop are dead ... you know? ... I’m broken up about it, too ... I mean really. BUT. That particular vaudeville act is playing the cloud on the circuit now” (Albee, 1960, 23). The death of his aunt whose house he has moved into, adds to the agony of Jerry. He states: “She dropped dead on the stairs to her apartment, my apartment then, too, on the afternoon of my high school graduation. A terribly middle-European joke, if you ask me” (Albee, 1960, 24). For him life has become a coarse joke. This has resulted in bitterness which has stolen away his inner peace and makes him an angry man whose anger is building up with age. Jerry is trying to balance out his own guilt and blame which he feels is a source of trouble to him, resulting in maximizing his own failure. If examined closely, Jerry is moving towards a state of depression; he is losing sensitivity for others. He has become insensitive to his family as well as to his friends and neighbors. He feels rejected by the society but actually it is not only the value system around him which is solely responsible for his deficiencies but he himself is partly responsible for such a zoo-like situation in which he himself feels caught up. He has never tried to wash away the bitterness which resides within him. Instead, he has started hating himself, his lot, and life. He finds no way out.

Jerry has started showing signs and symptoms of a psychopath. Like a psychopath, he tells all sorts of lies to get Peter’s attention. His longish speeches contain white lies as well as huge stories intended to confuse the listener. His cunningness manipulates Peter to do what he otherwise would normally never have done. He uses guilt, force and other methods to instigate his hidden desires and feelings for others. When he makes Peter kill him, who on the other hand feels extremely nervous on what he has done on Jerry’s manipulation; Jerry shows another sign of psychopathy: absence of guilt or remorse on any action. Instead, he shows a shallow emotional response to serious incidents. He callously poisons the dog at the rooming- house and when Peter cries on seeing the knife inside Jerry, he remains unperturbed and untouched by his cries, “His features relax, and while his voice varies, sometimes wrenched with pain, for the most part he seems removed from dying. He smiles” (Albee, 1960, 47-48). He cannot really relate

with the sorrows of others. His sexual promiscuity and early behavior problems have made him a lonely individual. He is both impulsive and irresponsible. He is neither ready to shoulder any responsibility concerning any relation nor society at large. On the other hand if anything goes wrong, he never admits to being wrong or owns up to mistakes and errors in judgment. Avoiding responsibility is also one of the reasons of not continuing a relationship for more than a day. Short-term relations can be established but long-lasting relations are always avoided by him. Like many psychopaths, he exhibits delinquent behavior in his youth. He is expert in manipulating the emotions of Peter by causing him to view himself as an unhappy poor fellow, thus lowering his sentimental guard and rendering him vulnerable for further exploitation. The most obvious symptom of a psychopath which Jerry has is his treatment towards others. He is prone to belittle, degrade, humiliate, mock and maltreat others. Finding Peter, a cultured man who is trained not to fight; he insults him. His treatment towards animals is also humiliating. I think that Jerry has become a psychopath due to the inconstant and unstable patterns of American culture. Liam while analyzing the contemporary American culture says, “New patterns of cultural existence, immigration and migration, and ethnic and racial boundary- marking have accentuated these decentring tendencies, fragmenting and dislocating the ‘common culture’ of reference” (2000, 52, emphasis in original).

The dialogue of Jerry is not delivered to communicate but to avoid silence with which he has to live. The image of empty picture frame signifies his strong desire to have someone with whom he can have his association and cherish his memories. With no one around, he finds himself in a hanging position which has left him with no choice but to talk to Auden’s “unknown citizen”— Peter. The breakdown of language is the reflection of the breakdown of cultural values in the society. Analyzing speaker’s discourse and meaning of their utterances in a particular culture will reveal intentions of interactants; it is seen that language is used to highlight characters’ inability to communicate and to suggest the hollowness of banal social intercourse. Albee uses such language to lend a wholesome criticism of the *American Way of Life*. In plays of Albee human feelings and relationships carry no meaning. The gestures of love, sexual charm, parental fondness, family feeling and hospitality are there but the real feeling has gone, so the language has lost its meaning and is used to evade the truth. Thus language conceals facts and is used to deceive others.

Language is used as an instrument of power struggle. The one, who knows how to use it well, finds convincing utterances, and wins over the battle. For Albee "[t]he condition of the theater is always an accurate measure of the cultural health of a nation. A play always exists in the present tense The most valuable function of the theater as an art form is to tell us who we are, and the health of the theater is determined by how much of that we want to know" (2005,63). It is not just art for art's sake that Albee dramatizes human condition but for him it is his obligation to jolt the American Community out of self-complacency. He urges the audience to seek self-knowledge which may lead to wisdom because he believes that change is possible. The cultural values are deteriorating due to excessive materialism, loss of traditional values and distorted human relationships so they should be restored. The society is swayed up by the wave of consumerism.

People have become obsessive of money, electronic gadgets and various status symbols. The success of a citizen is gauged by the number of things he owns. Albee is one of such writers who are against excessive materialism. According to Kolin "Albee targets the depraved power of money to set moral standards in America" (Kolin, 2005, 28). He satirizes the greedy American society for its materialistic attitude. Jerry mocks Peter's greed when he urges Peter to give him more space on the bench. Jerry unmasks Peter's possessiveness and makes him appear bizarre. Jerry is willing to die for the park bench that the two grown-up fight like children. Peter gets enraged and says: "People can't have everything they want. You should know that; it's a rule; people can have some of the things they want, but they can't have everything" (Albee, 1960, 42). Here Peter becomes a spokesman of a capitalistic society which intentionally marginalizes one section of the society from the other. People, like Jerry, are always kept apart from the executive class as their salaries are kept remarkably lower as compared to the educated elite of the society. It is this class that wants to maintain its hegemony on the infrastructure of the society. They are stakeholders of the social order while the proletariat has to work harder. Their labor is exploited and they face oppression and suppression from all sides of the society. Jerry, at this point, becomes the spokesman of Albee as he says, "Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honor? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?" (Albee, 1960, 44). These petty things have gained top priority in the lives of contemporary American culture while the feelings of love and care have gone to the background. Kolin asserts that this scene is a "cruel

satire on American society's insistence on compartmentalization" (2005, 24). The critic also asserts that the sub-text of this action is: "this is your patch; this is mine; we can't share; we must have our own isolated territories" (Kolin, 2005, 24).

The playwrights in the sixties like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee shared a certain common attitude towards the modern man's deplorable situation. The reality of the world is reflected in language and the structures of the language. Albee portrays moral and spiritual exhaustion in the Modern American culture which has lost the values of trust and friendship. When Jerry slowly enters the conventional and well-organized world of Peter, he asks about his job and how much he earns. Peter conceives Jerry to be a thief,

Peter: Well. I make around eighteen thousand a year, but I don't carry more than forty dollars at any one time . . . in case you're a . . . a holdup man . . . ha, ha, ha. (19)

Peter, "who lives by a routine that restricts and defines him" (Kolin, 2005, 20), avoids telling him a straight answer thinking that he might not receive some harm from this mysterious stranger. That is why he is reluctant to tell details about his family life. Marriage brings no happiness because husband and wife pass alienated lives. Friendship brings no peace of mind because it is based on common grounds of status not on mental affinity. Sexual relationship is also based on carnal pleasure. The partners stay together for sometimes and part as soon as they realize that the physical desire is over. Such temporary relationships bring more vacuity to their lives leaving them with a feeling of meaninglessness.

Jerry is "the antiestablishment, counterculture hero. He is the dark stranger, the social outcast, the orphan, the Other" (Kolin, 2005, 19). He wants to be heard and understood. He wants to establish relationship first with women, then with his homosexual partner, then with animals and now with an apparently normal heterosexual Peter. He confides to Peter that he does not see any girl for a second time and that he loves girls only "for about an hour" (Albee, 1960, 25). He does not have anybody to relate with and when he seeks Peter, Jerry finds that Peter is also not ready to spare his free time for such a freak. People cannot expect to have genuine interaction with their friends, family members and neighbors because they do not want to share their agonies. They do not want to bother themselves with each other's problems. Bieger commenting on the sixties of America writes:

The Sixties signify a decade the Second World War and its consequences in America are as existent as the more recent and still present warlike conflicts: the war in Korea and not least the nascent wars in Vietnam. Other stages of politics—like the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1961, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and the start of the Civil Rights Movement—are likewise integrated into the fictitious happenings and make sure that the individual feelings of *angst*, insecurity, and threat grow stronger still. (2013, 318)

CONCLUSION

Both Jerry and Peter live in the same city, but both encounter different experiences. Each interprets life's mishaps in his own way. Jerry finds that his death is the most appropriate solution to escape the unforgiving world, while Peter finds it difficult to perceive of such a deadly solution to one's feelings of isolation. Peter goes in state of shock when he sees Jerry on the bench slowly dying—replying nothing more than 'oh my god'; while Jerry, on the other hand, replies 'thank you'. Life is unexplainable, so Jerry does not try to reason his life out, but rather he accepts it as it is. *The Zoo Story* is a classic example of how a man feels when he is desperate for recognition in the society and acceptance by the busy world. Although Peter escapes without responsibility, he has to live with a sense of guilt because he held the weapon that ended the life of Jerry. Though *The Zoo Story* is a pessimistic work, but Bailey argues that the play ends on Jerry's brutal death which communicates Jerry's intense desire to communicate with Peter and the audience, but the play does not fall in the domain of the Theatre of Absurd because it ends on a note of hope for change (2003, 35) a hope that Peter will transform and understand that the minorities who cannot run with speedy life of the society should also be given respect by the society.

Thus the behavioural problems of Americans can be comprehended through the study of American culture and the changes taking place in their society. Culture-loaded utterances of Peter and Jerry are understood by analysing American culture. Patterns of utterances which are culture-related and culture-driven reveal the objectives of the interactants.

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