

Human Dignity and Racism in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*

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ABSTRACT

Edward Albee, an American dramatist, is ranked with Eugene O'Neill and other great dramatists of American literature. He has written several plays and adapted writings from other great writers. Apart from dramas he has also written some poems and tried other genres of literature during his earlier years. All of his plays question human existence and he tries to answer this question in his plays implicitly. This paper Human Dignity and Racism in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* examines the human obligations of Albee. According to Albee, life is meant to be lived. But we are all put in a cage called tradition and society. Albee's profound interest is in the question of human dignity. Every man is to be respected irrespective of his allegiance. The zoo is a simile for the tightly imprisoned framework of society in which there is no freedom of human response. What is wrong with the racism is want of interest in human dimensions. Thus, the major area analysed here is the need for human concern for the racial problems which prevail everywhere in the globe and to maintain human dignity properly.

KEYWORDS

Edward Albee; Dignity; Racism; Equality.

The present paper critically examines the human obligations of Edward Albee. The major area of examination lies in focusing on the need for human concerns in the racial problem. Albee's existentialism involves an affirmation of life. Life is meant to be lived. He keeps his focus on human concerns. Tradition is a cage; society is a prison; man has become a machine. These three metaphors by Albee imply how life is reduced to nothing and nullity. In the *Zoo Story* (ZS), Peter is represented as an example of this phenomenon. Life is an expression of living activity and vitality. The dramatist applies this yardstick to measure the merit of the

traditional ethics of society embodied in Peter. Peter does not come up to the expectations of the dramatist who believes that life means placing oneself in action and involving himself in a situation. All the comforts of life are showered on Peter. He exists but he does not radiate a kind of pulsating life. For the dramatist, the life of Peter forms a running commentary on the lifeless pattern of behaviour of an average man found in European Christian society.

Shabby clothes are a mark of indecency and good clothes are a sign of good culture. This time-honoured norm of the society is revised by Albee to make the character of Jerry relevant to the

civilization. Shabby dress is not identical to bad manners nor is good dress identical to a good behavioural pattern. These are all man-made norms, carrying no meaning at all. Albee preaches a lesson through Jerry that life places everyone in a peculiar predicament and he has to live and attain maturity on an individual basis of his struggle in living. If Jerry hits Peter, it means that man has to be shaken out of the long-established tradition which has made him irresponsible to the well-springs of life.

The episode of Jerry and Dog has a metaphysical connotation. The European philosophy involves a dualism between good and evil. But the existentialism of Albee dissolves the dualism between good and evil. The instance where the metaphysical opposition between good and evil is bridged is seen in the dog-loving and wounding Jerry. In this context, Albee uses the greatest phrase 'teaching emotion.' A review of the entire European civilisation is what is done in this critical phase. Through Zoo Story one learns that tradition, convention and ethics have led life to a kind of stratification and ossification which in turn has taken away the vitality of life.

Albee's concern in *The Death of Bessie Smith* (DBS) is with the pitiable predicament of the black Orderly who thinks that a black patient is either ill-treated or not treated well on the ground that he happens to be a black. What is the fun of having a black patient in a white hospital is the question raised by the White nurse. Albee says that the admission of a black patient in a white hospital is not fun but it should be viewed from a human point of view. Albee does not believe in racial discrimination. A situation is created by the dramatist wherein a black servant is systematically ill-treated. The feeling of the Orderly is also the feeling of the dramatist who has shown his profound sympathy towards him. Albee's satire reaches its high watermark when he says that the White

Mayor's haemorrhoids are more important than the illness of the black patient. A dying black patient can be allowed to die. He need not be saved. This is the feeling of the Nurse. Albee feels that all human beings have the right to live irrespective of colour and class. What is found wanting in the situation is a sympathetic response to the illness of the black patient. The dramatist comes out with a bitter conclusion that nobody seems to change his mind. Nobody minds anybody. This is the trend of the world; precisely because each one wants to stay in the same state without showing human consideration. Therefore, he says that each one will hug the race to which he belongs. Nobody is prepared to give up racial prejudice.

Albee's interest in human concerns explains his inclination and preference for establishing a passionate relationship with life. To denigrate and downgrade one based on colour is an instance of human prejudice. Albee says that for the Nurse, the White Mayor is more important than the black servant Orderly. Albee thinks that there is no fixed nature in a man which makes one the highborn and the other low born. These are the distinctions created by the mind and society and not by nature itself. The behaviour of the Mayor and the Nurse does not go hand in hand with their rank and place in society.

A great man shows the nobility of mind. When the Mayor resents the entry of the black servant orderly in his room, it is a sign of some kind of sickness in his temperament which does not permit him to look at a person of black complexion with love. The dramatist is more concerned with the twist in the mind of the Mayor than with anything else. A complete absence of a human dimension together with a thought of this want of human element is Albee's primary concern. When he projects such scenes of white ill-treating the black, Albee's sole purpose is to highlight this 'absence of human dimension.' A great man is great in spirit

and not in rank and social position. When the dramatist says that nobody bothers about anybody it is nothing but an indirect admission that there is no concern for human life.

Albee shows profound interest in the question of human dignity. Every man is to be respected irrespective of his

allegiance. Much demand in life that calls for attention lies in the need for showing interest in human concerns. The zoo is a simile for the tightly imprisoned framework of society in which there is no freedom of human response. What is wrong with the racism is want of interest in human dimensions.

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