



RETHINKING THE AMERICAN "SUCCESS MYTH" IN EDWARD ALBEE'S 'THE ZOO STORY'

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Abstract

Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" reconstructs a new model of community. It allows for a space to question America's "Success Myth" and urges people to look within and see through fissures that divided the community in the process. My paper tries to study the binaries formed due to commodification of humans during the rat race towards success, deemed necessary and popularized by the modern American society. The play is self-explanatory in its choice of its setting - a zoo. This paper also throws light and tries to unravel the zoomorphic existence of people amidst success and complacency. This paper would be a rethinking on the American "Success Myth" where modernist urban space comes with a moral and ethical cost.

Keywords: Binaries, modernist, success myth, zoomorphic.

Edward Albee's "The Zoo Story", a quasi absurdist political play explores the relationship between a middle aged man named Peter who conforms to the American "Success Myth" and an almost schizophrenic tramp named Jerry. Jerry approaches Peter on a Sunday at the Central Park and drags him uneasily into his paradoxical narratives to an extent where Peter is made to hold a knife upon which Jerry jumps to death.

This quasi absurdist play comes across as a mirror depicting the modern urban community. Jerry is a symbol for the every 'other' we find in an urban society who is relegated to the margins on account of his/her class, race, sexuality etc. He stands for every bright child who did not get a chance to shine. Peter on the other hand is the quintessential gentleman who is indifferent to the "other" and their sufferings and prefers to wear a mask of complacency as a kind of defence mechanism that helps in alienating the individual from himself.

The staged murder or the act of self immolation which Jerry undertakes is not comical but an unmasking of the violence of community life. It unsettles the binaries between friction and fusion in social interaction through Jerry's silent acceptance of self immolation. The play comments upon the way a modern community functions by highlighting the limits of human interaction. Within the "murder - suicide- sacrifice" triad it reveals the uneasy picture of violence and communication.

The violence and aggression depicted in this play is not prescriptive for a society but it rather exposes the fissures and antagonisms that "society", "groups" or any collective identities maintain knowingly or unknowingly and where an essential violence emerges due to the lack of communication. This violence wakes the community out of its comfortable and indifferent stupor. Mary M.O. Nilan takes Jerry as a "universal symbol of the alienated modern manincapable of giving himself in the normal sense".

The play stands out as a morality play exposing guilt and thus being redemptive. The play also lays bare the new ethics of community followed in the modern times where communication, sacrifice are paradoxical cusps. Jerry functions as a marginal figure who is also aware of his non – belongingness and also functions as the cathartic element for the society. The city here becomes the zoo where modern men reside and which explodes through the “contact” between individuals. The representative American “Success Myth” which the stoical middle class followed was indifferent to Jerry, while he was capable of dismantling it with the therapeutic contact murder. Jerry says, “I came unto you...and you have comforted me, dear Peter” (French, 1959:26). He also says, “Oh Peter, I was so afraid I’d drive you away. You don’t know how afraid I was you’d go away and leave me.” (Albee, 1959:414)

The play undoubtedly highlights the American way of life, the anonymity of the metropolitan space which goes on to create a new sense of belongingness or a new model of community with all its wart and ugliness, where parameters of hierarchies divide individuals in the garb of the “success myth”.

The entire action in the play takes place in a zoo to show us what we need to be free of. Within the circles of morality the play depicts gaps that reduce human economy and culture into a zoomorphic space. Jerry himself is not an ideal person. We cannot call him a proletariat fighting the bourgeoisie. He does nothing differently than the people he scorn. He himself was a recluse thus, he is also a prisoner in his own cage. He too had a zoo like existence. He shared rooms with Negro transvestites, melancholic women, drunken nymphomaniacs and aggressive dogs.

The entire play offers a diagnosis of social tension and also provides the ethical conditions which are a prerequisite for an ethical community. The community following the American “Success myth” is depicted as artificial, hollow and emblematic of how a community should not be. The play also reveals Jerry’s underlying wish to “reach out” in this mechanical conformist society. Jerry’s ticklings and aggression shown to Peter was not

offensive mechanisms against the class enemy but a desperate attempt to reach out, part of his constant search for contact. But in a community based upon hierarchies and in a language based upon gulfs between socio – political registers, he cannot “reach out” without the catalyst of hostility or confrontation whose pity and fear are finally catharcized by his sacrificial “infinite moment”.

It is almost through the pleasure and pain, collision and contact, Jerry finally reaches out to Peter and Peter awakens through a shock therapeutic murder/ suicide. Jerry dies and reveals Peter’s “dying existence” in a metropolitan society but everything remains unchanged. The act of sacrifice cannot really promise an ethics of intimacy, welcome and hospitality for the society. It does not remedy the allocation of power politics, rather Jerry sees himself as a commodity soon to be absorbed in a capitalist economy as an ‘item’ or a ‘commodity’ in news fit to be consumed by the leisurely classes like Peter’ :

“You’ll read about it in the papers tomorrow if you don’t see it on your TV tonight.”
(French,1959:39)

Jerry teaches Peter to face his animal self (he is seen defending the territorial rights to his Park bench) and also exposes one’s self to the other’s sufferings as one’s own guilt. We see Peter withdrawing from uneasy topics to maintain his placid and complicit façade but Jerry’s murder reveals the horror of suffering to him.

Anita Stenz observes that Peter was “quite asleep” before Jerry shocked him into “a confrontation with himself in the eyes of a suffering fellow human being”. Thus, Jerry releases Peter from his ideological cage into communitarian knowledge and thinking. The encounter between Jerry and Peter can neither be written off as a religious affair nor can we treat it only in its face value of angst and isolation. Rather the play suggests an overcoming of interpersonal indifference.

Peter’s membership to the metropolitan American life was largely materialistic and ideologically biased in favour of capitalist success myth and middle class complacency. But with Jerry’s

narrative and his final act of self immolation he is re-subscribed into the “conscience collective”, feeling the trauma, culpability and sympathy to the stranger’s agony. The absence of policemen maximizes the sense of a community with a minimal state based on such conscience and consensus.

The play offers an alternative perspective – it shocks false consciousness and reveals a number of truths which unfortunately is overlooked by the inhabitants of the urban world, as a result of which they become incapable of retrieving morality and saving the community from de-humanization. Thus, the overarching “thanatos” prevails in the absence of “eros”.

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