



EDWARD ALBEE: A SOCIAL PROTESTOR

DR. ALI HASAN ¹

¹ ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE, MALPURA(TONK).

ABSTRACT:

Edward Albee laments about the condition of contemporary American Society. The sentiments of friendship, loyalty and love have been sacrificed for commercial values. The traditional institutions of society like family, marriage etc. have lost their genuine sanctity. He raises his voice to bring change in society.

KEYWORDS:

SOCIAL PROBLEM, DIDACTIC, ILLUSION, ALIENATION, COMPLACENCY, BOURGEOIS, THERAPY.

Edward Albee is one of the most controversial dramatists of America. He is also one of the most read and produced playwright today. His writing encompasses different dramatic forms from naturalism to surrealism and from realism to impressionism. Many critics have been baffled by his new language and innovative techniques of presentation. His plays have something new and extraordinary in them. He introduced a language and a manner which was different from that of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

To many people his plays seem "depressing" and they feel that Albee does not write happy plays. In a recent interview with Roudane Albee says that drama is an assessment of life. He elaborates thus:

Drama is a mirror held up to them to show the way they do behave and how they don't behave that way any longer. If people are willing to be aided in the search for total consciousness by not only drama but all of the arts - music and painting and all the other arts give a unique sense of order - then art is life-giving. Art gives shape to life it increases consciousness (195).

In his opinion drama has an important function in society. It shows how the application of the right kind of values are beneficial for all the members of the society. Drama is a reflection of society. It exhibits manners, life-style and thinking of the people. In simple words, drama is an attempt to make the situation better than what it is.

Albee has been considered a social dramatist in the tradition of Clifford Odets, John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. One basic difference between Albee and the earlier social dramatists is that he does not provide ready-made solutions to social problems. He seems to know artistic danger of being didactic and moralistic. He fears that this could have narrowed down the parameters of his art. In an interview with Digsby Diehl in the Transatlantic Review Albee makes his views

clear and says:

I'm not sure that it's the responsibility of a writer to give answers, especially to questions that have no answer-the responsibility of the writer is to be a sort of demonic social critic to present the world and the people in it as he sees it and say 'Do you like it? If you don't like it change it?' (72).

A little further, speaking about the play-wright of the thirties he said that they were aggressively conscious of social problems and propaganda took over from art in their plays. "May be there were easier answers in the thirties than there are now in the sixties". (Diehl. 71-72).

Albee is often regarded as a pioneer of "Absurd Theatre" in America. He felt offended when he came to know of this label. He does not like labels attached to the writers. He felt that such labels confine the readers approach to the text. In an article "Which Theatre is the absurd one?" he said that labels "can be facile and can lead to non-think on the part of the public" (171). His plays. The zoo story and The American Dream are the best specimen of the Theatre of the Absurd. Albee associated himself with this movement because its manner of presentation intensified the seriousness of his subject. Compared to European Absurdist his plays look realistic. His plays are tightly wrapped up.

It is Albee's endeavour to make modern man shed the illusions in which he is trapped as well as to portray the real condition of man. Faced with lack of communication and complacency of the bourgeois, Albee does not lapse into pessimism. He emphasizes that alienation has done enough wrong to mankind and humanity. It is time man should renounce all self- imposed indulgence and embrace his fellow-man.

Albee does not like passive audiences in his theatre. He seeks a constructive reaction from them towards his plays. For him theatre is not a place of relaxation or retirement where people go solely for entertainment. He expects that

the audience must come prepared to pay the same attention to the play that he himself does, when writes a play. In an interview he ways that the best way for the audiences to understand his plays is to come without any preconceptions and predetermination. He referred to such an attitude as a "state of innocence". According to him theatre is a live and dangerous experience -and therefore a life-giving force" (Roundane 194). Hence he expects that the audience must be willing to undergo that experience which he himself has felt and must come with an open mind.

The kind of theatre Albee is advocating, is a theatre which acts as a therapy or a medicine. The necessary preconditions of this theatre is active audience participation. Perhaps only then a true catharsis can be experienced by the audience. Eric Fromm also believed that, the human capacity to love "demands a state of intensity, awakens, enhanced vitality, which can only be the result of a productive and active orientation in many other spheres of life" (The Art of Loving, 129). Albee expects all the above qualifications from his audience because he believes that the true success of the drama is achieved when the "audience is bloodied" (Roundane 195). Albee is not a pessimistic dramatist. He does not feel that modern man is helpless and can not change his attitude. It is his firm belief that sick humanity can be restored to health if it is given the right knowledge.

Albee has been inspired by a galaxy of European dramatists such as Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, strindberg, Anounilh, and Artaud. He has also been influenced by the great dramatists of his own country such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee williams and Arthur Miller. Ann Paolucci found in his writing a familiarity with Dante and Pirrendello. Critics like Michael Rutenberg consider him "a social protestor in the tradition of Aristophanes" (124).

Edward Albee has depicted the contemporary human condition in his plays. He criticises the hypocrisy of bourgeois society vigorously. He claims that psuedo standards of modern consumptive society propagates alienation. The self-imposed isolation of modern man has hampered communication. The normal family relationships are dislocated. His characters are deluded and live in a world of fantasy. He intends to bring a change in society through his plays.

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