Dramatizing Desire in Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*

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Abstract

In postmodern philosophy, desire is often considered as a positive liberating force that ought not to be seized or controlled. Actually, the postmodernist thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari disprove Freud’s negative perception of desire as lack and contend that desire is a dynamic energy that seeks to emancipate the subject. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that desire should be liberated from its consideration as lack and flow freely instead. In the same vein, Jean-François Lyotard questions the validity of the Freudian assumption that desire is a negative force. In his *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard focuses on the workings of libidinal intensities in the Capitalist System and claims that Capitalism is based on the exploitation of libidinal energies. Lyotard insists that the System aims at controlling the subjects through manipulating their libidinal energies and transforming them into organized arrangements. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard believes that libidinal intensities shall be allowed to circulate freely without the intervention of the System to regulate their movements into organized structures. Briefly, Deleuze and Guattari’s as well as Lyotard’s libidinal politics attempts to destabilize the centrality of the System through the liberation of the structures and the release of libidinal intensities.

In this paper, the study of the notions of desire and libidinal politics in Albee’s play through the Deleuzo-Guattarian and the Lyotardian perceptions shall demonstrate that the playwright pictures the continuous conflict between libidinal forces, and therefore the individual will, and the American System. Through this very clash between the personal and the communal, Albee attempts to draw attention to the repressive nature of the System and the importance of the liberation of the libidinal forces and the emancipation of the oppressed subjects.

Keywords: Desire, Libidinal Politics, Libidinal intensities, the Capitalist System, the American Society, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Albee.
Introduction

The perception of desire and libidinal energy as negative forces has been a source of controversy. While Sigmund Freud considers desire and libidinal forces as a threat to the stability of the subject, other thinkers, precisely postmodernist philosophers, attempt to dissociate them from this negative conception and insist that they are rather positive forces. In his “An Autobiographical Study,” Freud argues that “the ego was obliged to protect itself against the constant threat of a renewed advance on the part of the repressed impulse” (18). The Austrian psychoanalyst insists that the conscious is engaged in a process of continuous repression of libidinal impulses in order to preserve the integrity of the subject.

On the contrary, the French postmodernists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari reject Freud’s negative consideration of desire and affirm that “desire does not lack anything” (Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 26). They contend that desire is rather a constructive force and propose instead the liberation of libidinal energies from all forms of repression. Actually, their objective is to “open possibilities for desire to flow in multiple ways and directions at once, regardless of socially sanctioned boundaries that otherwise seek to control that flow” (Auslander 87). Likewise, in his theory of Libidinal Politics, Jean-François Lyotard advocates the emancipation of libidinal energies. His theory is based on the idea that the libido is “not at all closed in the sense of a volume, it is infinite,” and “intensities run in it without meeting a terminus” (Libidinal Economy 4). In a few words, Lyotard thinks that desire is a positive process and suggests the liberation of desire and libidinal forces.

In literature, many writers have displayed a particular interest in desire and the workings of libidinal forces in their literary works. Edward Albee is among those who have tackled the issue of desire in a multiplicity of ways in their writings. In his The Zoo Story, Albee explores the area of libidinal politics through dramatizing two characters whose lives are deeply affected by mechanisms of desire and libidinal energies. The current paper will explore the different ways in which Albee attempts to study and comment on the workings of desire in his society. The focus will be on the examination of two major manifestations of desire in the play: the desire to make verbal contact and the desire to make physical contact.

I- The Desire for Communication:

Edward Albee is a prominent American playwright who gained fame during the second half of the twentieth century. Actually, “now in his … eighties, with twenty-eight theater productions behind him, the recipient of three Pulitzer Prizes, two Tony awards, and numerous other prizes, Albee is the greatest living master playwright on the American stage” (Németh 100). The Zoo Story, Albee’s first play, is a one-act play premiered in Berlin, Germany in 1959. The play stages two characters Jerry and Peter and is set on a park bench in Central Park, New York, on one Sunday afternoon.

Albee portrays Peter as “a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely” (14). Through this physical depiction of Peter, Albee seems to suggest that he is an ordinary man whose physical appearance has nothing exceptional about him. The use of negation (neither, nor) could mean that Albee denies Peter any distinguishing personality. The negative description of Peter from the very beginning alludes to his lack of
authenticity and individualism. Apparently, Albee’s objective behind this depiction is to shed light on the absence of genuineness and the crisis of individuality in his community. Jerry, on the other hand, is “a man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was” (14). The description of the character of Jerry highlights his physical weakness and his indifference with this bodily collapse. He seems to be a solitary person who is estranged from the outer world. He represents the figure of “the outcast,” who suffers from a “severe sense of alienation” (Saddik 36).

Jerry starts the conversation and announces that he has visited the zoo. He tells Peter “I’ve been to the zoo,” and adds “I said, I’ve been to the zoo. MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!” (15). Peter is surprised as a stranger disturbed his serene state of mind and begins talking about his visit to the zoo. He finds himself compelled to listen to Jerry and to communicate with him. Jerry starts interrogating him about his job and life, while Peter unenthusiastically responds to his questions. When Jerry asks Peter “do you mind if we talk?” the latter, who is “obviously minding,” replies “why …, no, no” (17). Apparently, Peter does not mind to interact with Peter, but in reality he prefers to carry on reading his book instead of speaking to a stranger.

Jerry reveals that he lives in a miserable rooming-house on the Upper West Side that is owned by a hostile and mean landlady. He confesses “I live on the top floor; rear; west. It's a laughably small room” (21). His deplorable living conditions are worsened by his odd uncommunicative neighbors. Jerry discloses further his tragic life as his mother “walked out on good old Pop,” his father “slapped into the front of a somewhat moving city omnibus,” and his aunt “dropped dead … on the afternoon of [his] high school graduation” (23). The outcast Jerry finds himself alone in a cruel world. Unable to establish meaningful communication with humans, he decides to seek contact elsewhere. He eventually comes to the conclusion that he needs to communicate with animals as he declares “if you can’t deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!” and adds “a person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people ... SOMETHING” (30). He tells Peter about the landlady’s dog, its repeated attacks against him and his continuous attempts to tame and befriend the beast. Jerry affirms “I decided: First I’ll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn’t work … I’ll just kill him” (27). He attempts to gain the dog’s sympathy through feeding it, but when he fails he poisons it. Jerry’s efforts are useless as he didn’t ultimately succeed in making contact with the animal: “We had made many attempts at contact, and we had failed” (31). Jerry’s urgent desire to communicate pushed him to look for alternatives to human contact in the animal world. In this context, Steven Price insists “Jerry’s withdrawal from the world is even more profound,” as he is stuck “in a rooming-house whose inhabitants live as if in cages, and unable to form a relationship even with the landlady’s dog” (248).

This failure urged him to visit the zoo so as to explore the ways animals and humans coexist. Jerry reveals to Peter his true intentions behind this visit claiming “I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too” (34). In the zoo, Jerry notices that animals are separated from each other and from human beings by bars and cages. He remarks that “everyone [is] separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals” (34). Albee’s reference to the cages and the way animals and humans are
set apart could allude to the alienation of Man and the absence of human relationships in American society. Indeed, he seems to suggest that human beings are separated by intangible cages just like animals are locked behind the bars. In discussing this idea, René Ahouansou explains: “the zoo image is a striking poetic image of man’s plight; imprisoned in our daily cares, sharing nothing with our fellow men except on the surface, we are just like these animals in their cage” (44).

Albee’s condemnation of the alienation and imprisonment of individuals could be related to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the liberation of the subject. In fact, the French philosophers argue that the social machine continuously attempts to control the subjects and regulate the circulation of their desire. They assert that “the prime function incumbent upon the socius, has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated” (33). Deleuze and Guattari seem to question the social machine’s manipulation of the subject and the oppression of desire so as to guarantee the stability of the system. They oppose the idea that desire is a negative force that should be organized and repressed lest it subverts the social machine. In the play, “parallel to the caged animals in the zoo is the caged man who is no longer free. The restraints and complexities of the modern age incarcerate him and alienate him from his fellow people. He is striving alone to ascertain his own being but to no avail” (Turki 3). Albee uses the zoo scene to pour scorn on the isolation of the individual in American culture. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Albee proposes the liberation of the subject from all forms of restrictions that keep him cut off from his fellow humans.

Jerry’s hunger for making true contact pushes him further in his journey to set up a proper conversation. He affirms “I don’t talk to people,” and adds “every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk” (18-9). When he encounters Peter, Jerry acknowledges that he has continuously tried to make meaningful communication many times with humans and animals but all of his efforts were in vain. Even Peter is not willing to provide him with the truthful conversation that he desires to make. After hearing Jerry’s several stories about his life and recurrent efforts to make authentic contact, Peter tells him “I DON’T UNDERSTAND” (31). Jerry’s strong desire for communicating with anything is encountered by failures as neither animals nor humans accept to interact with him. Commenting on this idea, Katherine Worth declares that Jerry “has found it impossible to establish a relationship with anyone, dog or human: hating and loving all end up as indifference” (42).

Peter and Jerry are antagonistic characters as while Peter is portrayed as a middle-class family man who has “an executive position with a … a small publishing house” (19), Jerry is described as an impoverished and solitary man. Unlike Jerry, who lives in a rooming-house, Peter is an affluent publishing executive who has two daughters, two cats, and two parakeets. In his “The Caged Soul: A Study of Edward Albee’s The Zoo Story,” Harith Ismaiel Turki considers Peter as “an ordinary publishing executive, who is leading a very calm and settled life, while Jerry lives alone, no family and no friends” (3). Peter is a typical American middle-class man who enjoys the stability of his life. He seems to embody the spirit of conformity of affluent Americans. Actually, Philip C. Kolin believes that “Peter leads an unexamined life, devoid of risk, challenge, spirit. He is the compliant citizen” (20).
On the contrary, the alienated Jerry seems to refuse the life of stability and conformism and prefers to live away from the complexities and limitations of middle-class life. “Living on the margins of society, Jerry is the antiestablishment, counterculture hero” (Kolin 19). Albee’s use of the nonconformist Jerry alludes to his criticism of the complacency and conformity of American middle-class. Jerry, the rebellious subject, is liberated from the restraints of the American System and attempts to free Peter from his dull and complacent existence. When Jerry challenges Peter to fight for the park bench, the latter refuses initially to fight, but engages himself later and starts defending his possession of the bench. Jerry succeeds in helping Peter to dispose of American middle-class’ spirit of acquiescence and inactivity. According to Anne Paolucci, Peter “moves monotonously on the surface of life, pushed on by a kind of inertia which is mistaken for intention. Jerry destroys the illusion by pushing him into action and forcing him to exert his will consciously and directly” (40). Peter’s violent reaction to defend his territory could stand for his ultimate emancipation from the dominant spirit of idleness and stability. In this respect, Robert Vorlicky contends that “Albee intentionally questions not only Peter’s values, but those of the capitalist patriarchy … into which American men are socialized” (127). The examination of the antagonistic characters Jerry and Peter and the breakdown of communication between them discloses Albee’s dissatisfaction with American ideals of material success and conformism and his advocation of the liberation of the subject from the dominance of the System.

II- Liberating Libidinal Intensities:

Jerry’s urgent need to connect with anything hints at the workings of his private self. In other words, his pressing desire for communication and his thirst to make real contact even with animals betray the internal conflicting forces of his psyche. This inner tension is further revealed through Jerry’s recurrent references to his past sexual experiences. He confesses that he had several sexual intercourses with women, but he never got satisfaction. Addressing Peter, Jerry claims “I never see the little ladies more than once. I’ve never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put? ... make love to anybody more than once” (24). He admits that he never had more than one intercourse with a single girl.

In commenting on the issue of sexual desire, Deleuze and Guattari assert that “it is the social repression of desire or sexual repression—that is, the stasis of libidinal energy—that … engages desire in this requisite impasse, organized by the repressive society” (118). They explain that society tries constantly to repress libidinal forces. They believe that instead of repressing desire and libidinal energies, the social machine should liberate those energies. Deleuze and Guattari contend that desire does not represent any threat to society, but rather contribute to certain extent to the formation of society itself. Their idea of liberating libidinal energies, and consequently the individual could be detected in Albee’s play. In point of fact, Jerry’s assertion that he had many sexual experiences with girls is an actual challenge to the authority of the social machine. Albee seems to suggest that society has failed to suppress Jerry’s libidinal intensities and the fact that Jerry discusses his sexual relationships with a stranger in a public place confirms the idea.

Jerry’s inability to get sexual gratification with women alludes to the fact that he is not a straight individual. Actually, just after telling Peter about his experiences with girls, Jerry recollects past memories about having an intimate relationship with a boy. Jerry informs him
that he “met at least twice a day with the park superintendent’s son ... a Greek boy ... I think I was very much in love ... maybe just with sex” (24). This childhood memory is a clear indication that Jerry is not a heterosexual person, as he states “I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer ... queer, queer, queer” (24). Jerry’s words reveal that he was a homosexual in his childhood, but does not give any indication about his present. Nevertheless, many details in the play hint to the fact that Jerry is still gay. When speaking about his experience with the dog, Jerry informs Peter that the landlady wanted to have a sexual relationship with him. He affirms that “she has some foul parody of sexual desire. And I, Peter, I am the object of her sweaty lust” (25). But Jerry, who is the object of her desire, refuses to make intercourse with her, and confuses her by saying “love; wasn’t yesterday enough for you, and the day before?” (26). As a result, the bewildered woman believes his words and “relives what never happened” (26).

By the end of the play, a significant scene could confirm the fact that Jerry is still a homosexual. In fact, during his fight with Peter, Jerry pulls a knife to threaten him, but when he drops it, Peter rapidly holds the knife to defend himself. Jerry “charges PETER and impales himself on the knife” (39). This act could be interpreted as an act of phallic penetration (Paul 205). Actually, in this highly symbolic scene, the knife stands for the phallus and the stabbing act could be considered as an act of sexual penetration. That is to say, “when Jerry forces Peter to stab him at the end of the play, the moment is full of phallic significance” (Raheem et al. 464). Although stabbing is a deadly act, Jerry’s “features relax,” and “he smiles” (39). Jerry’s enjoyment of this act of phallic penetration could imply that he was and still is a homosexual. “At the moment of their grim intimacy with the knife there is contact between Peter and Jerry” (Stanz 11).

Through releasing his libidinal intensities, Jerry succeeds in disrupting the order imposed by the System on subjects. Lyotard, in this context, asserts that “the virtu required by the politeia [is] to remain staunchly within the zero of impulsional exchanges, to live without having lost or gained, to regulate the circulation of libidinal energies at the minimax, at the minimum of losses and the maximum of gains” (159). For Lyotard, the Capitalist System guarantees the persistence of its existence through regulating the flow of libidinal energies. In reality, Capitalism organizes and conducts the libidinal intensities so as to minimize the deficits and maximize profits. Jerry, the rebellious outcast, disregards the System’s recurrent attempts to regulate and repress libidinal energies, and therefore the subject. This scene suggests that “Jerry’s entire purpose has been somehow a reflection of repressed desires” (Raheem et al. 465).

Through staging two conflicting characters in the play, Albee gives two opposing world views. As a matter of fact, the nonconformist Jerry, who refuses the oppression of desire, could be considered as a threat to the stability and unity of the System. By discussing his sexual experiences with an unfamiliar person and alluding to his homosexuality, Jerry defeats all forms of repression and attempts to subvert the rules of society. On the other hand, Peter, the middle-class conformist, is totally subjugated by the Capitalist System. The fact that he is wealthy, married, and has two daughters and two parakeets means that he has already embodied the spirit of fixedness and complacency of the American System. In this respect, Lyotard insists that “if these intensities are entered into a ledger, it is because they have already passed through the filter of the politeia, which excludes, as we have said, enormous
pieces of the labyrinthine band of the libidinal body” (166-7). In the case of Peter, his conformism means that he accepts the domination of the System and his libidinal desires will not be able to circulate freely on his libidinal body, but are rather repressed and controlled.

Through the explicit as well as implicit allusion to homosexuality and the disruption of repressed desire, Albee aims to draw attention to the problematization of desire in American culture. He is being critical of American society’s tendency to repress libidinal energies and suppress individuals. In this way, The Zoo Story “can be seen as an allegory about homosexuality” (Raheem et al. 465). The playwright’s dramatization of two antagonists in his play could indicate that the discussion of matters related to desire and sexuality is controversial in his culture. The staging of an active homosexual character, Jerry, and an inert heterosexual man, Peter, reveals Albee’s disillusionment with passive and conventional individuals and consequently with the repressive nature of American System.

It is worth mentioning that Edward Albee himself is homosexual. As “a gay author,” Albee attempts to draw a picture of a homosexual person in his play and his efforts to assert his individuality (Fox 205). The Zoo Story itself could be perceived as a challenge to mainstream heterosexual American life. As a matter of fact, “at the time Albee wrote The Zoo Story, in 1958, homosexuality was thought by many to be a mental illness. It was also illegal. In most states, consensual sex between men was considered sexual assault, and both participants could be sentenced up to 20 years in prison” (Raheem et al. 465). Hence, through the discussion of homosexuality in his work, Albee seems to condemn the negative attitudes and stereotypes that Americans have about sexuality and queer people. Albee’s objective is to subvert such prejudices and to try to correct the commonly held beliefs about desire and sexual impulses.

Conclusion

By writing The Zoo Story, Albee expresses his disapproval of American middle-class culture. This play is “fundamentally a piece of social criticism” (Samuels 188). Indeed, Albee puts emphasis on the problems of the absence of genuine contact between individuals and the ultimate break down of communication. Jerry’s journey in the zoo and Central Park is motivated by an urgent desire to connect with anything. By the end, this desire is fulfilled as he succeeded in making contact with a human being, Peter, though a last one. Albee appears to center his play on “the necessity to break out of complacency in order to participate in life” (Németh 99).

In this play, Albee examines also sexual desire and society’s persistent attempts to repress it. Libidinal forces’ resistance of possible repression by the System could be seen as a parallel to the continuous struggle of the individual against the oppression of the community. Jerry’s behavior and way of thinking could be considered as a rebellion against any form of submission to social authorities or power structures. In brief, libidinal intensities’ free circulation and evasion of repression could imply that the individual adopts effective strategies, especially liberating those sexual energies and drives, in order to resist and defeat the domination of the rational System.
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