
Psychosocial Dilemma in Edward Albee's 'The Zoo Story'

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Abstract

'Psychosocial dilemma' refers to the mental conflict within the 'self,' one which is individualistic in nature, based on the desires or likings, and the other, formed due to the directions given by the society as per the accepted belief of social conduct. These dilemmas, conflicts, and quandaries are nothing extraordinary; in fact, they are inherent in every individual, even in today's contemporary world. So, the psychosocial dilemma refers to the confrontation experienced by the human mind, which is formed on the basis of the individual and the social self. This particular consideration is also applicable to 21st-century society, where an individual is still stuck in the same dilemma. Therefore, the paper aims to trace the portrayal of the aspect of psychological and social dilemma stemming out of the characters of *The Zoo Story*, which faithfully portrays a realistic picture of the mid-20th century American society.

Keywords: Psychosocial, Dilemma, Self, Edward Albee

Introduction

Psychosocial Dilemma

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:"(Shakespeare 64)

The line remains immortal amidst the aging centuries, and yet its importance, instead of fading, has illuminated us mostly in every era. The contradiction, or rather the antipodal analysis, often strikes a considerate discomfort in the minds of every person breathing on this earth. This phase is aptly described by the word 'Dilemma,' which came into existence in the early 16th century from Greek in combination with 'di,' meaning 'twice,' and 'lemma,' meaning 'premise.' It is further explained in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* as "a situation in which one has to choose between two undesirable things or course of action" (Hornby 335). Sometimes, 'dilemma' or 'mental collision between two alternatives' encumbers the pace of our thought process. Also, it is instrumental in conjuring a possible delay to the time frame required to formulate a decision. The exact same notion is framed by

William Shakespeare in his famous play *Hamlet*. The protagonist in this play is caught in the cobweb of two contrasting possibilities, resulting in a hindrance to arriving at a conclusion that adversely postpones his course of action.

The word 'psychosocial' means "relating to the interrelation of social factors and individual thought and behavior" (Hornby 1007) as per the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. It implies the relation between an individual and the society one is living in or, in other words, the coexistence of human beings conforming to certain ideologies constructed through age and time. Society imposes certain obligations which are thought to be essential for coexistence. Hence, each individual adapts accordingly to the social norms, forming a moral boundary on the basis of those norms. 'Psychosocial dilemma' reflects those dilemmas that exist in every human being when confronted by those certain obligations. The self is formed of two aspects: the individual 'I' that exists as a binary opposition to the social 'Me.'

Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist and the father of psychoanalysis, stressed the use of language and how it conceals, reveals, or modifies hidden desires, anxieties, and fears. By this, he expressed that desires (Id) are not expressed easily because of the hegemony that culture and society have created. Hence, there is a need to pay close attention to language and other symbolic expressions, gestures, sounds, facial expressions, etc, to uncover hidden desires. Freud associates language with the conscious self; it projects an image that is socially and culturally accepted. In Freudian terms, the Id (unconscious) and the superego (conscience) are consistently involved in a conflict, and the ego (conscious) projects as per the social or cultural norms. Explaining the Ego, Pramod K Nayar states:

"The ego is the conscious mind, which we work with, use and are most aware of. It mediates between the unconscious id and the superego. It is the source of our decision-making and our rational thought"(65).

In this context, Consciousness can be identified with the self, the id as the individualistic self, and the Ego as the social self. From the idea proposed by Freud, it is obvious that the human psyche is always in conflict, and the social self generally represses the individual self. The Ego restricts the id on the basis of social acceptance, and hence, there is a consistent rift between the id and the superego. Apart from the psychological aspect, the self is also explained by the American social psychologist George Herbert Mead. Mead explains the construction of self in a social context. In one of the books, he states, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (Mead 135). The self is also discussed in the linguistic notions, where Mead elaborates on the functionality of language in shaping every possible idea; he states, "I know of no other form of behavior than the linguistic in which an individual is an object to himself, and, so far

as I can see, the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself" (Mead 142).

He further moves on to the concept of 'I' and 'Me,' where he divides the self into "two phases (or poles): (1) That phase which reflects the attitude of the generalized other and (2) That phase which response to the attitude of the generalized other. Here, Mead distinguishes between the "me" and the "I ."The "me" is the social self, and the "I" is a response to the "me" (Cronk, "George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)"). We find that Mead's concept of 'I' and 'Me' refers to the Freudian concept of the human psyche. "It is thus very close to the way in a man Freud's 'ego-censor, the conscience...arose from the critical influence of his parents (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice), to whom were added, as time went on, those who trained and taught him and the innumerable and indefinable host of all the other people in his environment - his fellow-men - and public opinion" (Freud 90).

It is this 'I' and 'Me' that formulates the 'psychosocial dilemma' in the human mind. "Walt Whitman marks off the impulsive "I," the natural, existential aspect of the self, from critical sanction. It is the cultured self, the "me," in Mead's terms, that needs re-mediation" (Mack 144). With the advent of mechanization in the post-war era, the human psyche is more reflective as well as reflexive, so the dilemma is inevitable. On occasions, when an individual is well connected with the social milieu or is trained well according to the social norms, the predominance of 'Me' often undermines the existence of 'I,' the superego forms a strong foundation, and the conscious overrules the possibility of 'I' in favor of the social 'Me .'Similarly, the 'I' dominates when the situation is reversed. There is a constant clash between the 'individual self' and the 'social self,' which affects the approach of an individual toward society. Conformation represses the individual self, while confrontation contradicts social norms. With this confrontation or disagreement, the 'othering' process begins, resulting in alienation.

20th Century American Drama and Edward Albee

The concept of drama was always centered on entertainment, particularly on American soil prior to the twentieth century. Gradually, in the twentieth century, the focus shifted towards psychological and philosophical insight, encouraging the American dramatists to the new era of this art form. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, various experiments were being carried out in search of a pattern to suit American audiences or to shape twentieth-century American drama. Finally, in 1930, the proclamation of 'American Drama' came to the forefront, with its features being "realistic contemporary middle-class domestic melodrama and comedy" (Berkowitz 2). It was obvious that American dramatists focused more on the domestic setup, seeking a deeper understanding of human emotions; domestic realism was the rule of the day.

“Not only are American plays about recognizable people in a recognizable world, but they are about the personal lives of these people. Whether a play is actually set in a living room, with a cast made up solely of family members, as an extraordinary

number are, or whether the 'domestic' setting extends to an office and a circle of friends, the issues and events are presented in small and localized terms. Whatever the deeper meanings of an American play, on one solid level, it is about love and marriage, or earning a living, or dealing with a family crisis" (3).

Albee's plays deal with the social scenario of America, and they specifically focus on the portrayal of individuals and society in relation to each other. With the advent of economic stability in America, society and its members were inclined towards materialism. Thus, human emotions lost their expression and became repressive, which resulted in alienation. Albee gained a commendable position in the American theatrical world; he displayed the contemporary American society of the 1950s in his plays, which consist of a host of lonely individuals wandering aimlessly, devoid of human interaction. On the other hand, the plays penned by Albee also provide the psychological aspect; his characters allow us to have an insight into the human psyche, which is constantly in a shift when it comes to interaction with each other or with society. It can also be said that his themes generally revolve around illusion and reality, possession and communion, domination and submission. When it comes to characterization, most of the characters portrayed in his plays are desperate individuals who play cruel psychological games. In this context, we find that Albee depicts the significance of violence and hatred, which are two of the most important contributing factors to love. However, there are diverse opinions regarding the themes of his plays; some critics even conclude that there are no themes at all. In an interview taken by one of his close friends, William Flanagan, Albee gives an interesting answer regarding the thematic concerns, saying:

"I go up to my room about three or four months out of the year, and I write. I don't pay much attention to how the plays relate thematically to each other. I think that's very dangerous to do because, in the theater, one is self-conscious enough without planning ahead or wondering about the thematic relation from one play to the next. One hopes that one is developing and writing interestingly, and that's where it should end, I think" ("Edward Albee, The Art of Theater No. 4").

It can be said that society and the human psyche were Edward Albee's prime focus. His plays are immersed in dark, intellectual comedy with a pinch of absurdism and nihilism, often fading out in the chaotic bafflements of philosophical prophecy. His treatment of the content can be clearly seen in the form and structure as well. Ian Mackean sums up Albee's projection:

"He depicts humankind's inability to communicate and the human need for integration and involvement with others. He attacks the replacement of real values with artificial ones in American society, condemns complacency, cruelty, and emasculation, and challenges his audience to form opinions on various social issues. He favors the structural pattern of realistic opening, increasing emotional entanglement, the peak of intensity and quick ending" (6).

The Zoo Story, written by Albee in 1958, has been proclaimed by Bigsby as “the most impressive debut ever made by an American dramatist” (129). It is said that Albee considered it to be his 30th birthday present. Initially, the play failed to reach an American audience as it was rejected by several New York producers. They failed to understand and appreciate the absurdist notions of the play, which Albee emphasized in order to explore the themes of isolation, loneliness, miscommunication, social disparity, and dehumanization in the commercial world which embraced the American society. Dealing with the rejection in America, Albee sent his play to an old friend who arranged for its first production in Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt on September 28, 1959. However, four months later, the play premiered in the United States Off-Broadway on a double bill with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village on January 14, 1960, and received largely positive responses from the critics. With this play, Albee was launched into national and international recognition, which not only gained him a literary reputation but also made him popular among the critics' circle.

Analysis

“*The Zoo Story* is a pessimistic, but not totally hopeless statement about what Albee sees as the contemporary American version of the human condition, especially the lack of love and real contact between people”(Sykes 448). The play contains only one act and two characters, Peter and Jerry. Albee introduces his character with minute details, which allows the audience to have a fair idea of the social class to which they belong.

PETER: A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, and carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger.

JERRY: A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go fat, and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness" (Albee 4)

It could also be said that Peter's description gives the impression of a person who is very concerned about his outlook and one who conforms to the norms established by society. His snobbish appearance also highlights the artificiality, which is depicted well by the words 'neither' and 'nor.' Both words imply a balance that is sustained by limiting the excessiveness of anything in Peter's character. His dress, particularly in contradiction with his age, reveals the traditional approach of an individual belonging to the materialistic section of society breeding on imposition and hypocrisy. From a different approach, it is also possible to interpret the dress and behavior as Peter's urge to cherish the youth, which he might have lost in the pursuit of commercial success. On the other hand, Jerry's portrayal emphasizes the individualistic aspects, one who is not dressed poorly but is careless about his appearance. This explores the facets of individualism, which is carefree and untamed by social conventions. Jerry's approach towards life does not seem to be didactic; his

appearance is presented in a combination of past and present, what he was and what he is now. His past appears as a conformation, whereas his present strongly suggests confrontation. Albee also mentions that this change in his physical appearance is not an outcome of indulgence in immoral activities or excessive drinking.

Both the characters are drawn meticulously to expose the domestic scenario of American society as it happened to exist in the mid-20th century. The mental collision is hinted from the very first appearance of the characters on the stage. "Albee insinuates in the stage directions that Peter's and Jerry's different worlds can never be redeemed. Peter is an ordinary publishing executive who is leading a very calm and settled life, while Jerry lives alone, with no family and no friends" (Turki 1). The contradictory characters of the play represent the two different kinds of individuals existing in society: one who is affluent and enjoying a complacent life adhering to the proclaimed social values and the other who is rebelling against artificial social existence. Albee was conscious in his approach while shaping the characters; he recalls, "I was obviously analyzing two opposite people: one had compromised too much on the way to adulthood, and the other was compromising nowhere at all. And there was bound to be a clash" ("Edward Albee Interview"). This gives us an idea about Albee's view of the characters he intentionally set up on the stage to imply the paradoxical possibility of existence. Peter, who had 'compromised too much on the way to adulthood,' is an example of servile submission to the accepted traditional society, while Jerry, who 'was compromising nowhere at all,' stands in opposition to the constructed idea of society and progress in terms of commercial stability.

Interestingly, the stage setting is also arranged accordingly; the play opens with a scene of Sunday afternoon summer with two benches placed oppositely on each side of the stage facing towards the audience. Peter is seated on the right bench, carefully reading a book. On a different approach, it can be said that 'Sunday afternoon summer' symbolizes the economic stability of American society, but it should also be noted that Jerry, later on, specifies 'sun-drenched afternoon,' which could be understood as 'economy-drenched society.' The two benches in the opening scene present the diverse mental condition of humans living in that society. Peter's position on the right bench can be accounted for a man who happens to accept and abide by the regulations imposed on him by society. The left bench is empty, which depicts the condition of individuals who do not conform to any didactic norms; the expected character on that bench is absent, which, in fact, strikes the distinguishing note from the traditional thought process. The first dialogue stirs the scenario, and Peter is forcefully drawn out of his social decorum.

"JERRY: I've been to the zoo. [PETER *doesn't notice.*] I said I've been to the zoo.

MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!

PETER: Hm?.. What?.. I'm sorry, were you talking to me?" (Albee 4).

The first line from Jerry asserts the existence of an individual self; the 'I' proclaims its presence without bothering about the code and conduct of the social behavior. Peter, who is engrossed in his reading, is startled by such an intrusion. Jerry

attempts to continue the conversation by involving Peter in it, but he returns to his book after some casual replies. This reflects Peter's mental aspect, which is confined to the design of social obligation. In fact, he is trained according to it, so he himself is unaware of the domination that society exerts on his individual self. The conversation is then initiated further when Jerry confronts them directly, and Peter decisively puts down his book. As the dialogue continues, Jerry proceeds to talk about Peter's domestic life. Peter's response towards marriage depicts the idea of marriage as a social standardization. This idea is being challenged here by Jerry; his criticism satirizes that marriage is a matter of choice, not an established law. Jerry's urge to know more or his overly friendly manner presents a contradiction to Peter's reserve and private attitude.

Peter presents the idea of a perfect family as the result of the affirmation of social constraints. The picture-perfect happy family is underlined by the presentation of two daughters, a mother and a father. The happy family is further elaborated with pets, two cats, and a pair of parakeets each for the daughter. From the conversation, it is clear that Peter is not going to have any more children; hence, everything is the traditional idea of family. In a way, Peter's angry retort also reflects the fact that it was his wife who decided not to have any more children. In Freudian terms, Peter's anger reveals the truth that he was so eager to conceal. Peter's tamed existence is also confirmed when he agrees to 'That is the way the cookie crumbles.' This affirmation points out the condition of an individual living in society, and it further gives us the impression of a confined existence that is forcefully imposed by social norms. The individual identity or the influence of the Id in Peter appears lost due to the over-emphasizing effect of the superego. On the other hand, Jerry presents his individual self; his intrusive attitude without affirming the constructed social convention of a gentleman gives the idea of the life he is leading. His blunt declaration clearly projects the influence of the individual self.

The play proceeds with Jerry's description of the place where he lives. It is a small room; in fact, it is a portion of a room that is divided by the beaverboard. He similarly describes the surrounding tenants of the building, which portrays a gloomy image. Within his belongings, he mentions:

"... two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books, a pack of pornographic playing cards, regular deck, an old Western Union typewriter that prints nothing but capital letters, and a small strong-box without a lock which has in it ... what? Rocks! Some rocks ... sea-rounded rocks I picked up on the beach when I was a kid. Under which ... weighed down ...are some letters ... please letters ... please why don't you do this, and please when will you do that letters. And when letters, too. When will you write? When will you come? When? These letters are from more recent years" (9).

The belongings suggest Jerry's approach toward life and his isolation from society. Two empty frames symbolize the empty space he has in his life. The letters

and the kind of letters described by Jerry gives an implication that he had some sort of connection in the past, but he detests the intrusion of someone in his life. His nonconformity led him to isolation; he was not willing to submit to any strict norms either by any individual or by society. The individual 'I' seems to be the driving force, and Jerry consciously chooses to move away from the accepted social brotherhood. He lives in an isolated world, though it is evident from his revelations that he faced the dilemma earlier in his life. His approach towards Peter also reveals his inclination towards social bonding. It is this conflict in the human mind that exists continuously and leads toward the psychosocial dilemma. Jerry's explanation of the pornographic playing cards and its comparison points out the hypocrisy of marital relations; he elucidates that in married life, the real experience is substituted by the fantasy: "It's that when you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience, and when you're older you use the real experience as a substitute for the fantasy" (11). The idea presented here is of the artificial life, which is led by married couples due to the conventional ideas prevailing in society. It is noted that Jerry's isolated existence is, in a way, due to these conventional ideas, and he himself doesn't want to live an artificial life led by the established principles. Jerry also mentions his relationship, which further emphasizes another aspect of Jerry, his homosexual relationship, which is not accepted in society. It should also be noted that for the first time, Jerry admits that he is in love or has an emotional connection with someone. But here again, the relationship could not be continued, which might be one of the reasons for Jerry's isolation. Here we find Jerry's repressed desires coming out, and his feeling for that relationship can be seen with the line, "But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it?"(10)

Jerry's encounter with the landlady is vividly described when he speaks about how he is the object of her sweaty lust. He expresses how he escapes her every day; in fact, this implies how Jerry escapes society, which is full of artificiality. Peter attentively listens; his passivity is optimum, while Jerry is aggressive and passionate during the interaction. The play progresses with the story of Jerry and the dog. During his stay in the rented room, he always encountered the dog that his landlady possessed. The dog chased Jerry with great enthusiasm, and this encounter was aggressive. Jerry tried to befriend the dog by giving hamburgers, but that did not work. As soon as the dog finished the hamburger, he ran to Jerry. Eventually, Jerry tried to kill the dog by poisoning it. He poisoned a hamburger patty with rat poison and fed the dog. The dog was ill for some days but survived. Actually, Jerry wished the dog to live. He says, "I am afraid that I must tell you I wanted the dog to live so that I could see what our new relationship might come to"(Albee 15). After this incident, whenever they met each other, the dog did not bother Jerry; in fact, both of them had come to an understanding. Through the expressive dog story, Jerry suggests, "Sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly"(8). The story also gives an idea about Jerry's attempt to come out of the isolation.

The conflict in Jerry is obvious; he does not want an intrusion in his personal life but wants to break out of the isolation. A similar longing for interaction in American society is further reflected in the play. Jerry mocks society and describes the void in a weird word game; he expresses:

"And where better, wherever better in this humiliating excuse for a jail, better to communicate one single, simple-minded idea than in an entrance hall? Where? It would be A START! Where better to make a beginning ... to understand and just possibly be understood ... a beginning of an understanding, than with ... [*Here JERRY seems to fall into almost grotesque fatigue*] ... than with A DOG" (16).

Jerry's words also reflect the question of acceptance in society. His urge to be possibly understood suggests an understanding that is not prevailing in society. Individualism and its ways are frowned upon by society, particularly when it questions the norms of society. The conflict between acceptance and rejection is carried further to the next scene, where it is seen that he is pushing Peter out of the bench slowly. It also reveals the plea of persons like Jerry, who embraces his individual self and wants to be accommodated in society without conforming or adhering to any obligation forcefully imposed as an authoritarian stance.

Towards the climax of the play, Jerry's individual attitude collides with Peter's social attitude. Jerry forces Peter to break the pretension of a civilized being. It is to be noted that out of the two benches mentioned in the first scene, the possession of the right bench becomes significant. Jerry mocks Peter's controlled composure and continuously provokes him to come out of the artificial pretension that he has practiced under the influence of society. Peter tries to reason him out of the situation, but Jerry sticks to his agenda of breaking the artificial social self. When Peter finds no way out of provocation, he accepts Jerry's challenge to fight. Jerry takes out a knife and throws it at Peter's feet. Again, the situation reverses, and Peter, coming back to his senses, shouts for help.

At the end of the play, Jerry impales himself on the knife as soon as Peter picks it up in order to defend himself. The death of Jerry shows how the individual self is dominated by the social self and makes it so passive that its existence is barred. Jerry kills himself to assert his individual existence, and so seeks an understanding of society. Peter, the representative of the social 'Me' in spite of its artificial presentation, could not subdue the urge of possession, which, in fact, is a social trait. Albee ends the play with Jerry's death, and Peter's dispossession of the social self implies the conflict that prevails in the human mind. On the other hand, it can also be said, "Jerry's engineered suicide is an attempt to experience some kind of human affection, however inverted or gruesome, before taking leave of a world in which he no longer wants to live"(Sykes 455). Albee aptly brings out the psychosocial dilemma in which every individual is entwined, and the major question remains the same - to conform or to confront?

Conclusion

Peter's pathetic condition clearly implies that society paralyzes the independent thought process. The dilemma or the conflict that began between Peter and Jerry reflects the psychosocial dilemma that prevails between the individual self and the social self. The characters represent both aspects of the human mind. Peter metaphorically stands for the social 'Me' and Jerry, the individual 'I'. The conversation between the two characters demonstrates the collision the human mind faces consistently. Albee beautifully presents the contradictory characters of Peter and Jerry, who also serve as metaphors for social self and individual self. *The Zoo Story* approaches the audience with certain questions about social impositions and conventional ideas. It criticizes the idea of 'success', which is only measured by economic stability and conforming ability. This forms the psychosocial dilemma. Peter conformed to the idea of success in social terms, but it appears that he had conformed too much; hence, his existence was similar to a 'vegetable'. On the other hand, Jerry, who conformed to nothing at all, remains in isolation, seeking ways to reconcile with society in his own individualistic terms. Albee depicts the condition of an individual who is helplessly shackled by the society.

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