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HISTORICAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Published in Vol.-36, No.1(I) 2023

Utkal Historical Research Journal with ISSN: 0976-2132
UGC Care Approved, Peer Reviewed and Referred Journal



संस्कृत विद्यापीठ
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TECHNIQUE AS STYLE: A CLOSE LOOK AT EDWARD ALBEE'S *THREE TALL WOMEN*

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Abstract:

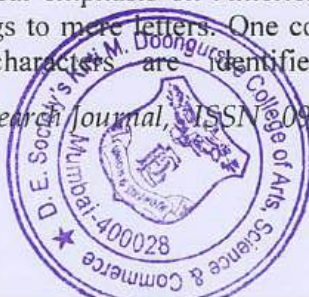
Death has been a subject of deep mystery and perpetual enigma. Literature attempts to verbalize this inevitable fact of life and the Theatre of the Absurd applies its unique technique to uncover various hues and colors associated with it. To capture this subject with all its dimensions in play after play on the American stage is perhaps Edward Albee's most significant contribution to contemporary American literature. The present paper is based on the hypothesis that, Edward Albee, an Absurdist playwright with a difference, in one of the later plays blends the theme of mortality with his unique technique. The paper examines his style of depersonalizing his characters only to make them universal.

Keywords: Edward Albee, *Three Tall Women*, technique, style, theme, depersonalize.

As theatre has never contented with merely mirroring or depicting the external world, Edward Albee's theatre too functions as a forum for questioning. With deep analysis and understanding, it has always tried to offer some insights. While handling primarily the themes of death and ageing in his Pulitzer Prize-winning play entitled, *Three Tall Women*. Albee uses a fresh experimental form of play in terms of content and style. The story of an elderly woman, reminiscent of regret and compromise, makes the play wholly realistic. The playwright asserts, "*Three Tall Women* is an absolutely naturalistic play about three ages, three women who happen to be three ages of the same woman in an impossible but realistic convention with each other" (Aggressing Against the Status Quo 8).

Although in contemporary critical theory, the focus has shifted considerably from the biography of the author to the reader's response to the work, a fascination to investigate an author's autobiographical elements in a work of art has not ceased to date. Therefore, a critic's searchlight often penetrates an author's personal life to note autobiographical elements in his work. This is also true in the case of the Albee scholarship. However, with respect to *Three Tall Women*, Albee himself has managed to save the critic's and reader's efforts by his admission at the beginning of the play. He admits that the portrayal of the protagonist is based on the personality of his foster mother. At the same time, Albee discourages exclusively biographical readings of his plays. In an interview, he remarked, "No worthwhile piece of literature is any good if it has to be related to some biographical factor in the author's life" (qtd. by Krohn & Wasserman 14). Although the play under scrutiny is Albee's most intentionally autobiographical work to date, searching only for the autobiographical elements is to trivialize a work of art like *Three Tall Women*. The play touches the issues of a larger magnitude and has to present much more than the mere personal life of the author. The play is a sagacious critique of and a prudent commentary on senility, and its consequences on the protagonist as well as others in her life. It deals with her attitude towards mortality and her mental condition while facing impending death. Therefore, it is pertinent to address these universal issues that the play is highlighting, to keep the approach to the play more objective and less biographical.

Albee's use of technique is nothing but his style that is conversant with the theme of the play. The characters in *Three Tall Women* are not identified by name, but by letters A, B and C which reveals a critical emphasis on American society, the society that has reduced the identity of human beings to mere letters. One comes across such nameless characters in *All Over too*, wherein characters are identified only by their functions within the



family/community - The Wife, The Daughter, The Mistress, The Doctor, The Son, The Best Friend, The Nurse, the Photographers, The Reporter etc. Albee refers to all these characters only in terms of the Man who is in a coma.

The lack of names for the characters is a relevant factor for the play, *Three Tall Women*; it intensifies the factors of deindividualization. Therefore, the play blurs the individual traits, indicating that the characters are generic and can be as common as any other. The characters A, B and C are in fact, the manifestations of three phases of one woman representing several other women of the same social and economic status. Albee uses this technique of not giving them names to dilute the individuality of the characters. In doing so, he seems to adopt a criticism of society predominantly informed by the cult of individualism. Besides, this technique helps Albee to universalize the subject he is dealing with in the play.

The play opens with the debate: of whether protagonist A is 91 or 92. At this C wonders whether A is scoring "some tiny victory" over time and seeks a "private vengeance" (*TTW* 11) from the past by lying about her age:

C: No! It is important. Getting things . . .

A: [...] I I'm ninety-one.

B: (Pause.) Is that so?

A: (Pause.) Yes.

C: (. Small smile) You are ninety-two.

A: [...] Be that as it *may*.

B: (. To C) Is that so?

C: ([...], indicates papers.) Says so here.

B: [...] Well ... what does it matter?

C: Vanity is amazing.

B: So's forgetting.

A: [...] I'm ninety-one.

B: (Accepting sigh.) Ok.

C: [...] You are ninety-two.

B: (Unconcerned) Oh ... let it alone.

B: It doesn't matter!

C: It does to *me*. (*TTW* 3-4)

Thus, the topic of A's age continues to be debated for about eight pages after it is originally introduced. The opening dialogue: "I am ninety-one" underscores senility as the prominent theme of the play. It is further reinforced by her mother's attitude towards it. Her mother too had resented old age and its resultant helplessness. Though Albee uses a storytelling technique like that of the Wife in *All Over*, the treatment is different. In his earlier plays, such as *All Over*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Counting the Ways*, *Listening* etc, telling a story, facilitated the protagonist to escape from the present reality in which rejection, loneliness, betrayal and uncertainty haunted the character and by reconstructing the past, the character hopes to discover an answer for the incompatibilities in the present. In the context of this pattern, when A tells her story, she does not want to conceal the self but rather forestalls the future. Since the past gives her the hallucination of evading death, she struggles to remember all the events of her past and is flabbergasted when they elude her. "Such memories," opines Bigsby, "are the root of a profound irony, as youth and age are thereby forced together" (Bigsby 22). A's attempt of stealing a victory over time through story-telling, proves futile. She is unable to withstand the consequences of verbalizing memory, in which painful memories become too much as she realizes that death is near and inevitable.

The first Act largely comprises exposition in preparation for the philosophical yet emotionally charged Act II. Through a few faint and some distinct memories of A, the readers/viewers learn of her personal history gaining insight into the portrayal of her

indomitable character. When one meets A in the first Act, one finds that she is dying. Frail and deteriorating physically, she is confined to a sick bed in her "wealthy bedroom" (TTW 2).

Albee paints her as a bigoted and prejudiced woman. Like Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, A too thinks that everyone in her life is a "flop". She thinks her only son is not dutiful enough and visits her solely out of responsibility and not out of love. Her husband is a useless "penguin" (TTW 82) of a man. She suspects that her lawyer exploits her wealth. She alleges her friends to have violated the supposedly sacrosanct contract of friendship and feels that they have either grown old and moved away or have died: "You count on them! And they change. The Bradleys! The Phippes! They die; they go away. And family dies; the family goes away. Nobody should do this!" (TTW 41). She blames others but is unable and unwilling to accept the defects in her character as she is a frustrated broken woman.

Though brought up as a poor woman, she marries a wealthy man. She was the third wife of her husband who took her after dating her sister, "he saw me with Sis before he dated her, "that I was taller" (TTW 84). Like in Albee's earlier plays, the motif of a loveless relationship is reinforced by linking sexual intimacy inexorably with commerce. She enjoys all the riches and status in society provided by her husband. The gift, which she calls "the most beautiful bracelet I'd ever seen" (TTW 55) was far more important than the person presenting it. The husband and wife could not connect and the marriage degenerated into a bizarre display of unfulfilling spousal whoredom. In the first Act, A is unable to reflect upon the emotional void created by this marriage. According to Bruce Mann, she is motivated solely by "an abiding concern for her social identity; she cannot see beyond it and does not realize that this limits her and makes her unhappy" (Return to the Muses 13). Her caducity made her increasingly suspicious of her loss of wealth to the point that she became paranoid. She fears that everyone in her life is robbing her "right and left" (TTW 49). "Everybody steals something" (TTW 49), she snipes. This "something" is not only her wealth but also her youth and vitality, robbed by ageing. She lives under constant dread that her identity will be stolen at any moment.

B seems to represent Albee's view of life, which is much more mature. At the peak of middle age, in contrast to C's youthful intolerance, B cares for A and pacifies her by offering assurances. B tries to understand A's state of mind without getting involved. She accepts A with all her whims and follies. She recounts A's visits to the surgeon and her decaying arm, with compassion and detached equanimity. She appeals to C to take a balanced and relativist view of A's character and gets furious over C's obdurate inflexibility. "Since she's here from the lawyer," B exclaims, "why should she behave like a human being; why should she be any of help; why should she . . ." (TTW 29).

B rebukes C and advises her to "grow up" (TTW 14) and have a realistic outlook. She appeals to A to delve further into her personal history; this takes the first Act to an emotional climax. While narrating, A suffers physically and mentally- her body aches due to the wear and tear of ageing and her mind suffer due to the bitter memories of the past. She reflects on her son's flight from the family home, her husband's prolonged illness and her sister's alcoholism, with sheer anger. She blames them for leaving her: "I think they all hated me because I was strong because I *had* to be. Sis hated me; Ma hated me; all those others, *they* hated me; *he* left home; he ran away. Because I was strong. I was tall and I was strong. *Somebody had* to be" (TTW 60). She bemoans her lost physical glory: "I've shrunk! I'm not tall! I used to be tall! Why have I shrunk?!" (TTW 46).

The memories of the tall, stunning woman, A, reverberates in Act I, but then she complains about losing parts of her body. First, she laments about losing her spine. "I don't have one. I used to have one" (TTW 47). It dawns very late upon her, that the stinking smell and degenerating body are nothing but the outcome of ageing. The disappointment that resulted from this biological inevitability overburdens A as a deserted, senile woman. Her son deserted her and her husband died leaving her fake jewelry. Money, power, beauty and relationship all

proved transient. Life becomes a saga of loneliness, loss, monotony and remorse. She refuses to be crushed under the weight of her life's baggage, as well as the ravages of time. At the end of the first Act, she suffers a stroke and falls silent. As a result, in the second Act, she lies comatose at the center stage and the work of unifying her fragmented identity commences.

The second Act focuses on spiritual decay as against the physical deterioration in the first Act. As Thomas Adler puts it aptly: "If Act One of *Three Tall Women* concerns the physical diminishment or shrinking, Act Two focuses squarely on moral shrinkage or slippage: the realization, like Krapp's, that in the process of living, accommodations, compromises, bad choices and decisions have been made" (171). Idealistic C is a beautiful and luminous girl of 26. She doesn't know that a perfect marriage is a perfect fantasy. To her marriage is a route to wealth and heightened prestige in a social circle. She denies the unpleasant reality and can't think of becoming like A in the future. She says:

I won't. I know I won't—that's what I mean. That . . . (points to A) . . . thing there? I'll never be like that. *Nobody* could. I'm twenty-six; I'm a *good* girl; my mother was strict but fair—she still *is*; she loves me and Sis, and she wants the very best for us. We have a *nice* little apartment, Sis and I, and at night we go out with our beaux, and I *do* have my eye out for . . . for what—the man of my dreams? And so does Sis, I *guess*. I don't think I've been in love, but I've been loved—by a couple of them, but they weren't the right ones. (*TTW* 70)

The audience meets a war-worn and embittered B in Act II. Disappointed by her marital life heading towards spiritual hollowness, B remains entangled in material pleasures. Although discontented, she shows a level of perspective that C lacks. She realizes that the mad rush of material pleasure has left her discontented. She comments bitterly on the nature and difference of infidelity between men and women:

You're growing up and they go out of their way to hedge, to qualify, . . . to evade; to avoid—to *lie* . . . You don't tell us things change—that Prince Charming has the morals of a sewer rat, that you're supposed to *live* with that . . . *and* like it, or give the *appearance* of liking it. Chasing the chambermaid into closets, the kitchen maid into the root cellar, and God knows *what* goes on at the stag at the club! They probably nail the whore to the billiard tables for easy access. *Nobody tells* you any of this. (*TTW* 93-94)

She is still not able to stop abdicating any responsibility for her pain and isolation. She is unable to digest the fact of her only son's estrangement. She has failed to accommodate him with his typical sexual orientation. She opens up, "He loves his . . . he loves his boys, those boys he has. You don't know! He doesn't love me and I don't know if I love him. I can't *remember!*" (*TTW* 59).

A, B and C represent three distinct generations belonging to different economic classes. A is haughty, owns a lot of property who employs B, belongs to the labour class who knows her limits as a personal caretaker and youthful C is ambitious as well as idealistic who is from the service sector. A's son is a representative of a young generation who is individualistic in nature while A is a typical conceited mother. A very common motif of a strained relationship between parents and children is present here. John Lahr observes in his theatre review: The boy's muteness is a metaphor for the inconsolable gap between parent and child. It's also another of Albee's brilliant maneuvers; the child is forever outside the narcissistic parental embrace- seen but not heard" (104). When the protagonist's son comes to meet her in the hospital each woman reacts differently. C is excited about the chance of seeing the son she has not yet given birth to. A is coldly standoffish but acknowledges his dutiful visit. B reacts violently, yelling at him, "Get out of my house" (*TTW* 89). However, the young man remains detached from the drama of his mother's life.

Realizing the sterility of the relationship and dreading its future, A and B are compelled to examine the options they availed in the formation of their images. B realizes that what she thought to be gold, i. e. money and power, was just glitter which gave temporary pleasure. She couldn't exercise her power to make the right choices. According to C, the happiest moments are yet to come and she can't imagine all is done at the age of twenty-six. The comatose stage depersonalizes A's character to go through an epiphany where she can look at her three selves as in one of the cosmic Beckettian moments, "I'm beside myself...I really get the feeling that I am dead: coming to the end of it; that's the happiest moment" (*TTW* 109-110).

To conclude, by splitting the protagonist, A into three different characters, A aged 91, B is 52 and C is 26, representing three stages of life, Albee portrays graphically the evolution of one woman's identity. The juxtaposition of three characters enlightens the audience of A's personal compromises, infidelities, remorse and helplessness towards life's inevitable finality. At the age of 92, surrounded by signs of wreckage, A bewails the loss of strength and grandeur due to advancing age. Though she is aware of the fact of ageing, its acceptance is made difficult due to isolation, abandonment and disappointments in life.

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