

Social Crisis in Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith*

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Abstract

This paper is an interpretation of Albee's drama *The Death of Bessie Smith*, with an emphasis on the theme of racism, as well as other race-related social problems, such as social inequality, materialism, ethical dilemma and distorted human relation. Beyond the race-induced historical event, it is more of a morality play about the collapse of human values in contemporary society.

Keywords: Racism; Social inequality; Ethical dilemma; Distorted human relation

1. Edward Albee and New American Theater

The world literature has witnessed three important movements in the mid-twentieth century, especially in dramatic arts, such as "The theater of the Absurd", which appeared in Paris with the performance of *Waiting For Godot* by Samuel Becket's in 1953, the movement of "The Angry Young Men" which flourished in London with the performance of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 and the movement of "The New American Theater" that rose with Jack Geber's *The Connection* staged at The Living Theater in New York, as well as Edward Albee *The Zoo Story* premiered in West Berlin in 1959 [1].

If we examine the American theater in the late 1950s we find that Broadway started to suffer a market decline over those years. The American theater seemed to be threatened by a complete collapse. Great writers like Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller no longer remained as

recognizable dramatists [2]. The gloomy situation demanded for young playwrights to establish a new American theater. New dramatists like Gelber, Richardson, Kopit and Edward Albee emerged on stage. Unfortunately only Albee succeeded in his career as a dramatist while the other three give up their writing halfway. Albee is regarded as the most important initiator of the New American Theater movement, well known for the plays *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The Sand Box* (1959) and *The Death of Miss Bessie Smith* (1961) and other works.

Albee becomes the most representative leader of the New American Theater because of his unique style of writing in his works, which is a combination of the prosaic and the absurd, obvious and mysterious commonplace and revelation [3]. He mingles the reality with fantasy in criticizing his community and dramatizing the social crises of his people.

Albee's creativity lies in using a novel language and daring techniques not only for social commentary, but going beyond that to criticize social diseases of his age. Of Albee's plays, "the most impressive example of the creation of new absurd dimension on stage is the giant replica of the mansion in *Tiny Alice*, the most effective use to date as dramatic script...surpassing his teachers in his technique" and "...the only dramatist that comes after O'Neill, who shows real growth, and the only one who makes a serious effort to break away from the "message" plays which have dominated the American theater since O'Neill" [3]. Different from European writers of the absurd theatre, Albee is preoccupied with illusion that screens man from reality. For him, all the moral, religious, political, and social structures with which man has made to shelter themselves have collapsed. That is to say, the action of his plays dramatizes the process of collapse, so that the audience can fully recognize the reality behind the illusion.

2. Social Crises and Albee's Drama

America in the early 20th century suffers from many social problems such as public injustice, racial and social discrimination, which leads to ferocious conflicts. The best American playwrights in the forties and fifties represented by Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams try to present these problems, whose common theme centers on social behavior. Different from those dramatists, the American playwrights of the sixties deal with existence as subject in itself. They are often torn between a desire to follow realism and the temptation of experimentation. Such a tension is evident in the plays of Albee. As we know, Albee criticizes the social behavior of his age inside the community, by putting his work inside a philosophical and psychological frame. Both O'Neill and Beckett have influenced him greatly. He admitted in an interview with Downer that "I do think that my exposure to Beckett and to late O'Neill was probably important right at the time I gave up poetry and novel" [4]. After the works of O'Neill, Miller and Williams, social drama appears in some of the plays of Albee, Jack Gelber, Arthur Kopit and Jack Richardson, but their approaches to social concern are different. Albee and his generation are labeled by Mary Lukas as "Social critics". She states that "Albee and the generation of the new American dramatist who are just beginning to appear, understand themselves as its society critics and its forces. They have not reconciled themselves with the world they live in and disprove of any phony, mores and demands. Unlike some of his European colleagues, Albee's outlook has a strong relation with the decline of society. His argument is less with life than with society" [5]. In fact Albee's favorite drama subjects are always on community problems. According to him the relation between drama and society is very important, and playwrights should stage and criticize the central problems

to reestablish a new community. For example, *The Death of Bessie Smith* reflects his fascination for social drama and shows his great ability to present social protests, displaying Albee's power in articulating human conflict and his message to the modern generation of the sixties.

Albee sees that the clash with reality is the main function of the playwright and the first responsibility of the individual, which means Albee, is a straight analyst of social events. The sense of disasters, the illness of American humanity and the decay of values are soaked into his vision. Through his criticism of the social reality, we become aware of the fact that the roots of the American social decline lie in the disintegration of personal relationships and the breakdown of the ethics which justifies individual existence.

3. Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith was a well-known African-American blues singer who was born in Chattanooga in 1898 [6]. In 1923 she like other black people at this time bought a house and settled down in Philadelphia. Bessie succeeded in her career in the 1920s and gained a wide reputation. "With one record Bessie's supremacy as a famous singer of the 'classic blues' was recognized ..." [6] and thousands of her sold records together with more than 14 shows made this epoch of Bessie's career is the supreme fruitful one.

During the 1930s Bessie Smith faced the most unfortunate period of her profession because the fever of classic blues faded and the music industry entered a new era. Therefore, Bessie's reputation declined. "Even for one disc by Bessie become very difficult to blacks who could not have enough money to buy it" [6]. There were fewer people who could pay to hear Bessie sing in a direct show. Bessie's career declined during 1930s, but there was still an opportunity for her comeback. Her fame began to pick up again in 1937 when she got a chance to record and contribute in a new film and shows. However, compared with her popularity in the 1920s, her career in this decade could by no means be of success. Bessie's career and life were ended by a car accident on 26th September 1937 when her car collided with a truck on the way to a Broadway Rastus Show in Memphis. Bessie's death had triggered a hot discussion on racial relations in American, which motivated Edward Albee to write this play [7].

4. Social Crisis in the *Death of Bessie Smith*

Bessie Smith was killed in a car accident on September 26, 1937, in Memphis in the State of Tennessee. In fact she died because she was denied to medical assistance in all of the city's hospitals for she was a black. *The Death of Bessie Smith* explores the racial psychology of the American deep South between the whites and the blacks and collapse of human values by depicting the anger, frustration, love and hate of people who suffer from stagnation and desperately want a change in their life [8].

The play consists of eight scenes. Instead of emphasizing the incident itself, Albee dramatizes this play in a rare style. In the whole play, apart from Bessie Smith, Jack is the only character who has a name. The others are all nameless only known by their professional roles, such as The Nurse, The Orderly, The Intern, The Father, and the Second Nurse. In addition, Bessie Smith has never clearly appeared in the play. The spotlight was on the nurse in the hospital, a twenty-six year old southern white girl, full blown, pretty, with a wild laugh" [9]. Her life was surrounded by three men: her Father, fifty-five, a thin balding white man [9] and a fragile patient; the Orderly, a light-skinned black, twenty-eight, fighting hard to find a position for himself in the society but in vain; the Intern, a 30 year-old southern white man, a so-called boyfriend of the Nurse and a liberal thinker, who was torn by the ambivalence between his ideal and the reality. The story of Bessie is imbedded within the story of the Nurse, which obscures the death of Bessie Smith from the central stage. Apparently, the play is on racial discrimination, but Albee's goal centers on "shocking the audience into self-reflection and participating in living fully"[10], intending to illustrate how social and racial conventions have produced a destructive absolutism in human relationship. In this sense, Bessie Smith's death is the logical extension of a process which goes beyond racism.

The Nurse is a complicated character in the drama. On the one hand, born in a family with a father full of racial superiority, and "bred in the racism of the South" [7], she bears a typical identity of a southern white. And on the other hand, she despises the values of the community she belongs to.

The play develops around the love and hate between the Nurse and her father, the Orderly, and the Intern focusing not only on the theme of racial relation but also on other race-related problems, such as social inequality, materialism, ethical dilemma and distorted human relation.

4.1 Racism and Social Inequality

The story took place in the deep South where racial discrimination is a pervasive social problem; thus racism and race-related social inequality become the central theme of the play.

Although Bessie is absent in the whole play, the last two scenes clearly presents a race-induced death of her because she was denied into the white hospitals after the car crash. When Jack rushed Bessie to the nearest hospital to the car accident, he was rejected by the Second Nurse despite his repeated pleas:

JACK: There has been an accident, ma'am... I got an injured woman outside in my car...

SECOND NURSE: Yeah? Is that so? Well, you sit down and wait... You go over there and sit down and wait a while.

JACK: This is an emergency! There has been an accident!

SECOND NURSE: YOU WAIT! You just sit down and wait!

JACK: This woman is badly hurt...

SECOND NURSE: YOU COOL YOUR HEELS!

JACK: Ma'am... I got Bessie Smith out in that car there...

SECOND NURSE: I DON'T CARE WHO YOU GOT OUT THERE, NIGGER. YOU COOL YOUR HEELS! [9].

After the denial, Jack drove Bessie to another hospital in Memphis. He beg the Nurse for help but again was denied:

JACK: ... I got someone outside...

NURSE: You stop that yelling. This is a white hospital, you.

JACK: No...

NURSE: Now you listen to me, and you get this straight... nigger... this is a semiprivate white hospital... [4].

In the end, the Intern tried to help her, but it was too late; Bessie died of bleeding. Her death was a direct result of racism and a symbol of a beautiful dream that one day racism would end in the country.

There is always a strong link between racism and social inequality. American community appreciates and respects white citizen in general at that time. Jack assumed that mentioning Bessie's name would be enough to admit her to the hospital not only as a black, but as a respected woman with fame. He frequently demanded for help: "Ma'am... I got Bessie Smith out in that car there...", but retorted by the second Nurse: "I don't care who you got there, nigger" [9] although in the other hospital the Nurse declares "Oh, this is no plain woman... this is no ordinary nigger... this is Bessie Smith!" [9]. It was a fact that in the South even "the poorest illiterate white could claim a standing in society denied to the wealthiest and most intelligent and educated black" [11].

Similarly, power, *wealth*, privilege, and prestige are admired in American society. When the Nurse met the Orderly for the first time in the hospital, the Mayor is admitted. She compares the Mayor's treatment with that of a badly injured man received by the hospital at the previous night. The hospital is less interested in a patient whose life is in danger than someone with power like the Mayor. As the Nurse stated "...it's true that the poor man lying up there with his guts coming out could be a nigger for all the attention he'd get if His Honor should start shouting for something... he could be on the operating table... and they'd drop his insides right on the floor and come running if the mayor should want his cigar lit.... But that is the way things are. Those are facts. You'd better acquaint yourself with these realities [9]. "...we are no one bit more concerned for that man than we are for His Honor..." [9]. This statement implies that the Mayor has got special care just because of his high social status.

He is more important than anyone, and therefore verifies the existence of social inequality. Yet, the truth is that the cause behind this inequality is the race of the individuals and the color of skin. Social inequality in this play is also reflected in career opportunity and personal advancement. For example, the Orderly in the white hospital is a representative of manual labor, which is considered to be the most common type of work for blacks [12], though he believes that he deserves a more decent job in regard to his education and abilities. However, being an Orderly is regarded as an adequate job for a black in the white-dominated community. The Orderly tries to advance himself, but it is regarded as a violation of the racial etiquette in the South and the Nurse threatens to get him fired.

4.2 Materialism

Materialism is another theme depicted in this play. All the characters are soaked with material wants of different kinds, which manipulate people's social behavior and their interpersonal relation. For example, the Father, in order to satisfy his impractical ambition to be a politician, he has developed a superficial friendship with the Mayor.

The Intern intends to have a better job and consults the Nurse for his idea of talking to the Mayor:

ORDERLY: I know... I know the mayor is an important man. He is impressive... even lying on his belly like he is... I'd like to get to talk to him.

NURSE: Don't you know it? TALK to him! Talk to the mayor? What for?

ORDERLY: I've told you. I've told you I don't intent to stay here carrying crap pans and washing out the operating theatre until I have a ...a long gray beard... I'm... I'm going beyond that [9].

The Orderly is tired of doing low-wage manual routines at the hospital and wants a change for his situation. He tries to ask for help from someone like the Mayor with power and high social status.

The Nurse has a relationship with the Intern but refuses to marry him because he is impecunious. In reply to the Intern's proposal to marry her, she said: Marry me! Do you know... do you know that nigger I sent to fetch me a pack of butts... do you know he is in a far better position...realistically, economically... to ask to marry me than you are? Hunh? Do you know that? That nigger! Do you know that nigger out earns you... and by a lot? [9]. The Nurse assumes that marring the black Orderly would be more realistic and economically better off though it was impossible. If she gets married with the Intern, she would suffer financial difficulties and be tortured by his idealistic aspiration and, probably, a long-term needy family life.

4.3 Ethical Dilemma and Distorted Human Relation

All the characters in this play are trapped in a psychological complex that involves constant mental

conflicts in situations where a choice between desirable or undesirable alternatives is to be made. Violation of the social and racial convention would result in transgressing their personal pursuits.

Albee presents in the play a paradoxical mentality and distorted relationships among the characters. For instance, **between the Nurse and the father, although the Father hates to be a fragile patient of his daughter, he envies the other patients taken care of by her. For the Nurse, she wants to take good care of the invalid Father, but on the other hand, she needs protecting from him, getting irritated when the Father does not drive her to work. They attack each other fiercely. For example, the Father ridicules the Nurse's relationship with the Intern and the music she listens to as "Goddamn nigger records" [9], and the Nurse retaliates the Father by scorning his hypocritical friendship with the Mayor and his impractical ambition to be a politician.**

In the relationship with Orderly and the Intern, the Nurse is faced with dilemma too. The Nurse is subconsciously attracted by the Orderly and even hypothetically assumes that marrying a perspective black man who is eager to succeed would be more advantageous, but consciously she ridicules his race because a white woman like the Nurse cannot love a black man like the Orderly under the social circumstances, and such interracial marriage cannot be approved by the Father, which is verified by the Intern's lines: "... why don't you just ask that nigger to marry you? 'Cause, boy, he'd never ask you! I'm sure if you told your father about it, it would give him some pause at first, because we know what type of man your father is...don't we? ... [9].

Likewise, the Nurse and the Intern also create a rather paradoxical and superficial relationship. They seem to like each other. On the one hand, the Intern is a white, which conforms to the racial conventions for marriage, thus she chose to have a relationship with him; on the other hand, she has no intention to marry him because of his unrealistic ideal and awkward financial situation. Thus, their relationship is described as "battle of sexes" [13].

In struggle for social equality, the Nurse, the Intern and the Orderly are stranded in a dilemma that on the one hand, influenced by human rights movement, their rationality tells them they should hold a liberal view on racial issues and support the blacks to fight for equal rights; on the other hand confined by the social and racial codes in the southern community they are not willing to taking any action. Maintaining the existing life style of the whites is still of utmost importance.

First of all, The Nurse holds a contradictory mentality to the Orderly's intention for advancement. At one time, the Nurse encourages the Orderly to move to the north since the situation there was generally more liberal and pleasant for blacks and they might find more opportunities there. She suggested: "I'll tell you what you do... You go north, boy... you go up in New York City, where nobody's better than anybody else... get up north, boy..." [9].

However, at other times, the Nurse discloses her typical southern superiority and prejudice over the blacks. She indicates that the Orderly should be grateful for his simple job, which is illustrated by the following exchanges with the Orderly:

NURSE: ... I'll tell you something... you are lucky as you are [9].

NURSE: I'll tell you what you just want... I'll tell you just what you want if you have any mind to keep this good job you've got... You just shut your ears... and you keep that mouth closed tight, too.

All this talk about what you're going to go beyond. You keep walking a real tight line here ... [9].

Clearly, the Nurse has no intention to change the present situation and the whites will maintain their authority. Since, the whites perceived the blacks as their rivals, and hence the Nurse wishes to keep the Orderly at the bottom of the society. Her behavior is driven by the fear of the ambition of blacks [14].

Besides, the Intern was irresolute and hesitant in deciding whether heading for the Spanish war or staying with the Nurse. As a symbol of liberal intellectual, the Intern "dislikes racism, materialism, and the impersonal nature of institutions, in this case the hospital where he works" [15]. Possibly because civilians in both Spain and the United States have to struggle to bring changes to their life, Albee presents the Spanish war within the play as an analogy that in America there is the same pathetic war between whites and blacks, where hundreds of residents, specifically blacks, are also killed as an outcome of racial conflicts. It appears that the liberal Intern could become a supporter for the blacks and ready to help them with the struggle for equality. He told the Nurse: "There are over half a million people killed in the war! Do you know that? By airplanes... Civilians! ... I am not concerned with politics but I have a sense of urgency... a dislike of waste... stagnation... I am stranded... here... My talents are not large... [9].

The Orderly lives in a Dilemma so as to have lost his identity. He made every attempt to enter the strata of the whites, but in vain. For example, he keeps a "clean shaven, trim and prim" appearance [9], tries hard to keep himself on

the good side of every white, like "a genuine little ass-licker" [9], and speaks with a preference to big words though his lines throughout the play are broken or unfinished. As a result he was denied by both the white and the black community.

In the Orderly's endeavor to gain equal rights, his words speak louder than his action. He had a strong desire for a change and believed that the circumstances should change and equal rights should be achieved. He also hints that blacks should take action and fight for their rights

ORDERLY: There are some people who believe in more than promises...

NURSE: Hunh?

ORDERLY: I say, there are some people who believe in more than promises; there are some people who believe in action [9].

However, throughout the play, the Orderly remains obedient at his humble job without any realistic action to fight for his equal right.

The dilemma faced by the Nurse, the Intern, and the Orderly reflects clashes between the more literal values of the young and the stereotypical values deep-rooted in the southern community.

5. Conclusion

Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* is originated from a historical event, regarding the famous blues singer, Bessie Smith, who had a car crash and died on account of being denied to a white hospital in 1937. As a play written in 1959, at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, it apparently discusses the complex racial conflicts between the blacks and whites. "But over and above the level of social protest this is a play about individual strapped in their own myths, condemned to act out their fictions to the point at which they are forced to deny their own humanity and desires". Therefore, the play is an exploration of race-related social crisis in terms of social inequality, materialism, ethical dilemma and retorted human relation in American society in the mid-20th century.

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