

# ECO-ETHICAL PREDICAMENT: 'APOCALYPSE' IN EDWARD ALBEE'S SEASCAPE.

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## Abstract

Since the turn of the century eco-ethics is a buzz word in the wake of environmental apocalypse. An anthropomorphic understanding of nature is believed to be pivotal in encouraging better interconnections between humanity and nature. Hence re-examination of the relationship of the natural and social world is the need of an hour. Interpersonal relationship of human beings has been the focal point of the writings of the eminent American playwright Edward Albee. However *Seascape* (1975) is the first play of Albee staging inter-species encounter dealing with issues related to science, sea life, animal behavior and anthropology. The slice of environment is a sun-soaked beach where two couples, each from landscape and seascape, interact, highlighting multiple issues such as love and marriage, offspring and obligations, pride and prejudice. The present paper investigates how the play covers the vast expanse of the concept of Human Evolution by Charles Darwin while the human couple talks of their childhood, youth, their children, and their future. The paper aspires to prove how Albee's vision presents an interesting dramatic spin on Darwin's principle of Natural Selection and Sexual Selection. The verbal communion between human and non-human characters manifests the eco-ethics in the future process of evolution when the human couple assures to "help" the non-human couple to succeed in the next phase of their existence on land. The play ends on the optimistic note with a single word uttered by Leslie- "Begin". Thus the paper attempts to prove that in future humans need to think beyond the humans in order to offer an aid or assistance to the creatures they have been not only accustomed to ignoring but also assaulting and exploiting. Hence they will have to give up selfishness and become co-creators rather than just co-habitants.

**Key words:** eco-ethics, evolution, Charles Darwin, Edward Albee, *Seascape* Natural Selection and Sexual Selection

## INTRODUCTION

The existence of human race today is threatened by the grave consequences of misappropriation and exploitation of environment. Materialistic and consumerist human attitude is actually responsible for this ecological predicament. Eco-criticism examines the portrayal of relationship between human beings and natural environment in the given literary texts evaluating ecological consciousness. Eco-critical readings of literary texts tend to focus on the manners humans and environment interact, influence and counter each other. Hence "Community-based environmental issues—including environmental justice concerns—have found theater a viable tool through which to promote social change, open dialogue, or protest the status quo"<sup>1</sup> Like Marxist and feminist criticism, eco-criticism too is evaluative in nature which investigates how modern, post-modern writers imagine ecological apocalypse.

Unlike other forms of literature theatre is a performing art which has direct and immediate appeal. Thus it becomes an appropriate means to realize human, non-human interconnection and mutual dependence provoking ecological consciousness. Humans are evolutionarily more closely connected to animals than their vegetative counterparts. Hence animals feature abundantly in literature-either in the form of fairy tale or bestial tale making eco criticism a fertile ground for investigation of literature on animals. Large numbers of animals and birds species have occupied the literary imagination may it be the ominous killing of falcon in S.T. Coleridge's "*The Rime of Ancient Mariner*" or the seafaring and fishing narratives of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* or Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Litterateurs have fore grounded human encounters with animals where nature and culture come face to face. The fiction and poetry of Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, William Faulkner, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder etc, also are found to be replete with animal references. Animal references in the theater are normally treated as allegory, symbol or metaphor "either by the playwright or the spectator/critic: thus Ionesco's rhinoceroses are read as fascists, Schaeffer's horses as paganism, Ibsen's wild duck as freedom and Chekhov's seagull as art"<sup>2</sup>

However in *Seascape*, the newts are neither a symbol or metaphor nor it is an allegory. It is evident from the racist attitude of Leslie and Sarah towards fish. "The temptation to read the reptile couple as typical members of another social group, with characteristic chauvinism and intolerance, is short-circuited, because that thought is immediately

<sup>1</sup> Theresa J. May *Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage* P: 93 pages.uoregon.edu/ecodrama/files/file/Greening%20the%20Theatre.pdf.

<sup>2</sup> UnaChoudhuri, *Beyond Landscape* [http://www.hotreview.org/articles/beyondlandscape\\_print.htm](http://www.hotreview.org/articles/beyondlandscape_print.htm)

portrayed as superficial and insufficient<sup>3</sup>. Thus the encounter between two couples, human and reptile each, is nothing but an inter-species confrontation leading eventually to mutual understanding.

### NEED FOR THE STUDY

Eco-critical discourses expose the suicidal behavior of human world in the wake of ubiquitous environmental degradation. Hence a wide-ranging eco-critical research of literary texts has to be undertaken in order to bring out eco-ethical awareness among masses. Eco-critics claim that theatre can be very effective and immediate medium for ecological consciousness. Hence the eco-centric analytical approach of dramatic studies becomes the need of an hour. Albee's *Seascape*, very subtly gives the message as stated by Thomas P. Adler of '*saving others in order to save oneself*' (Adler, 1979) which is to be perceived, executed in day to day life and further perpetuated.

All the celebrated critics of Albee such as Mathew C. Roudane, Michael E. Rutenberg, Thomas P. Adler, Anita Maria Stenz, Lucina P. Gabbard, Liam O. Purdon, Gerry McCarthy have reviewed *Seascape* from various view points: psychological, symbolical, metaphorical or have studied its major themes like mortality, evolution of relationship etc. Remy Bumpo's "Field Guide" highlights the panorama of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution but falls short to explore the eco-ethics embedded in it. Thus Albee's *Seascape* from eco-ethical perspective becomes indispensable.

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the present research paper is to study the eco-ethical consciousness embedded in Edward Albee's *Seascape* and to highlight how an eco-conscious literary work can heighten the eco-sensibility of the readers/spectators. Accordingly the objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To explore how Albee engages very subtly the audience while shocking its sensibilities over the theory of Human Evolution.
2. To underscore Albee's plea to society to rejuvenate its spirit as well as think beyond humans for the wellbeing of all creatures.

### HYPOTHESIS

Edward Albee, through his play, *Seascape* advocates that though the process of evolution is inevitable, the respect for the animal world and the harmony between the natural and social world is the solution for the ecological apocalypse.

### METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present research paper is a kind of library based exploratory research, hence the research methodology primarily involve critical analysis of primary as well as secondary literature resources with respect to the hypothesis of the research problem. The desk work primarily included the collection of literature/reference materials in the form of hard and soft copies. The hard copies included the books, reprint of published research papers, etc whereas the soft copies included web pages, pdf files (e-reprints) downloaded from the internet. The literature so collected was referred and critically analyzed and the issues were understood from the perspectives of the objectives and hypothesis of the present research problem.

#### Evolution of Edward Albee

Edward Albee has handled a wide range of themes in his long literary career spanning more than five decades. Although he belongs to the movement of The Theater of the Absurd, describing the absurdity of the relationship of human and the universe, his works very often try to give solutions to the conflicts rather than conveying an absurdist sense of inescapable determinism. And *Seascape* can be called as a crowned glory as it's a light comedy ending on an optimistic note.

#### Evolution of *Seascape*

*Seascape* is a fantasy; even so, it's not a fairy tale. It gives dramatic expression to Darwin's theory of Human Evolution. According to Albee's biographer Mel Gussow, as early as 1967, Albee was reading books on Anthropology and Sociology by Robert Ardrey and Konrad Lorenz and "thinking about the 'collective unconscious.'" The play, as he described it at that time, was "a study on the social structures of primate society and of fish society." Thus we find Albee "moving from writing about people to writing about animals<sup>4</sup>."

#### Plot of *Seascape*

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Modern Dramatist: Edward Albee, Gerry McCarthy, MacMillan Publishers. Hound Mills and London, 1987, p115.

The play comprises of two acts. The first act opens with a middle aged couple, Charlie and Nancy, on a sun-soaked beach, basking in the warmth of their plump retirement funds. Their conversation reveals a relationship full of affectionate amusement, with just a touch of discontent smoothed over with rueful toleration. Nancy, with all her talk of travel, adventure and change, is the one associated with movement, while Charlie is happy doing nothing and yearns for rest.

The opening conversation consists of vague planning, gentle disagreements, and some surprising reminiscing. At the end of the act Charlie and Nancy are joined by Leslie and Sarah, the English-speaking reptile couple, and the atmosphere is a mixture of admiration and alarm, fascination and fear. Act II is a *Bildungsroman* for both the couples. It embodies the encounter of the human and newts which is hugely entertaining--suspenseful, exciting, moving, surprising, where the newts find human ways incomprehensible and "reject modern civilization"(Amacher,166). The two couples quiz each other about the nature of their lives, venturing into intimate topics that highlight evolutionary process covering discussion on "marriage customs, flight and aerodynamics, child bearing and rearing and racialism"<sup>5</sup>. However the conversation takes the toll of physical fight ending in reconciliation, but the newts decide to go back to sea. But Nancy prevents them saying "You'll have to come back...sooner or later," (*Seascape*, p.135) and the play ends on the optimistic note with Leslie's words- "All right. Begin" (*Seascape*, p.135).

### Eco-drama *Seascape*

Ecological consciousness reverberates, from beginning till end, which is visible in all aspects of the play; setting, theme, characters and dialogues. The setting is a sun soaked beach, a meeting point of sea and land, boundary for aqua and land creatures. Two out of four characters are non-humans who are "evolutionary predecessors of Charlie and Nancy (Lucina P. Gabbard p. 313) and the human characters love the proximity with the Nature hence Nancy wishes them to be seaside nomads. Charlie as a child unlike the boys of his age wished to be a fish, "able to go under, live down in the coral and ferns, . . . down in the green, the purple. . ." (*Seascape* p 13). What Charlie fancied doing as a child, Nancy craves to do in the last segment of life: to live beside the sea, always moving on, combing beach after beach. She is inherently part of the ecosystem and it is evident that "her exuberance, enthusiasm, and spiritual vitality"<sup>6</sup> is achieved only through the harmony with Nature.

I love the water, and I love the air, and the sand and the dunes and the beach grass, and the sun shine on all of it and the white clouds way off, and the noise of shells . . . (*Seascape* p. 5). Her eco-sensibilities are so strong that when they first encountered the newt couple, Leslie and Sara, she asks Charlie to roll over like an animal. By adopting the submission posture she wants Charlie to 'adapt' to the given environment, in other words, to become ecologically "adept". The dialogues of play are not only ecological in sense, taste and intention but are richly replete with *eco-vocabulary*: pounding waves and quiet coves, white sand, palms, pine trees, cliffs, reefs, miles of jungle, sand dunes, sand fleas etc.

The theme of the play is primarily *eco-ethical* predicament which is evident in the opening dialogue of Nancy about the noise made by the jet planes: "such noise they make" (*Seascape* p. 3). In jet planes' noise and Charlie's irritation, "They will crash into the dunes one day. I don't know what good they do" (*Seascape* p 3) there is not only the "hint of apocalypse" ( Mc Carthy p. 116) but the doubt raised by Albee about the validity of scientific and technological inventions as a sign of progress .

### The theme of Evolution

*Seascape*, directly and openly celebrates Darwin's naturalistic evolution. The theme of evolution works on two planes in the play: abstract and concrete. On the abstract level, the relationship of Charlie and Nancy is in the process of evolution-their growth, stagnation or regression. Nancy asserts that Charlie's growth has halted, and he is too quickly reverting to lethargy. On the concrete level the newts are evolving, proceeding from aquatic animals to humanoid land creatures. Thus the process of evolution blurs the boundaries between human and non-human world as both the species are inevitably and eternally in the process of evolution.

Charlie is indeed reasserting Darwin's theory of "survival of fittest' in following dialogue, "Mutate or perish. Let your tail drop off; change your spots, or maybe just your point of view." (*Seascape* p.123). However Leslie and Sarah experience the divorce between them and their familiar environment. It is exactly what Albert Camus has described as absurdity of relationship between human and universe. It's because of grossly polluted sea water that has brought of numerous species on the verge of extinction. Therefore Nancy and Sarah feel to be outsiders in their own surrounding:

". . . all of a sudden, everything . . . down there . . . was terribly . . . it wasn't comfortable anymore . . . we didn't think we belonged there anymore." (*Seascape* p.116).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p123.

<sup>6</sup> Roudané, Matthew Charles. *Understanding Edward Albee*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1987, p133.

Interestingly enough, Albee here is indeed speaking about Darwin's natural selection, "which is a gradual process by which species adapt to their environment"<sup>7</sup>. Darwin speaks through Charlie, when Charlie tells the newts, "there was a time when we all were down there, crawling around, and swimming and carrying on. . . (*Seascape* p.118) . . .It means that once upon a time you and I lived down there" (*Seascape* p119) and also when Sarah says 'It was growing thing, nothing abrupt' (*Seascape* p 116). As the process of evolution is eternal, inevitable, takes place slowly but naturally leaving little scope for human contribution/efforts. However the meaning and purpose of life is not just mutate or perish. Hence evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould notes, "Darwinism compels us to seek meaning elsewhere-- in art, music, literature, theatre- and religion" (field guide p29). In this pursuit of meaning, was born the language.

### Language

Humans differ from animals in their use of language. It is exclusive to humans, and is a mile stone of human achievements in the process of evolution. In the interaction with Leslie and Sara, Charlie and Nancy realize that language, a prized hallmark of human beings is, indeed, insufficient to communicate while its primary aim is to communicate. Unable to comprehend, the newts press for the explanation and the definition of 'love'. The two humans fall short of words to explain the term and it is not the abstract nature of the emotion of 'love' but rather inherent incapability and limitations of the language to put across certain terms. It reminds us of Derridean Deconstruction propounded in 'Of Grammatology' in 1967. According to Derrida, as Krishna Swami puts it simply in "Contemporary Literary Criticism", when we attempt to define something, "we keep moving from one word to another word, going round and round but never get at the meaning. For example, when we look for the meaning of the word 'meaning' in the dictionary, it goes in a circular manner, like-

meaning: what is meant; significance

meant: what it means

mean: signify

significance: meaning

Thus no sign is complete in itself; it depends on another sign and that sign in turn depends on another, hence no word yield a final, unified, meaning which will explain exactly the word. Failing in their grand attempt to explain the exact meaning of various emotions linguistically, Charlie turns the table on Sarah and Leslie enquiring about their courtship and coupling. What Sarah explains is nothing but a principle of 'Sexual Selection':

I was reaching my maturity, and so, naturally, a lot of males were paying attention to me—milling around—you know, preening and snapping at each other and generally showing off, and I noticed one was hanging around a little distance away, not joining in with the others...and I didn't pay too much attention to him, because I thought he was probably sickly or something, and besides, there were so many others, and it was time to start coupling...when, all of a sudden! There he was, right in the middle of them, snapping away, really fighting, driving all the others off. It was quite a rumpus (*Seascape* p 89-90).

"The principle of Sexual Selection was one of the main points on which Darwin differed from Alfred Russel Wallace, who independently constructed a theory of natural selection in 1858—nearly a decade after Darwin developed his more complete thesis in 1842 and 1844, but before Darwin had published anything. However, in 1871, Darwin published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, in which he argued that sexual selection, in addition to natural selection, was at work in the development of the human species" (Field guide p 35). To put it simply, in a given population, every male can opt for different strategies so as to maximize his reproductive success. Strategy one can be the strategy showing strength and aggressiveness, defeating others in the competition whereas strategy two can be for males having poorer display/lesser strength but who are endowed with courtship skills so that they can seduce the females somehow and manage to mate with them when there is no one around to compete. Even females have a choice to choose either strategy one male or the other one. Her choice depends on taking into consideration her own capability, her available resources because not all females strong enough to invest in their babies. It is interesting to explore that in a given population of 100 males, how many males opt for strategy *one* and how many for *two*, similarly how many females go with strategy *one* males and how many end up choosing strategy *two* males. Here Leslie adopts strategy *one* because "Leslie had to make a "rumpus" in order to win Sarah as a mate—when he stood back from the fracas, she thought he was sickly. It was only when he threw to the wind his own instinct toward self-preservation (he even gets a scar!) that she decides he's the newt to help her lay her children" (Field guide p. 30).

The inter-personal relationship between Charlie and Nancy, too, is undergoing evolution. The encounter with newts teaches Charlie tolerance. Ironically, while he accuses Leslie of being bigot because he does not like fish, it is he who too couldn't escape bigotry. He calls Leslie "someone who has no grasp of conceptual matters, who hasn't heard of half the words in the English language" (*Seascape* p.94), he further calls him "brute beast" (p.126). Charlie's accusation implies that he believes that Leslie and Sarah are inferior. In fact his assumption of superiority makes him bigot. However the realization of help, support, and mutual co operation dawns upon Charlie and Sarah who willingly offer

<sup>7</sup> en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Natural selection



help to newts. In case of Charlie and Nancy, the change is not expected to occur in physical form but in attitude and its implementation.

## CONCLUSION

Albee's *Seascope* reflects ecological issues which directly intersect human world. According to him whatever ecological conditions we find ourselves today in, is our own doing. The encounter and interaction with the newts enlighten the human couple of the ethics of this evolutionary schedule. Charlie's prejudiced and racist remark of calling the newts as 'brut beast' undergoes change when they decide to help the newts in their next phase of life. They promise to "help" the others to succeed in the next phase of their existence on land. The creatures, returning from the verge of retreat, accept the offer of help. The last line of the play, spoken by Leslie: "All right. Begin" (p. 135) is promising as well as demanding. Because the new beginning, though remarkable, is tough and challenging. That future, it seems, requires them to think beyond the human, and to offer aid and assistance to lives they have been accustomed to ignoring. It requires them to move from being mere figures in a landscape to being the co-creators, with other figures--however improbable--of a landscape imbued with new environmental ethics.

The core issue in the first act of the play is Charlie's disagreement over Nancy's proposal of the couple being beach wanderer. It is Nancy's solution over stagnancy of their marital life. She wanted a change, wanted to be moving. It raises certain questions: Is constant change progress, or merely change? How can we avoid stagnation? How do we negotiate the space between two persons, spouses to be specific? What is the role of humans while granting space to other species?

*Seascope* is predominantly a dialogic text. Newts' discomfort in the ocean could be read as water pollution caused by chemicals of industries. It can be looked at being similar to the rampant and ubiquitous animal encroachment in human settlements. The beauty of the text is, it can also be seen as a stage in the life of the amphibians, in the process of evolution as humans have evolved out of sea creatures. But Albee leaves the issues unanswered. Humans have to remember that they are not the privileged species but are responsible species. They should not only treat animals as just another species but also respect them as a co-inhabitant. Hence the subtle message is "Be eco-centered instead of self-centered". With *Seascope*, the future of the theatre as well as environment is to be bright since the theater has started thinking and looking beyond humans. *Eco-theater* is by humans but not only for humans but for entire *eco-system*.

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