



HOPE AMIDST TRAGEDY: EDWARD ALBEE'S TRAGIC VISION IN *THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA*

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ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century human life is not so much faced with the great issues of humanity or dignity as with a crisis that is directly related to the human life in consumerist, materialistic and individualistic social system. Edward Albee in his plays brings out the crisis of modern human life. The crisis of modern human life is related to the lack of communication, individualism, materialism, alienation and lack of motivation for living life. Albee explores the tragedy of the modern man in a very sensitive and comprehensive way. From the beginning of his career his ears were very sensitive to the voice of anguish of human life.

INTRODUCTION

However in the present play, Albee presents the classical concept of tragedy and introduces the play as the subtitle - the definition of the tragedy because in the Greek tragedy means "goat-song" The origin of the word "tragedy" is shrouded in historical obscurity, but it is believed it first emerged in Athens around 533 B.C. Its most commonly known definition refers to the sacrifice of a goat in the vegetation and fertility rituals associated with the god Dionysus. It is also described as a mimetic representation of the death, mourning, and restoration of a vegetation god. Thus tragedy means bestiality, murder and bloodshot.

The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? explores the theme of sexual fantasy, frustration, and domestic anguish. The play opens with the conversation between Martin and Stevie. They have been enjoying a happy married life with their son named Billy and journalist Ross under the same roof. Domestic instability occurs when Martin falls in love with a goat. This domestic instability prevails till the separation of Martin from goat. The play focuses on the bestial act itself that Albee became discouraged. The play isn't about goat-fucking. It is the story of true love between man and beast. The play presents taboo sexuality, domestic instability and the murder of the goat. Albee highlights that Martin's bestial infidelity is not as responsible as his treatment at the hands of his lifelong best friend, Ross for the dissolution of his marriage to the intelligent, devoted Stevie, and the murder of the goat.

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1P a g e

In the present play Albee follows the traditions of the classical tragedy. In the classical drama tragedy was related to the person of higher class like kings, queens, generals and courtiers or some other members of the upper class. The reasons of meeting the tragic fate in the classical heroes and heroines were also the serious issues of life. The classical writers employed “Hamartia” in their plays. They believed that in tragedy, the tragic hero falls into misery through *hamartia*, a mistake or error that result in irreparable damage to the life of the protagonist and/or the lives of their loved ones. *Hamartia* or ‘tragic error’ brings to the fore the fragility and contingency of human life. In Macbeth Shakespeare highlights the ambitious nature of Macbeth as the tragic flaw. Albee also introduces hamartia as the feeling of homosexuality (his love for a pastoral American ideal, manifested by a goat named Sylvia.) in the character of Martin. Martin is a 50-year-old architect who possesses a perfect domestic life. He is the epitome of the American success story, a Pritzker Prize-winning architect who has been recently commissioned to design a \$27 billion "World City" in Kansas. , Martin’s career is at its zenith. He is a world-renowned architect who, in addition to his prestigious prize as Ross mentions:

Three things happened to you this week, Martin. You became the youngest person ever to win the Pritzker prize, architecture’s version of the Nobel. Also this week you were chosen to design the world city, the two hundred billion dollar dream city of the future, financed by us electronics technology and set to rise in the wheat fields of our middle west. Also this week, you celebrated your fifteen birthday. Happy birthday, Martin, and congratulations!(*The Goat P.553*)

He is a financially successful family man with an adoring wife and an intelligent, thoughtful son, Billy. Billy, who is a homosexual, helps complete the portrait of the hip, modern family. As Martin is quick to point out to Ross, Billy is a “real cute kid . . . bright as you’d ever want, gay as the nineties” (*The Goat P.551*). Unquestionably, Martin and Stevie’s relationship with their son is a loving and supportive. They have happy life under the same roof. But Martin’s domestic life is shattered and he becomes the tragic hero by the revelation that he is having an extramarital affair with a shameless livestock hussy named Sylvia. He has only to explain to his best friend, wife, and son the nature of his barnyard dalliance.

Martin believes in dalliance but the first major choice made within the play’s timeframe is Martin’s, when he relents to Ross’ probing and admits to his affair with Sylvia. However, since that choice is made in the confidence of what Martin believes is a friend he can rely upon, it requires less consideration than the next, which is made by Ross. Excluding any argument about what he should or shouldn’t do, Ross possesses the freedom to choose whether to inform Stevie of Martin’s affair with Sylvia.

“Ross: Jesus. You have to tell Stevie.

Martin: I can't! I couldn't do that!

Ross: You have to . . . and if you don't I will". (The Goat P.570)

Martin's bestiality brings the disorders and doubts amongst the members in the well-ordered family life and compels them to understand the reality of life. Stevie, for example, when confronted with her husband's unimaginable act, gets shocked and asks herself if Martin has the same feelings and love for goat as his devotee wife. For the animal he has lost all the morality and has become a "goatfucker." When her husband's love becomes equally shared between woman and four-legged beast, She doubts on her purity and curses her womanhood.

Fundamentally like Stevie, Goat will want its own identity. It has also the feelings of love. It seeks sympathy from human beings. It has no sense of sexual relations with a human being. It is the selfishness of human beings that gets him indulged in the act of bestiality. Martin maintains relation with the goat for his own pleasure. This relation leads on the path to the grave.

The play opens with the conversation between Martin and Stevie Gray's lushly appointed suburban drawing room. Martin is at the height of his powers, both personally and professionally. His best friend, and local broadcast journalist, Ross, has arrived to interview him for a television segment in commemoration of Martin's acceptance of the Pritzker Prize for architecture. As Ross remarks, "Some people matter in extraordinary ways, in ways which affect the lives of the rest of us— enrich them, inform them. Some people, I guess, are, well .

. . . more extraordinary than others. Martin Gray—whom you've met on this program before—is such a man, such a person" (The Goat P.55).

Unlike most of Albee's married couples, Martin and Stevie have an authentic bond. Their marriage is flawless. They care for one another from the core of the hearts. As Stevie comments later in the play, "You'd never imagine that a marriage could be so perfect" (*The Goat P.597*). They have an ideal child named Billy. He is full of sympathy for his parents. Stevie is true to Martin. She loves him deeply. She says:

"I rose into love with you and have—what—cherished? you all these years, been proud of all you've done . . . been . . . well, happy. I guess that's the word. No, I don't guess; I know . . . I've married the man I loved and I've been . . . so . . . happy" (The Goat P.594). Like Stevie, Martin also exposes his love feelings for her when he states: "You're the love of my life, the mother of my handsome and worrisome son, my playmate, my cook, my bottle washer do you?"(The Goat P.542).

In brief they have deep feelings of love for each other. They have no destructive illusions like George and Martha. They never misguide each other like Boy and Girl, yet their happiness is short-lived only because of hamartia.

Martin and Stevie are honest for each other, they respect each other and they are dedicated to each other. But when he falls in love with the goat, he feels restless, and expresses concern about losing his memory:

The play explores the underlying cause of Martin's anxiety. When Stevie comes to know of Martin's affair with the goat in spite of their marriage, she is filled with pain and shame and makes fun of Martin. Stevie becomes disconnected from her husband and asked questions about it questions, Martin becomes evasive, and launches into a mock confession of his affair.

Martin has the better realization of the American Dream. He is materialistically satisfied. He is uneasy with his role as architect of the America imagination and feels an intense spiritual disconnect from the society which he is, ostensibly, helping to shape. He is shocked about his fall of his from social standing. When Ross desperately attempts to keep the interview to know Martin's increasing melancholy – "What an honor! What a duo of honors! You're at the pinnacle of your success, Martin," Martin responds, "You mean it's all downhill from here?" (*The Goat* P.554). This line is an echo of an earlier one in which Stevie asks Martin about his feelings of foreboding—"The sense that everything going right is a sure sign that everything's going wrong?" (*The Goat* P.557). Martin sees the destruction he is about to bring. For him, a professional pinnacle is merely a harbinger of unavoidable decline. His material success, of which Ross is in constant awe, is merely a mask for his growing sense of isolation and lack of emotional fulfillment.

When Martin reluctantly admits about the affair with goat, Ross does not condemn Martin for his infidelity. Rather, he appears proud of Martin's sexual exploration and happily reminisces about a past extra-marital affair of his own. When Martin reveals that he found the object of his affection on a farm, Ross hungrily imagines a fantasy scenario. "Daisy Mae," he says, "Blonde hair down to her shoulders, big tits in the calico, bare midriff, blonde down at the navel, piece a straw in her teeth . . ." (*The Goat* P.567). Dismissive of Martin's professed spiritual awakening, Ross dwells in the carnal. Even when his friend ecstatically protests,

"Yes! Yes! I am! I'm in love with her. Oh, Jesus! Oh, Sylvia! Oh, Sylvia!" Ross can only imagine a lurid fantasy (*The Goat* P.568). It is not until Martin presents the other man with a picture of his paramour that the reality sinks in. "THIS IS A GOAT," he exclaims, "YOU'RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU'RE FUCKING A GOAT!" His secret now laid bare, Martin can only respond, "Yes" (*The Goat* P.578).

Though Martin urges Ross not to disclose his infidelity publically yet Ross writes Stevie a letter detailing his affair with Sylvia. Stevie reads portions of the letter aloud, subsequently illustrating the superficiality of its author's character. "Because I love you both—respect you, love you—I can't stay silent at a time of crisis for your both, for Martin's public image and your own deeply devoted ..." (*The Goat P.578*).

Stevie has full faith in her husband. She thinks that Martin will mend himself for his self respect and family's welfare but she gets only frustration. Stevie's struggle is the focus of the second scene. Having been forsaken by her husband for a barnyard animal, she interrogates the validity of her own identity. Her confusion deepens when Martin protests that he still loves her.

STEVIE: You love me. Let's see if I understand the phrase. You love me.

MARTIN: Yes!

STEVIE: But I'm a human being; I have only two breasts; I walk upright; I give milk only on special occasions; I use the toilet. You love me? I don't understand.

MARTIN: Oh, God!

STEVIE: How can you love me when you love so much less? (The Goat P.575)

Her husband's love for goat and his compels Stevie to think. Stevie is less concerned with the actual act of bestiality than by its implications for her sense of self. She wonders, if Martin could so cavalierly cavort, sexually, with a goat, what does that say about her relative worth—her value as a wife and partner? She also questions the very foundation of their marriage. What had previously appeared to be a union free of illusion—one built on honesty and tenderness—may have been the ultimate deception. She comments, "We all prepare for jolts along the way, disturbances of the peace, the lies, the evasions, the infidelities—if they happen. .. we think we can handle everything, whatever comes along, but we don't know, do we?" (*The Goat P.580*).

Additionally, Stevie delivers an indirect admonishment to the audience. Just as Baby's Man commented on our tendency to disassociate ourselves from the painful experiences of others, Stevie reminds us that, regardless of one's progressive self-image, there are times when we will be utterly unprepared for the ways in which our tolerance is tested. Husband and wife are working at cross-purposes. For Stevie, the conversation centers on the pain she feels and the utter abandonment and disillusionment her husband's affair has caused. For Martin, however, the desire to make Stevie comprehend his actions is an issue. He seems unable to perceive how his actions have caused his wife so much suffering. For him, his love for Sylvia was an inescapable force, and their sexual congress was a near-religious experience. He has become a quintessentially isolated Albee character. Alone in his passions and seemingly rejected by

his wife, Martin's only hope is to be understood. He and Stevie stare at one another across the abyss of their shattered marriage, unable to make the other understand the loss they both feel. Albee was surprised at the reaction the kiss elicited. In one interview he remarked, "A lot of people got hysterical and walked out. People didn't walk out at the revelation that [Martin] was having an affair with a goat, but when the gay son kissed his father. What kind of a country do we live in?" ("Albee, Unafraid"). Hoping that kiss would act as a catalyst for audience self-examination rather than disgust, the playwright has Ross re-enter soon after the two men break their embrace. His immediate, snarling response is that Martin is "sick, sick, sick" (*The Goat P.*).

Edward Albee wants to expose that how the overbearing nature of the spouse creates communication and gap misunderstanding between newly married couples. The lack of communication and understanding bring the bitterness that is the source of hatred and violence between husband and wife.

Albee also focuses on the hidden and terrifying secrets of a wife who lives in a twisted marital relation within a failed marriage. Gillian is aware that her marriage is unstable, yet she believes that even "a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all." Although Gillian is afraid of solitude and isolation yet she doesn't mend her domineering nature and doesn't try to probe into the reasons for her unsuccessful marriage.

In the present play Edward compares marriage with a garden. Marriage and the garden resemble a sort of a contact, marriage is the source of communication between husband and wife, and the garden is the source of deep contact between the land and the one who scatters the seeds, so it is important to preserve the form of the marriage and garden otherwise everything would fall apart.

Jack wants an active communication while Gillian yearns for any kind of communication, whether by love or hatred, because this communication means that she is still alive. Gillian, hence, thinks that her existence as a woman, and eventually as a wife, is determined by her relation to Jack. She realizes that her choice to be with Jack for this relation gives a meaning to her existence. Her marriage, despite all the frustrations and disappointments, constructs her being. After all any human being without relationships would be a mere scarecrow in the wilderness. It is worth mentioning here that Gillian's conception about the idea of her existence does not mean that she has a dependant identity. She admits that her marriage has made her an individual. She sees that "marriage does not make two people two" (*Marriage Play P.304*). Gillian and Jack are two separate entities for they "have not become each other"; they've become themselves (*Marriage Play P.304*). Both husband and wife have their own ways of life and their own ways of thinking. They do not meet but in their marriage under the shelter of their frustrated relation. Her marriage gives her the chance to choose. She has chosen to lead this tedious life rather than to have a blank terrifying life, "When two people

choose to be together though they're strong enough to be alone, then you have a good marriage... We've not compensate, we've complemented [each other]" (*Marriage Play* P.304).

Gillian can be identified with Albee's standard in life. She experiences the cruelty of life as a means to keep her alert and aware of her situation. Albee says, "The journey through consciousness should be participated in as fully as possibly by the individual, no matter how dangerous or cruel or terror-filled that experience may be." Gillian, therefore, believes that she should accept the absurdities of her marriage, symbolizing life itself, as they are, a means to re-establish communication and mutual contact. She, thus, strives to maintain the form of her marriage with its frustrations. She instinctively bears a hope for a better day to come. In his interview with Emily Mann, Albee asserted that "one must have dreams, even though false, in order to survive ... It's okay to have false illusion as long as you know they are false."

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