



## **EXPLORING THE CONVERGENCE OF EDWARD ALBEE'S EXISTENTIALISM AND BUDDHIST IDEOLOGIES IN SELECTED PLAYS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the intersection of Edward Albee's existentialist plays and Buddhist ideologies, revealing a profound resonance between the two. Through a critical analysis of selected plays, including "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", "A Delicate Balance", "The Zoo Story", "The Sandbox", "The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?", and "The Play About the Baby", this study demonstrates how Albee's work critiques the notion of a fixed self, reflects the impermanent nature of reality, and confronts the human condition of suffering, desire, and attachment. By examining the convergence of Albee's absurdist theatre and Buddhist teachings, this research offers new insights into the playwright's oeuvre and the universal human experiences that underlie his work.

**Key words:** Buddhist ideologies, Existentialism, Absurdist theatre, Suffering, Desire, Attachment etc.

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### **Introduction**

Edward Albee, a prominent figure in American absurdist theatre, has long been fascinated by the

human condition, crafting plays that probe the complexities and mysteries of existence. His works, such as *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"* (1962) and *"A Delicate Balance"* (1966), have been characterized by their existentialist themes, absurdity, and critiques of societal norms (Barnett, 2008). Interestingly, Albee's existentialist explorations bear striking similarities to Buddhist ideologies, which also question the nature of self and reality. As Buddhist scholar, Robert Thurman (2013), notes, "The Buddhist teaching of 'no-self' is not a denial of the existence of a self, but rather a denial of the existence of a permanent, unchanging self" (p. 23). Similarly, Albee's plays often blur the lines between reality and illusion, challenging the notion of a fixed self.

### **The Absurd and the Illusion of Self: Deconstructing Identity in Albee's Plays**

Edward Albee's *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"* (1962) and *"A Delicate Balance"* (1966) exemplify the absurdist tradition, challenging the notion of a fixed, essential self. This analysis explores how these plays reflect the Buddhist concept of (no-self) and deconstruct traditional notions of identity. In *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"*, the characters' games and illusions blur the lines between reality and fantasy, mirroring the impermanent and fluid nature of self (Albee, 1962). George and Martha's relationship, in particular, exemplifies the instability of identity, as they constantly shift roles and personas (Barnett, 2008, p. 123). This fluidity resonates with the Buddhist teaching of no-self, which rejects the idea of a permanent, unchanging self (Thurman, 2013, p. 25).

Similarly, *"A Delicate Balance"* critiques the notion of a fixed self through the character of Julia, who returns home after a mental breakdown, challenging the family's perceptions of her and themselves (Albee, 1966). Julia's presence disrupts the family's carefully constructed illusions, revealing the fragility of their identities (Solomon, 2010, p. 145). This disruption parallels the Buddhist concept of no-self, highlighting the impermanence and instability of self. In both plays, Albee employs absurdity to expose the illusion of a fixed self, echoing the Buddhist teaching of no-self. By deconstructing traditional notions of identity, Albee's works reveal the fluid, ever-changing nature of self.

### **Impermanence and the Fleeting Nature of Reality**

Edward Albee's *"The Zoo Story"* (1958) and *"The Sandbox"* (1959) exemplify the absurdist tradition,

exploring the impermanent nature of reality and human existence. This analysis examines how these plays reflect the Buddhist concept of impermanence, highlighting the fleeting nature of reality and human connection.

In "*The Zoo Story*", the characters' encounters in the park reveal the impermanence of human relationships and the fragility of communication (Albee, 1958). Jerry's desperate attempts to connect with Peter ultimately fail, illustrating the transience of human bonds (Barnett, 2008, p. 90). This impermanence resonates with the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, which emphasizes the constantly changing nature of reality (Thurman, 2013, p. 30).

Similarly, "*The Sandbox*" critiques the notion of a fixed reality through the character of Grandma, who embodies the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death (Albee, 1959).

The play's use of absurdity and illogic further underscores the fleeting nature of reality, mirroring the Buddhist concept of impermanence (Solomon, 2010, p. 120).

In both plays, Albee employs absurdity to expose the impermanence of reality, echoing the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. By highlighting the fleeting nature of human connection and reality, Albee's works reveal the impermanent and constantly changing nature of existence.

### **Albee's Exploration of Suffering and Attachment**

Edward Albee's "*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*" (2002) and "*The Play about the Baby*" (1998) delve into the human experiences of suffering, desire, and attachment, resonating with the Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. This discussion examines how these plays reflect the Buddhist concepts of suffering, craving, and attachment, as well as the path to liberation.

In "*The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*", Martin's desire for Sylvia, a goat, exemplifies the Buddhist concept of craving, which leads to suffering (Albee, 2002). Martin's attachment to Sylvia also illustrates attachment, which perpetuates the cycle of suffering (Barnett, 2008, p. 200). This play reflects the First Noble Truth, suffering, which arises from craving and attachment.

Similarly, "*The Play about the Baby*" critiques the attachment to identity, relationships, and

possessions, echoing the Buddhist teaching of attachment (Albee, 1998). The play's use of absurdity and illogic highlights the impermanence of all phenomena, resonating with the Second Noble Truth, the origin of suffering (Solomon, 2010, p. 180). Both plays suggest that liberation from suffering requires a path similar to the Eightfold Path, which emphasizes right understanding, right intention, and right action (Thurman, 2013, p. 40). Albee's works imply that recognizing the impermanence of all phenomena and letting go of attachment can lead to the cessation of suffering.

## Conclusion:

This analysis has explored the intersection of Edward Albee's plays with Buddhist ideologies, revealing a profound resonance between the two. Through a critical examination of *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"*, *"A Delicate Balance"*, *"The Zoo Story"*, *"The Sandbox"*, *"The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?"*, and *"The Play About the Baby"*, this study has demonstrated how Albee's work engages with key Buddhist concepts such as no-self, impermanence, and the Four Noble Truths.

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