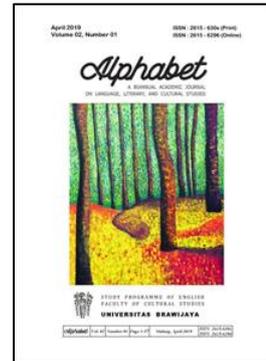


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# Hidden Political Agenda in Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*

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## Abstract

A case of zoophile, a sexual attraction toward animals, is considered rare to be talked within the scope of the queer theory. The wrong prejudices and discrimination received by zoophile also create a step backwards in getting acceptance from society compared to other sexual deviant orientation. As the issue keeps going, Edward Albee seizes his chance to shake the society's mindset in reconsidering the deeds of zoophile through a drama entitled *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*. He creates a character named Martin, who lives as a zoophile differently from the preconceived notion of society raising a political interest to see a zoophile as a part of the society. This research attempts to investigate the political purposes behind the normalization of queerness in Martin's character to reject intolerance and discrimination in society. The findings indicate that a political interest does exist from the presentation of Martin, which exhibits that a zoophile might have the same normal life as other people mostly do. This case of zoophile serves as an example of a minority case usually exposed to intolerance and discrimination. This research strongly argues that Albee tries to challenge the general perspective towards minority group in America, which sees them as aliens or a source of the plague. They can be anyone with a "normal" life; thus, they deserve equal treatment and not always to be considered *as the others*.

**Keywords:** minority, equality, zoophile, queer politics, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*.

In *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002), Edward Albee comes with an extreme case in which he was portraying a life of one deviant sexual orientation called zoophile, a term referred to someone who is attracted to have a romantic feeling or to commit sexual intercourse with an animal (Veid-Menon, 2012). This drama is not just unique for portraying a rare theme of sexual desire, zoophilia. In an interview on the first production of this play, Albee explained that rather than solely focusing on bestiality, the play was supposed to make people think "freshly and newly" about what they "can't imagine and what they have buried deep as being intolerable and insufferable..." (Rose, 2002, 01:13). In the play, the main character, Martin, is someone as familiar as others and different from the image built by a society which focuses and labels a zoophile with harmful prejudices. Arguably, dramatizing a story of a zoophile who is also a part of a

seemingly ordinary, happy marriage and is a successful individual, Albee hopes to "shock and disgust" some of the audience (Drukman & Diby, 2002). Albee asks the audience to think about how they will react should such extremities happen to them. Meanwhile, the goat can stand for two things: the animal and a person or situation serving as a scapegoat, and being scapegoat is the condition that is usually encountered by anyone belonging to minority groups in America. Martin's life in the drama suggests a metaphor for any minority in the U.S., usually thought as bad omens, the ones to blame for anything wrong to happen in the country.

Many argue that social commentary has characterized Albee's body of works. He criticizes American values in some plays such as *The Zoo Story* (1959), *The Sandbox* (1959), and *The American Dream* (1961). A story of couples engaging in one night of unrestrained

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drinking, malicious games and painful confrontations fills in the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). *A Delicate Balance* (1966) and *Three Tall Women* (1994), both a Pulitzer Prize winner, show Albee's perceptions on his mother and interaction of three women at different stages of life. *Me, Myself, & I* (2007) complicates the relationship between a mother and her twin sons (Tikkanen, 2019).

Albee admits the political nature of his works, including *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*. In this play, he wanted to make people examine what they, individually or as a society, think about the nature of love, the limits of their tolerance, and their consciousness and to examine themselves as a society (Rose, 2002). This article will extend this issue by exploring the political motive in the presentation of zoophile in this drama. If we follow Jagose (2005) in conceptualizing of zoophile, it can include a marginal sexual self-identification. The characterization of Martin might serve as the representative of a minority group member in nowadays America.

Zoophile is a rare theme of sexual interest, which raises a question of how it can be involved in queer theory. It is suggestive to observe that in the history of queer, the platform of queer has currently expanded to a deviant sexual orientation. Klages (cited in Harris, 2005) emphasized that queer theory is a disciplined study of theoretical speculation which comes out for analyzing the case of gay/lesbian that crosses the normative social construction in which, currently, the investigation expands into deviant sexual behavior. In extending the concept of queer theory, queer politics emerges to find a political reason in gaining societal acceptance behind an act and behavior which might reject intolerance and discrimination by normalizing their queerness (Warner, 1993). For example, to be a zoophile, along with this identity, a person might have a hidden purpose to gain acceptance in society; queer politics is helpful in revealing the political agenda in this drama by analyzing the presence of Martin as a zoophile as the general example of the life of minority group members in America. Like other minority groups,

zoophilic people must accept the general mindset of being *the others*, the marginalized.

In the first scene, Martin reveals this truth to his wife, Stevie, and his best friend, Ross, in separate conversations. Unfortunately, his wife considers his truth as a joke. His best friend reacts differently to respond to this revelation. In the second scene, the conflict emerges when Ross chooses to report the truth to his wife through email. The conflict escalates when his gay son, Billy, is involved in accusing him as goatfucker. In the last scene, the story ends sadly with the death of Sylvia, the goat, which suggestively acts for the sexual partner.

## TWO DIFFERENT QUALITIES IN MARTIN'S REPRESENTATION

In analyzing this drama, I find out that there are some presentations of Martin, which may contain political interest in influencing the society's mindset in order to alleviate prejudices and discrimination upon the zoophile. In doing so, I divide the explanation based on two different parts: (1) the presentation of Martin, an individual who has a quality of living as an ordinary person and (2) his presentation as an individual who can have high achievement.

### An Ordinary Individual in Martin's Representation

This drama portrays the ordinary life of a zoophile through the character of Martin. According to Cambridge Dictionary (2008) "ordinary" means being normal or undergoing everyday things. The "ordinary" also means common when there is a condition that reality does not reach the expectation of people. Hence, the standard of being an ordinary person is when a person does common things which conform to the reality of most people generally do.

The play indicates both positive and negative qualities of Martin, in which there are four positive and two negative traits portrayed. Concerning the positive traits of Martin, they comprise his honest portrayals, his genuine traits, his cheerful behaviors, and his positive

depictions. Cambridge Dictionary provides with indicators and definitions of those terms. For example, the indicator of being an honest person is concerning someone ability in telling the truth because a trusted person does not likely steal, cheat or lie. Meanwhile, “genuine” can be something which reveals the real one of what is precisely to be, so a person who has a genuine emotion or trait becomes a sincere and honest person (Cambridge Dictionary, 2008). By using the definitions, Martin is an honest and genuine person. The following is one of the dialogues from the script which shows Martin’s positive character.

MARTIN. (*Ibid.*) Ohhhhh! (*Considers it.*) Right; yes. Who else can I be cranky with?  
 ROSS. Stevie?  
 MARTIN. Ya know, Stevie doesn’t take too well to cranky anymore. **If she’s developed a flaw it’s that. “Don’t be so cranky, Martin.”**  
 ROSS. Pity. (*They’ve gentled down.*)  
 MARTIN. (*Shrugs.*) Well ... you know.  
 ROSS. (*Pause.*) So you’re in love.  
 MARTIN. With Stevie? Sure! Twenty-two years now. (Albee, 2003, scene 1, p. 16-17)

The dialogue indicates that Martin is honest and genuine. He complains about his wife, with whom he cannot do silly things together, unlike what he does with his best friend, Ross. On the other hand, the dialogue also shows a positive trait which reveals his feeling to love his wife for a long time spontaneously. These positive qualities suggest a political commitment aiming to send a message for society to humanize the life of a zoophile. This drama attempts to build sympathy by modifying society’s mindset with positive ways to view a zoophile. Thus, it might have an impact to gain societal acceptance for the existence of a zoophile. For example, some wrong prejudices which label zoophiles as pathetic, primitive and dangerous can shift as the society might increasingly accept the existence of zoophile while learning a new perspective that a zoophile can also experience the same life as an ordinary man like them. Veid-Menon (2012), who worked on the same theme of research, suggests that is how queer politics work, by building a platform for a zoophile to come out in public without forcing people to accept their sexual practice directly. A zoophile may eventually be accepted even though society continually feels uncomfortable with sexual

practice (Veid-Menon, 2012). In other words, queer politic exists behind the presentation of the positive qualities because it tries to allow space for the society to reconsider a zoophile as an ordinary man who deserves to be treated equally with others.

Next, the play also presents Martin’s forgetful and sensitive traits, which are two of his negative qualities. ‘Forgetful’ relates to frequent failure to remember something while being ‘sensitive’ happens when one is feeling upset, embarrassed or angry because of what other people have done to him/her (Cambridge Dictionary, 2008). The following dialogue shows the negative quality of Martin.

STEVIE. (*Calling offstage.*) What time are they coming? (*No response.*) Martin? What are they coming?  
 MARTIN. (*Offstage.*) What? (*Entering.*) What?  
 STEVIE. (*A little smile; a slowish statement.*) What ... time ... are ... they ... coming.  
 MARTIN. Who? (*Recalling.*) Oh! Oh. (*Look at watch.*) Soon; very soon. Why can’t I remember anything?  
 STEVIE. (*Finishing flowers.*) Why can’t you remember?  
 MARTIN. Anything; nothing; can’t remember a thing. This morning — so far! — I couldn’t remember where I’d put the new head for the razor; I couldn’t recall Ross’s son’s name — still can’t; two cards in my jacket make no sense to me whatever, and I’m not sure I know why I came in here. (Albee, 2003, scene 1, p.5)

The same idea goes with his sensitive behavior depicted in the scene when he is angry that his best friend has betrayed his trust by telling his secret to his wife.

STEVIE. (*Objective.*) Let’s review Ross’ letter, shall we? (*Waves it.*)  
 MARTIN. (*Hurt and enraged.*) How could he!! How could he do such a thing?!!  
 STEVIE. (*Ice.*) How could he — best friend to both of us, a man you would trust with your wife — no?  
 MARTIN. ... sure; sure ...  
 STEVIE. How could Ross write me this letter? (*Waves it again.*)  
 MARTIN. YES!!  
 STEVIE. (*Composed; cool; quating.*) “... because I love you, Stevie, as much as I love Martin, because I love you both — respect you, love you — I can’t stay silent at a time of crisis for you both, for Martin’s public image, and your own deeply devoted ...”  
 MARTIN. BULLSHIT!! (Albee, 2003, scene 2, p. 24)

Having negative traits may have no significant effect to influence society to alleviate prejudices and discrimination. Combining Martin’s positive and negative qualities is a vital part to argue that a zoophile is an ordinary man. In this case, depicting a condition that people have weaknesses upon their strengths is suggestive. Queer politics works better in this drama when both negative and positive traits combine the character of a zoophile. Focusing only on positive traits, on the other hand, may not be as effective because it

might raise an issue for asking a special treatment for a zoophile in order to get societal acceptance. Seidman (2001, cited in Veid-Menon, 2012) states that queer politics asks for assimilation without challenging others who belong to normal. In this reason, the combination of positive and negative qualities suggests an excellent example of queer politics which exists to influence society indirectly for thinking of zoophile as an ordinary man.

In this drama, Martin embodies a person who has three different social roles: a husband to his wife, Stevie, a father to his son, Billy, and a friend to his best friend, Ross. In the drama, within six occasions he takes a role as a father, and three times it suggests his role as a friend. The following is about his social role fulfilment while being a father to his son.

**BILLY.** That's what I thought, and you've figured out that raising a kid does *not* include making him into a carbon copy of you, that you've letting me think you're putting up with me being gay far better than you probably really are.

MARTIN. Oh, now ...

**BILLY.** Thank you, by the way.

MARTIN. It's the least.

**BILLY.** (*Nodding.*) Right. (Albee, 2003, scene 3, p.48-49)

According to Rosenberg and Wilcox (2006), a father should be a serving guide to the outside world, protecting and providing, and disciplining his son correctly, including being a role model to his son. Tischler (2007) also emphasizes a social role exists to set the obligation of people according to which status they are associated with a group. In this case, Martin is presented as an ordinary man since he has fulfilled his social roles.

Accordingly, the political interest of this drama was in the intention of the play in raising awareness that zoophiles can have a balanced life as the ordinary people. Also, Seidman (2001, cited in Veid-Menon, 2012) says that the morality of deviants which exist in their routine life contains a political purpose that can be examined further in the exploration of queer politics. The person identified with zoophiles can succeed in fulfilling his social roles such as the case with Martin. As a result, queer politics uncovers the aims of his normalizing portrayal to gain equal treatment in society.

### A High Achieving Individual in Martin's Representation

Martin also has achieved something as an individual as someone smart and successful. Cambridge Dictionary (2008) formulates the indicator of a smart person as someone's ability to have a high intelligence compared to others. Meanwhile, a successful person is a person who achieves the results wanted and creates more appreciation, which makes the person popular, including having more money. The following is an example of those indicators in the presentation of Martin.

**ROSS.** ... (*Announcer Voice.*) Three things happened to you this week, Martin. You become 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 U.S. Electronics Technology and set to rise in the wheatfields of our Middle West. Also, this week, you celebrated your fiftieth birthday. Happy Birthday, Martin, and Congratulations! (Albee, 2003, scene 1, p. 13)

In this dialogue, Ross acknowledges Martin's smart ability for becoming the youngest architecture winning the Pritzker Prize, the architecture's version of the Nobel and for his working to design The World City and for gaining his financial success as well. In this way, Martin smashes away a strong opinion that rejects zoophiles because they just different species as which destroy the anthropocentric order (Monikka Bakke, 2009 cited in Veid-Menon, 2012). This drama shows a zoophile as an ordinary person that contributes to society, such as designing the city and gaining a prestigious award like in Martin. A sexual preference, and in turn, a sexual desire should not be the judging standard to value an individual. It counteracts discrimination against the minorities such as zoophiles as the story of the drama does not suppose Martin needs to be put in jail because of his sexual practice, for instance.

The characterization of Martin as the main character whose both positive and negative qualities like other ordinary people and having outstanding quality is a way for Albee tries to ally with the position of most minority groups in America. He likely needs to show that Martin, that is a zoophile—a part of the minority group is not an alien. He is like ordinary people whose both positive and negative qualities,

even as an architect, he deserves to be awarded a Nobel-level prize that not everyone can achieve it. It is to say that not all everyone who is regarded belongs to a specific minority group fit with the usual negative stereotypes – or Allport (1991) termed it as “thinking ill” toward others—labelled to them. He also has stated that this thinking ill is an elliptical expression that must be understood to include feelings of scorn or dislike, fear and aversion, as well as various forms of antipathetic conducts (1991, p. 7). Sometimes, the ill thinker has no first-hand experience on which to base the judgement. In the case of prejudice against a particular race group, the example is thinking ill towards African-Americans who are usually labelled as violent. So, when one is around, especially in out-group setting, e.g. White neighborhood, he will be a source of fear for violent action and the Whites starts feeling uncomfortable and threatened. Interestingly, this does not only happen in America; the negative stereotypes against ones with darker complexion turns to be a global phenomenon. Someone with a dark complexion will usually receive more negative labels from others.

Martin, in Albee’s *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, is presented to have negative qualities, such as being forgetful and sensitive. Those qualities are “normal” human traits that can belong to everybody regardless of their social categories, from which Albee gives more emphasis on the positive qualities of Martin as part of a minority group member. For Albee, it is to say that anyone can be a zoophile – a member of any minority group. They can be your father, mother, neighbor, and not at all an alien even they can be one of the outstanding figures in the society. Martin here, as a zoophile, only functions as a metaphor for all minority groups in America for Albee to promote emancipation of the marginals. America in Albee’s perspective must be accommodative to the right of every individual, regardless of their social category, as it is one of their idealism that is explicitly mentioned in American Declaration of Independence – *that We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that their Creator endows them with*

*certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.* However, in the real minority groups member believe that they are still undergoing various kinds of discriminations in several fields. Based on the survey conducted for National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. The survey was conducted January 26 – April 9, 2017, among a nationally representative, probability-based telephone (cell and landline) sample of 3,453 adults age 18 or older. The survey included nationally representative samples of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, as well as white Americans; men and women, and LGBTQ adults. This report presents the results specifically for a nationally representative probability sample of 3,453 U.S. adults. The survey (*Discrimination in America: final summary*, 2018) results in the existence of the belief that all minority groups in America, generally experience discriminations against their group. Workplace discrimination is the most frequently reported experience within every group, but minority groups report far higher frequencies of this experience and the most frequent groups undergone the discriminations are Blacks and LGBTQ people. It is an example of the term Kammen (1970-71) had coined, *people of paradox*, for describing the changing tendencies in American policies, which seem to be contradictory to the ideals as mentioned in the proclamation. According to Kammen (1980), the ideals are not the bases for the policies anymore, and America turns to be more practical.

The play ends in an exciting scene, in which Sylvia –the goat– is killed. According to Albee, this is for showing a metaphor that the goat eventually becomes the *scapegoat*. It is in line with Allport’s explanation on the term in the case of prejudice against minority groups in America. Allport (1991, p.245-47) views that most of the times, minorities, especially those of religion, ethnic, and race, become the evils in some of the American social turbu-

lences. The murder of the goat also serves as an irony for how the "innocent" goat, not Martin, was terminated.

### CONCLUSION

Edward Albee, as the playwright, has the interest to show his opinion regarding the issue of a zoophile. He successfully uses the emotion of the audience to insert a message of acceptance toward a zoophile by escalating tolerance, sympathy, and understanding of society through some of the normalizing presentation of a zoophile. The results indicate that the political interest of this drama exists beyond the presentation of Martin as a zoophile. This research, moreover, may also support the playwright's statement that he intends to raise the awareness of the society regarding the social issue in his surrounding. Besides, the findings indicate the strength of Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* is on the way how Albee can maintain to insert a deep and concise meaning beyond the performance of the drama. Arguably, Albee tries to challenge the general perspective towards minority group in America by presenting that they are not always as strange as aliens, a source of plague or the ones to be blamed for any disaster to happen around. They can be any one of us who has a "normal" life; thus, they deserve equal treatment and not always to be treated as *the others*.

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