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**Social Class Segregation in American Society  
As Portrayed in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story***

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses about social class segregation in American Society especially in Manhattan as portrayed in *The Zoo Story* written by Edward Albee in 1958. The segregation can be seen through the social intercourse between Peter and Jerry, the main characters in this play. These characters are positioned in different social class because of the difference of educational and economic background. The writers use various sources to enrich their perspective and analysis taken from books and online sources. This research stands on the sociological side to view the problem why segregation may occur in real social life. To develop a good elaboration on the data found in the drama, the writers use sociological theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu that focuses on educational and economic capital as the main factors to segregate people in human society. After conducting the research, the writers found that there is a social class segregation in American Society which is depicted in *The Zoo Story*. This fact encourages most Americans to realize the what-so-called American Dream which aims to have a good and happy life based on freedom and equality in all aspects of life without considering the race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, employment status, and so on.

**Key Words:** *Social Class, Segregation*

**I. Introduction**

Segregation is a common social phenomenon related to the separation of someone with someone else or a social group with other social groups based on

particular social characteristics that distinguish them. Regarding the characteristics that may trigger the separation, Merry (2013:2) stated:

*“Segregation refers to separation — or spatial concentration — as defined by*

some characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, gender, religion, employment status, or language.”

This quotation proves that segregation occurs when people are grouped separately ascribed to their ethnicity, language, culture, and socioeconomic class. This separation may happen naturally because of the territorial occupation by a certain ethnic group in traditional rural regions or due to the too strong distinguishing characteristics that offer no opportunity for two or more groups to live together side by side in the same location as found in most urban areas around the globe. One of the characteristics is the difference of social class in society.

Social class segregation depicted in *The Zoo Story*, a great and famous play written by Edward Albee, underlines that this kind of phenomenon and practice happens throughout the history of mankind anywhere, including in America. Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928 in Washington D.C., United States of America (USA). He wrote some plays, such as *The Zoo Story* (1958), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *Seascape* (1972), and *Three Tall Women* (1994). Those masterpieces

brought him to be one of the most prominent playwright in America. He received a lot of awards like Pulitzer Prizes (1966, 1972, and 1994) and 2005 Tony Lifetime Achievement Award.

Albee's concern to the segregation practice inspired him to write *The Zoo Story* as social satire of American society through the main character, Peter and Jerry, as the portrait of the victims of segregation only because they have different educational and economic background. They are positioned differently in society an upper class man (Peter) and the lower class old boy (Jerry).

## **II. Review of Related Literature**

Segregation has a negative connotation. It is usually correlated to social inequality based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This inequality is considered as one of the triggers of some conflicts among people in society. In accordance with this fact, segregation creates two important impacts. First, a dominant group in society can decide whether others may enjoy equal civil status and freedom or not. Second, certain group gets advantages because of the power they have while other groups become

the victims of the exercise of power (Merry, 2013:23). A wealthier and more educated man will have a higher social status compared with a man who comes from poorer and less educated family. This different position classifies people in society in different social class.

Social class can be understood as social inequality related to power, authority, wealth, working and living conditions, life-style, education, religion, and culture (Cody, 2002:1). It became one of the main issues and a common term in nineteenth century as a result of the presence of industrial revolution. In general, there are three main social classes: lower class, middle class, and upper class. The lower class were suffered from a lot of exploitation and injustice because their rights as human beings were grabbed by the higher class. On the other hand, the upper class got every advantages in the relationship with the middle and the lower class people because they have more power, higher position, more money, and higher educational background.

In analyzing *The Zoo Story*, the writers used sociological theory by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, who introduced sociological theory

through three main concepts: *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. This theory highlights manner and disposition as the reason why someone acts or reacts in any situations and conditions of life. Both manner and disposition may create habits and perceptions since they are usually practiced repeatedly day by day from early childhood. The result of this long process and repetition is called habitus. Bourdieu (1993:5) defines habitus as set of dispositions which generated practices and perceptions. So, habitus has a tight connection to mental structure which is used to face social reality and a feel for the game (action) and a practical sense (reaction) in any fields in society. Furthermore, habitus can be understood as durable system of transposable dispositions in which it is structured. It is used as structuring structures and as principles to generate and organize manner and disposition. Habitus can be suited to its outcomes and even be practiced without presupposing a conscious aiming at the end or an express mastery in a certain field in order to reach a goal.

Someone acts in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations. Fields, like the economic field, the educational field,

the political field, the cultural field, and so on are defined as structured fields with their own laws of functioning and their own relations. It can be said that each of them has a structure which is determined by the relations between the positions someone occupies in the field. One's position can undergo a change if field's structure also changes. Bourdieu (1993:6) stated, "A field is a dynamic concept in that a change in agents' position necessarily entails a change in the field's structure." In addition, someone occupies different available positions or creates new positions in order to join in competition to control interests or resources which are specific to the field. Yet, if someone wants to enter a field (for example, the philosophical field, the scientific field, and so on), he has to have habitus which is used to influence someone to enter that field. Someone also has to have at least the minimum amount of knowledge, skill, or talent to be accepted in the field. It is because a field is used as an arena to practice knowledge, skill, or talent in the most advantageous way.

In fact, each person has capital which is different each another. It can be based on amount and kind of capital

itself. Someone who has little capital will be difficult to survive in a specific area compared with someone who has a little capital. Finally, capital is considered as a determinant to determine someone's social class in society.

Capital can be understood as an asset to take control a certain field in society. It is divided into two main groups; symbolic capital and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1993:7), "Symbolic capital refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition." It means that symbolic capital tends to economic capital. In other words, all of them show economic capital of someone in society. Meanwhile, According to Bourdieu (1993:7), "Cultural capital concerns forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions." It means that cultural capital tends to educational capital. In other words, all of them show educational capital of someone in society. Both of them are used and practiced in a field as an investment in order to get maximum benefit or profit from participation.

Moreover, knowledge and skill have important roles in someone's life especially to enter a field and to get a position in society. For example, someone who has much capital than someone else will be easier to be accepted in a specific field. As a result, someone who has not much capital will be difficult to adapt with the field. In conclusion, someone must have at least the minimum amount of knowledge and skill to fight and to survive in order to get a position in any fields.

### **III. Methods of the Research**

This research is conducted by using qualitative method because the writers are sure that it is the best way to uncover the problem of the research. Creswell (2012:16) stated, "Qualitative research is best suited to address a *research problem* in which you do not know the variables and need to explore."

There are some steps in doing this research. The first step is to do close reading several times in order to get a good understanding about the content of *The Zoo Story*. The second step is to collect the data from the material object and classify them into two main points: the background and the impacts of the

problem. And the third step is to interpret and to explain more about things questioned in the research problem.

To analyze the causes and the impacts of social class segregation in American society, the writers use sociological approach. This approach is considered as the best way to view the problems of segregation since it deals with the studies about society and humans' behavior. It tends to observe the consequences of social characteristics, like group pressure, authority, and power. It also explores the relationship between main characters in literary pieces and society.

Sociological concepts theorized by Pierre Bourdieu's about habitus, field, and capital are utilized as the tools to analyze the problem since Peter and Jerry, the main characters of the play, are segregated because of their different educational and economic capital. According to Bourdieu (1984:113), capital can be understood as potential talents that one has to occupy certain position in any human's life field in society.

## **IV. Findings**

### **4.1 The Causes of Social Class Segregation in American Society**

There are two causes of social class segregation in American society. They are the difference educational level and the difference of economic background. The first difference is caused by different educational capital such as knowledge, competence, and disposition. Meanwhile the second difference is caused by different economic capital such as prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor that one may possess.

#### **4.1.1 The Difference of Education Level**

Education played a very important role in American society since early colonial times. It is considered as a way of bettering oneself and his society because through education one can get better status, power, and knowledge (Stevenson, 1987:45-51). In other words, education is a capital or a door to have a better life.

Education refers to cultural capital in forms of knowledge, competences, or dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993:7). Knowledge, for instance, can strongly build human's mind set and behavior

that make someone different from others in a social community. Knowledge (as also competence and disposition) can be acquired through education. The higher education that one may have the more knowledge, competence, and disposition he gains. Related to this, people in society can be divided into two groups. They are people with high educational level who tend to have high position in society and people with low educational level who usually occupy the lower social class.

In *The Zoo Story*, Peter and Jerry are segregated by their educational level. Peter is an American man who has good and high education. On the other hand, Jerry is an American man who has low educational background. They have different educational capital that make them different. Peter's good educational capital can be seen from his ability to explain anything well. This quotation proves that Peters is an educated young man:

Jerry: ... What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away, What do they call those things?

Peter: {uncomfortable} A prosthesis?

Jerry: The very thing! A prosthesis.  
You're an educated man, aren't  
you? Are you a doctor?

Peter: Oh, no; no. I read about it  
somewhere: Time magazine, I  
think. {He turns to his book.}

Jerry: Well, Time magazine isn't  
for blockheads.

Peter: No, I suppose not.

This quotation mentions “*prosthesis*”, a very specific term in medical sphere related to an artificial body part, such as limb, heart, or breast implant (Online Oxford Dictionaries (2016:1). Although Peter is not a doctor but he knows the meaning of the term because he can read. And what he reads is Time magazine, a very popular source of information in America. “*Time Magazine*” as a reading material implies Peter’s educational level because Americans know that most of the readers of this magazine are educated men and women. On the contrary of it, common people who are labeled as “*blockhead*” do not read much. Reading activity is far from their daily habit. Therefore, they are not familiar with that kind of terminology.

To show his social class, Peter introduces himself to Jerry as follows,

Peter: I ... uh ... I have an  
executive position with a ... a

small publishing house. We ...  
uh ... we publish text books.

Jerry: That sounds nice; very  
nice ...

The position as an executive position indicates that Peter is an educated and skillful man. As an executive man Peter must be a staff with senior managerial responsibility in publishing house business. Only an educated man who has high educational level, like Peter, is able to get this position. Compared to Peters, Jerry has bad educational capital. Even though, he has no motivation to learn and to acquire knowledge to improve his personal competence.

#### **4.1.2 The Difference of Economic Background**

Industries grew rapidly in the United States of America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it was not followed by a wage increase for American employees that triggered the Great Railway Strike in 1877 in Pittsburgh. It was a conflict between American employees and American employers. They did protest and confront to their employers because of wage decrease. It caused a number of workers shot and some 2,000 railroad

cars were burned (Stevenson, 1987:64). The root of this conflict is the difference of economic capital between the employees and the employers.

Manhattan, the setting of place of *The Zoo Story*, is one of the big cities in the USA. This city is also affected by the conflict. Central Park, the place where Peter and Jerry meet each other in the beginning of the play, is one of the important places in Manhattan. There are a lot of important buildings, such as Broadway, Wall Street, Empire State Building, Greenwich Village, and Harlem. Therefore, it has been considered as one of the world's foremost commercial, financial, and cultural centers since 19<sup>th</sup> century (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016:1). Unfortunately, the presence of the important buildings in that area does not picture the welfare of some people who live in that location. The economic gap between the poor and the rich still exist in this region. In *The Zoo Story* such kind of gap is symbolized through the relation of Peter (a rich educated man) and Jerry (a poor uneducated young man). A rich man may have so many properties that make him living abundantly. Meanwhile a poor can mentioned all his possessions only in

seconds. Jerry, who represents the poor, said:

Jerry: ... What I do have, I have toilet articles, a few clothes, a hot plate that I'm not supposed to have, a can opener, one that works with a key, you know: a knife, two forks, and two spoons, one small, one large; three plates, a cup, a saucer, a drinking glass, two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books ...

This quotation represents the life of most poor people in America who only have very simple properties. Jerry's properties can be counted because he does not have enough money to buy more than what he has mentioned. Different from Jerry, Peter has whatever things he need to live comfortably. Yet more than material properties, Peter also has good reputation and success in life as a managerial staff in a publishing house from which he gets much money to buy his daily needs. It can be seen through a quotation below:

Jerry: ... You have TV, haven't you?

Peter: Why yes, we have two; one for the children.

Having two televisions indicates that Peter is a wealthy person. It is unusual for poor people like Jerry to have more than two TVs because it



does not belong to the daily basic needs common people try to fulfill day by day. For Peter, it is easy to have a television set because he has enough money to buy it. Having two televisions may also symbolize social status. A man who possesses luxurious properties is usually considered as someone with higher social class compared with someone who has nothing. So, it is clear here that having simple things which can be counted one by one in seconds and having luxurious properties more than one set really portrays one's economic class in society.

## **4.2 The Impacts of Social Class Segregation in American Society**

There are four impacts of social class segregation in American society. They are different behavior, different mindset, social jealousy, and psychological depression. All of them influence the relationship among members of society.

### **4.2.1 Different Behavior**

Education has an important role in building character, shaping personality, and preparing someone for a better future. People of higher

educational level tend to be more polite in speaking and action, have wider and deeper understanding on principle subject matter for life, have good commitment and motivation to be successful in their job or service, and usually occupy better position in society as leaders or any decision makers. On the other hand, people who have lower educational level are lack in many good and outstanding qualities mentioned above.

In *The Zoo Story*, Peter and Jerry have different behavior. Peter tends to be more polite. He chooses good and meaningful words to communicate his feeling and idea with other people. This consideration is supported by the following quotation:

Jerry: ... Well, boy, you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?

Peter: ... No, sir. Not from this.

The word "*sir*" shows that Peter tries to be polite to respond the question asked by Jerry about lung cancer. Perhaps Peter is upset to listen to the question but he is still able to control his anger to Jerry. The question contains something bad that all people will try so hard to avoid it. Actually it is not a good question to ask to a

friend. By asking that question, it seems as if Jerry expects Peter to suffer from that bad disease. Peter is perhaps angry with Jerry because of the question, but as an educated man he replies so politely. In this case, it is clear that the way one uses to express his thought and emotion represents the education level he has.

#### 4.2.2 Different Mindset

Education also has an important role to build a good mindset. People who have high educational level usually have a structured mindset. They tend to think logically using common senses based on the references they get from their personal education. On the other hand, people who have lower educational level tend to have an unstructured mindset and think illogically. In *The Zoo Story*, Peter and Jerry have different mindset. Peter tends to have a structured mindset. It can be seen through the quotation below:

Jerry: And you have children.

Peter: Yes; two.

Jerry: Boys?

Peter: No, girls ... both girls.

Jerry: But you wanted boys.

Peter: Well ... naturally, every man wants a son, but ...

Jerry: {lightly mocking} But that's the way the cookie crumbles?

Peter: {annoyed} I wasn't going to say that.

Peter and Jerry have different mindset on how many children one should have and what gender should there. For Jerry, having two girls is "the way the cookie crumbles" because Peter have to accept the girls although he expects to have boys also. In Jerry's mind, Peter must accept the fact, however undesirable. He mocks Peter as the cookie because Peter has no choice. Yet, as a structured mindset man, Peter reacts that he never thinks like that. For Peter, there is no difference between girl and boy.

Mindset is built through a long process. The process can be lasted through education and living environment in society. Good education and environment build a good mindset. On the other hand, bad education and chaotic environment will produce bad mindset. Peter learns many good things (knowledge and science) at school. His mindset is shaped well through school activity that is education. He also lives in a good environment consisting of upper class people who teach him how to

think logically and to behave in well-mannered attitude. It is quite different from Jerry who does not experience good education and lives in a bad housing compound consisting of lower class people.

#### **4.2.3 Social Jealousy**

Social jealousy is caused by a wide economic gap among people in society. People who come from lower economic level tend to be in social jealousy easily. It is because they have less access to the living standard that a social community members have in average. When the economic gap becomes wider and wider, the social jealousy will also increase. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry represents people of lower economic level who undergo social jealousy. It is supported by the quotation below:

Jerry: Why? You have everything you want in this world; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench.

Jerry's sentences shows that he is in a social jealousy toward Peter. He mentions some precious properties Peter has had to compare with the

bench that he wants to have. This comparison shows what is understood by most of poor people as social injustice. It is certain is that social injustice has become the reason of the emergence of social jealousy. On the other hand, people from better economic level consider that poverty is not caused by social injustice, but by lower class people's laziness. People like Jerry can actually get a better position in society through hard.

#### **4.2.4 Psychological Depression**

Economic gap and bad mindset can also influence one's psychological life. Psychological depression is one of the impacts. It is a very sad feeling in which someone is hopeless because of inexistence of jobs. As a result, it causes someone unable to live in a normal way based on a particular standard of living. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry who has low economic background tends to suffer from psychological depression. He has a hopeless feeling if Peter leaves him alone. It is supported by a quotation below.

Jerry: ... Oh, Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away. {He laughs as best he can.} You don't know how

afraid I was you'd go away and  
leave me ...

From a quotation above, the sentence '*You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me*' proves that Jerry is in a psychological depression. He considers that he cannot survive without Peter who has good economic capital. People who come from the lower class cannot exist alone in a certain area in society without people who come from the upper class. If they are left, they will be in financial and mental crisis. Therefore, it can be said that people who come from lower class have to live together with people who come from lower class in order to survive in life.

## V. Conclusion

The United States of America is divided into two biggest regions; Northern America and Southern America. People who live in North America tend to have higher standard of living. This region is considered as the most economically developed region in America because a lot of industries are built here. On the other hand, people who live in South America tend to have a lower standard of living. It is an

agricultural region in which a lot of raw material for industry are produced here.

In *The Zoo Story*, social class segregation is caused by different educational level and different economic background between Peter and Jerry as the main characters of the play. Peter who reflects people in North America has higher educational level. He is positioned in the upper class because he is a good structured mindset man. On the other hand, Jerry who reflects people in South America has lower educational level. He is positioned in the lower class because he is an unstructured mindset man who undergoes social jealousy and psychological depression. In other words, both of them live in the segregated area in American society because they have different social class. Therefore, it creates American Dream. It is about how people who live in North America and people who live in South America fight their rights to have an equal opportunity to get freedom and democracy in life related to education and employment.

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