

Harold Pinter –A Re-evaluation

¹Dr. Jayakrishnan Nair & ²Pulkita Anand

¹Asstt. Professor (English) Deptt. Of English Govt. J N S PG College, Shujalpur (M.P.)

²Asstt. Professor (English) Banasthali Vidyapith, Tonk (Rajasthan)

Abstract:

The present paper attempts study playwright Pinter is regarded as a representative of Absurd Drama. Pinter observes the comic side of the Absurd. As Pinter's dramas are drama of language, attempt has been made to an analysis of some dialogues of his plays from the absurdist point of view. Pinter, a modern dramatist who has exerted tremendous influence on the other writers. So a reassessment of the writer is an enriching and valuable experience. The paper also attempts in positioning Pinter's play in the contemporary milieu.

Keywords:

Revaluation; language; realism; absurd and humanise

The need for a fresh revaluation of Pinter's plays was never so urgent as it is now. John Simon¹ still holds: "Those who can understand our time, which is an incomprehensible mess, and its theatre, which has sunk to depths beyond fathoming, are charlatans or fools, whose respect or admiration Pinter can certainly count on..." Simon was actually replying to a remark of Harold Clurman to the effect: "Those who do not respect and appreciate Pinter's talent understand little of our time or its theatre."²

Pinter's plays 'resemble a child's vision of existence.' This has been another view which states that 'in retaining a child's sense of the world's fearsomeness, he (Pinter) taps the adrenal flow of contemporary guilt and anxiety. But to

attain full stature as a dramatist, he needs to poke a hole in that sealed nursery – dungeon of fears and take a look at the man-sized world outside."

Added to this is the usual complaint of Pinter's ambiguity. 'Less the Better' or 'Show, don't tell' are the techniques ascribed to Pinter. Martin Esslin remarks: "the area of the unknown that surrounds us includes the motivation and background of the characters. What Pinter, in his search for a higher degree of realism in the theatre, rejects in the "well-made play" is precisely that it provides too much information about the background and motivation of each character."

'The search for a higher degree of realism' is actually the key to understanding Pinter. Henry Hewes is of the view that Pinter aficionados claim that his showing the horror of society as it exists is the most effective way of attacking it, and that his attack goes deeper than that of playwright who pick at specific social targets."

This is very much the case at least of his play *The Room*. Much fault has been found with the appearance of the negro in Rose's room, when her husband is away. It is only his presence that explain what Rose had been earlier afraid of and what she had been trying to avoid. Rose was once Sal and she is being urged by the negro to 'come home'. She does not deny being Sal but only forbids the negro from mentioning it. It is this past, obviously a negro past, which she has been trying to hide by practically hiding in her room.

The negro is a messenger .But most probably he is her father .The relationship leaves no ambiguity about the situation .Rose has negro blood but is white .She is naturally ashamed and also afraid of owing up this relationship .But parental love pursues her. This also, in a way, explains the attitude of Bert, her husband .He is a slow-moving and non- speaking person .He probably must have discovered the negro antecedents of Rose after his marriage. This makes him glum and he is quiet. But when on his return he finds the negro in the room, he suddenly explodes in a violence that kills the negro . The one thing he could never tolerate was any link with the negro past and his reaction is as violent as the intensity of his suppressed feelings .The death of the negro causes blindness to Rose .Now she would not be able to see the jeers of the white society .Her suppressed and self – denied love for her father actually consumed her into blindness.

What Pinter is depicting here ,in this subtle manner ,is the agony of so many white families who dare not reveal their negro antecedents .The play is the tragedy of colour prejudices. Practically round about the same time, Edward Albee produced *The Death of Bessie Smith*, depicting the extent to which the colour bar worked. Bessie , a singer ,died as she could not be admitted to a hospital because she was black .Albee’s play underlined not only the colour problem but also the moral courage of a white intern who sacrificed his job for the sake of the dead negro singer .This is shown as a symbolic revolt of the young against the inhuman cruelty of racial prejudices .Pinter , on the other hand , without being ostensibly a social reformer , presented the problem at a higher human plane , depicting the life –long suffering of an individual , caused by the’ crime ‘ of having been born to parents of mixed

blood .On this theme he enacts this powerful tragedy of human drama .

Pinter’s next two plays , *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* actually form one connecting link .One can say that Goldberg and McCann , after having deposited Stanley with ‘Monty ‘ , whatever Monty stood for , had returned to their Birmingham den for further instruction regarding their next victim .In *The Birthday Party* , Goldberg already mentions three other names of his , namely Nat ,Simey and Binny .So they could now easily be Ben and Gus also .What the two plays depict is the new phenomenon of syndicated terror organisation which reduce their agents to mere trigger-happy machines and the victim becomes a mere object . The whole thing is absolutely cold-blooded, mechanical and devoid of emotions .But life is so uncertain that even the most trustworthy can become an ‘object’ or victim without having any idea about it .What Pinter has done is to humanise the situation by showing firstly how Stanley became the victim and later, by depicting how those who had made others victims reacted when it came to be their turn to become victims .It is no retribution that he is depicting in these plays but the inhuman approach to human life that modern life has brought about.

The Birthday Party shows in detail this merciless assignment being carried out heartlessly. The focus on this aspect relegates to the background the question of guilt, and how much of it, on the part of Stanley. The climax is achieved in the party itself which is held by the ‘killers’ to celebrate Stanley’s birthday though he keeps on denying that day being his birthday . It is strange party .Stanley is subjected to grilling interrogation by the ‘killers’ .The cross-examination is nonsensical but terrifying in its impact:

Goldberg: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

McCann: What about the Albigenenist heresy?

Goldberg: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

McCann: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

Goldberg: Speak up, Webber, why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley: He wanted to – he wanted to – he wanted to -.

McCann: He doesn't know!

Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley: He wanted ...

McCann: He doesn't know .He doesn't know which came first!

Goldberg: Which came first?

McCann: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

Goldberg and McCann: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

It is clear that the interrogations are professionals .The only place where Stanley responds is to the question: Why did the chicken cross the road? He tries to answer to give an explanation as to why he deserted the 'organisation' .But he hesitates, for being once a part of the organisation, he perhaps feels that any explanation to these hired hands would be futile .McCann cuts him short but Goldberg repeats the question again. This time McCann gives him no opportunity of speaking. It is clear to Stanley that his fate is sealed .The verbal onslaught continues, however. The party succeeded at first in reducing Stanley to a 'state of infancy' when he plays on the toy-drum savagely⁷. The party and the strangling questioning actually do much more to Stanley .The party is really the 'centre of the play;⁸for Meg the party is all enjoyable , for Lulu it is a sexual adventure , later to be regretted , and for

Stanley it is a moment of blindness and doom. He knows his end has come. So like a trapped , naked frightened animal he tried to strangle Meg who is the only one in the group who does not mind Stanley doing anything to her .Thus the party , actually, ends up in 'celebrating' Stanley's death on the day of his birth . While beating the drum he was actually bidding farewell to his existence.

Pinter here succeeded in creating a tragic moment .Next morning , Stanley is dressed up as a corpse .He had actually died the previous night .Now he was a mere 'living-dead', waiting for his formal disposal .And Petey's warning at this stage: 'Stan , don't let them tell you what to do!' is absolutely too late .

The impact of the play is what Pinter had desired. He 'opens our eye to the constant anxiety and the overwhelming sense of guilt which haunt personal existence in western society today!'⁹ And Pinter appears to be saying that 'life is fascinatingly dangerous, and the need for extra care is consequently urgent.'¹⁰

No one is free from this 'constant anxiety', not even the hireling themselves. That is what Pinter shows in *The Dumb Waiter*. The names of the killers are now changed to Ben and Gus. They are waiting in a basement for orders. They do not know their next victim. The small that they indulge in actually highlights their nervousness .It is here that Pinter actually humanise them.These merciless , mechanical cockneys are shown with common human anxieties when it comes to be their turn.Their anxiety heightens with the persistent demand for more varieties of dishes ordered through the dumb waiter . The nutty prank in the form of novelty of the dishes ordered ('two braised steak and chips; Marconi pastisio; one Char Siu and bean sprouts',etc.) ceases to be funny for the two hoodlums any more. They are

really panicky. They feel that they are being put to some sort of awkward test – which they have failed. The speaking tube has already announced that their food was unsatisfactory. This is an obvious sign of displeasure on the part of the ‘boss’, whosoever he is. Gus, who is elderly, leaves for a drink of water and the speaking tube comes to life at once, announcing the death of the man who enters the room. The curtain falls as Ben raise his pistol at Gus who walks into the room.

Was death meant for Gus only or for any one of the two who opted to leave the room first? Ben kills Gus but perhaps death is lurking for him somewhere, even outside the room the moment he is going to step out. These hoodlums have served their purpose, they are needed no more. They must go the Stanley way. Only for them there is to be no birthday party. The victim and the executioner have met again, they are one finally in the fold of death .Pinter produces this effect of horror of operation of impersonal forces of terror and blind obedience where man is menaced by the unknown and where the real ‘brain’ manages to remain unidentified.

However, these three plays of Pinter were subjected to a great deal of criticism for being ambiguous. It was said that Pinter makes no effort to show the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of each character and situation .Pinter cuts his trails to heighten the effect of suspense .He has been really concerned with the main motivation primarily, the basic issue, believing at he same time that once the main motivation was there the other details did not matter . ‘A character on the stage’ he said, ‘who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspiration, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of

attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things .The more acute the experience the less articulate the expression.’¹¹

Thus crating a situation devoid of rational explanation or bringing in sudden shift are to be understood as effective dramatic means to bring about the atmosphere of suspense, menace, terror and loneliness .But in his next plays, perhaps influenced by the criticism, he tells more .In *The Caretaker* there is no ambiguity .Pinter even obliges us to have a peep into the inner recesses of the mind of Aston, when he makes Aston deliver a long speech about the electric shock-treatment at the mental hospital .

Davies is undoubtedly the most unforgettable achievement of Pinter in this play .He is one of Pinter’s most skilfully drawn characters. He is stupid, garrulous, and helpless; something like a Chaplin tramp in his shabby costume, overgrown hair and his gaping toothless mouth. Mick’s remark is noteworthy; ‘You’re nothing but a wild animal, when you come down to it, you’re a barbarian .And to put old lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time.’¹²

Davies is society’s outcast .He reminds one of Lear’s Toms the Bedlam beggar. His very existence is a most powerful commentary on the society which has reduced a human being to sheer animality and a thing of nothingness. He is not merely a ‘personification of human weakness ‘as Martin Esslin¹³describes him but the personification of social degradation .He has suffered so much at the hands of society that he has even forgotten his name.

This outcast felt that at least in Aston he had found a messiah and that he might find in that junk-cluttered room (even Davies calls it ‘lousy, filthy hole’) some sort of haven for some time .But Aston’s

brother, Mick treats him as cruelly as society has hitherto treated him.

Such a 'dunghill' of society is bound to be stupid. He does provoke laughter is different as his speeches proceed. Take, for instance, his outburst stressing the need for a clock'. At first we laugh because of all people an unemployed, unkempt man would seem to need a clock least. And then we laugh slightly differently at a frustration we can understand as he tells of his unsuccessful attempts to keep the time in his head so that when he wakes from a nap he will know whether it is time to go have a cup of tea. At other times there is sadness, as when Aston is relating the details of his shock treatment in a mental institution to a man who has no capacity to interpret these as anything more than evidences that Aston is a 'nut'.¹⁴

Pinter gave a most befitting reply to those who saw in *The Caretaker* nothing but the funny humour of the stupidity of the tramp. '*The Caretaker* is funny, up to appoint. Beyond that point it cease to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it.'¹⁵

Davies is after all a human being. Despite all the crushing poverty to which he has been reduced, he still objects to shoes which are not of proper size or the shoelaces not being of matching colour. But this haven is not going to be his. He is turned out despite all his best efforts and worst tricks. His tragic existence and miseries will continue endlessly. The success of Pinter lies in the fact that 'one just hadn't noticed people exactly like them before, but now they exist.'¹⁶

The picture becomes all the more grim when Davies is pitted against two other people who also possess delusory hopes like him. Aston consistently talks of building a workshop at the place. Mick's plans are more elaborate:

You could have an off-white pile of linen rug, a table in afrosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, beech-frame settee with woven seagrass seat, white-topped heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround...¹⁷

And the poor tramp hopelessly tries to fit in the dreams of the two brothers. None of the three persons matched in the room may ever have their dreams fulfilled. Each one of them stands on the brink of rejection, disillusionment and unfulfilment as each of the three is paralysed by failure of the will. Davies is the first to go. Aston and Mick stand on the verge of fall. Today it is Davies, tomorrow it may be their turn. Each one of the three can be a tramp, only a thin line separates the two brothers from Davies. The play, indeed, is a forceful tragic rendering of life. '*The Caretaker* is a study of the human condition at the outer limit of endurance, both funny and tragic, paradoxically baffling and plausible, gifted with the poetic touch of universality, and turned out in colloquial dialogue that is breathtakingly cadenced and exact.'¹⁸

This brings Pinter face to face with the 'basic problem of being', as Martin Esslin puts it.¹⁹ His two plays, *The Dwarfs* and *The Collection* seem to be inspired by this basic urge. He now addresses himself to the question of all questions; What is truth? What is the truth about human beings? He himself raises the problem: 'There are no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false.

The thing is not necessarily either true or false ; it can be bith true and false .²⁰

Len, in one of his streams of consciousness outbursts in *The Dwarfs* ,poses the same problem:

The point is , who are you ? Not why or how ,not even what .I can see what , perhaps ,clearly enough ... But who are you I can't even begin to recognize , and sometime I recognize it so wholly , so forcibly , I can't look , and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number . Where am I to look , where am I to look , what is there to locate , so as to have some surety , to have some rest from this whole blood racket ? You are the sum of so many reflections...

Len further chides Pete : ‘ You ‘ve got no idea how to presertve a distance between what you smell and you think about it . You haven't got the faculty for making a simple distinction between one thing and another .Every time you walk out of this door you go stright over a cliff .What you've got to do is nourisah the power of assessment .How can you hope to assss and verify anything if you walk about with nose struck between your feet all day long ?’

A human being is “ the sum of many reflections ‘ –It helps Pinter's qust for truth ‘ at a deeper level than demonstrable fact .This involves a new preoccupation with the means of communication , since the question comes back , will people tel the truth about themselves , and if they will ,can they?²¹

The Collection, clearly, is a pursuit – for –truth comedy. Stella's story to her husband that she slept with Bill sends

James to Bill for verification. Why does he want to verify? Why does he wish to know the truth? To find out what Bill has in him that he does not possess? Or, to see if such a man named Bill exist at all or not? He propabbly does not believe the story fully .Perhaps Stella is trying to make him jealous. What is the truth that James discovers finally? Perhaps, some traits of homosexuality in himself! Besides that, the truth remains illusive .Stella, on Bill's homosexual friend's urging her statement and James's question remains unanswered: ‘Is it true?’ *The Collection* brings to the focus the basic question of relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, and this relationship is saved not by the truth but, may be, untruth finally. James has learnt one truth but, namely as Pinter himself said: ‘simple truth can often be something more terrifying than ambiguity and doubt.’²²And in *The Lover*, the husband and wife are determined to shun the truth .So much so that they feel that by facing the simple truth of their relationship as married people they would in which they meet as lovers .Hence their decision to continue to avoid the truth.

The maturity of Pinter's art finds its full expression in *The Homecoming* .Many basic issues raised in the earlier plays are touched at a deeper level here . Graham Kemper ²³describes the play as the portrait of Beelzebub and his relatives ; sons representing three forms of evil in m,an :

evil of intellect (Teddy)

evil of flesh (Lenny)

evil of brute force (Joey)

Max: Progenitor of evil; and

Ruth : Instrument by which evil is made manifest .

‘The characters,’he adds ‘are thus representative of the appearances, claims and consequent projections of pervasive evil’²⁴But even Graham Kemper admits

that this analysis does not satisfy the question of motivation : why does Ruth agree to become the family prostitute ? why does teddy not react ? why does no one react to Sam's death ?

Pinter always raise more questions than he answers . The play is Pinter's 'most lucid and complex' attempts ,according to Kelly Morris who regards its themes as ; Genration , heredity ,family , home .²⁵The complication begins when Teddy , the Philosopher Professor in America , brings his wife , Ruth , after six years to his home in England which is a male –den populated by his two brothers , father and an uncle .Finally , Ruth agrees to stay behind as a sort of family while Teddy quietly packs off.

Every play of Pinter represent a vision of life , his vision . One may not see life as he does it is imperative that his vision is a part of truth .And with his 'instinctive sense of theatre and rhythm', to quote his first Director , James RooseEvans , every play of Pinter is an event to be experienced .

Reference:

[1.] Hudson Review, Spring ,1967.Ibid.

[2.] Time,December,1962.

[3.] Martin Essslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*(1968).

[4.] *Saturday Review*,8 April ,1967.

[5.] Pinter, *The Birthday Party and Ohter Plays* , p23.

[6.] R.F.Storch ,Harold Pinter's 'Happy Families ' ; *the Massachusetts view*,Autum,1967.

[7.] Richard Schecher,'Puzzling Pinter',*Tulane Drama Review*, Winter ,1966.

[8.] Lowell D.Striker, *Christian Century* ; December 13 ,1967.

[9.] Kay Dick ,'Pinter and the fearful Mattter ' ,*Texas Quaeterly* ,vol.IV, Autumn,1961.

[10.] Programmme note for performance of *The Room and The Dumb Waiter* : Royal Court Theatre , London ,March ,1960.

[11.] Pinter, *The Caretaker* . Martin Esslin ; *The theatre of the Absurd* ; p.279.

[12.] Henry Howes,*Saturday Review* : 21 October ,1961.

[13.] Harold Pinter ,Letter to *Sunday Times* ,London, 14August ,1960.

[14.] *Newsweek* ,26 ,October ,1961.

[15.] Harold Pinter,*The Caretaker* .

[16.] *Time* ,10 November ,1961.

[17.] Martin Esslin , *The theatre of the Absurd*, p.290.

[18.] Programmme Note for performance of *The Room and The Dumb Waiter* ,Royal Court Theatre, London,March,1960.

[19.] Johan Russel Taylor , *Anger and After*(1963),p.309. Ibid. P.301.

[20.] Graham Kempet ,*Christian Century* ,1 March ,1967. Ibid.

[21.] Kelly Morris 'Homecoming ' ,*Tulane Drama Review* , Winter ,1966.