

EXPLORING ABSURDISM IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS**Dr. Kaushik Kr. Deka,**Assoc. Prof., Department of English,
M.N.C. Balika Mahavidyalaya, Nalbari, Assam**“Life is not merely inconsistent
...but fundamentally absurd...”**

Absurdity is the condition or state in which human beings exist in a meaningless, irrational universe wherein people's lives have no purpose or meaning. An alternative reaction against drawing-room naturalism came from the Theatre of the Absurd. Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering.

Mention has already been made that the phrase ‘Absurd Drama’ or ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ gained currency as a result of Martin Esslin’s book ‘The Theatre of Absurd’ published in 1961. Esslin points out that there is no such thing as a regular movement of absurd dramatists; the term is useful as a device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing features they have in common.

In his discussion on absurd Esslin points out that in present century the number of people for whom God is dead has greatly increased. The theatre of the absurd is one of the ways of facing up to a universe that has lost its meaning and purpose. As such it fulfills a double role. Its first and more obvious role is satirical when it criticizes a society that is petty and dishonest. Its second and more positive aspect is shown when it faces up to absurdity in plays where man is stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context, confronted with basic choices the basic situation of his existence.

Esslin also states that all the plays under the category of absurd violate every canon of successful drama and still achieve phenomenal success: *‘if a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience almost with mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerism of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dream and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue these often consist of incoherent babblings.’* (Esslin 21)

To a large number of cultivated readers all over the world, Harold Pinter is known as the author of some powerful and thought-provoking dramas. Yet he himself would perhaps not be happy with such a reputation. In 1970 on receiving the prestigious Hamburg Shakespeare Prize, Pinter said:

“Once many years ago, I found myself engaged uneasily in a public discussion on theatre. Someone asked me what my work was ‘about’. I replied with no thought at all and merely to frustrate this line of enquiry: ‘The weasel under the cocktail cabinet.’ That was a great mistake. Over the years I have seen that remark quoted in a number of learned columns. It has now seemingly acquired a profound significance, and is seen to be a highly relevant and meaningful observation about my own work. But for me the remark meant precisely nothing.”(Scott 9)

Harold Pinter is the product of a post war generation that has attempted to reject the evils of the twentieth century and present a new outlook on society. In most of his plays Pinter tries to express the experience of man in transition, not in terms of the angry young man in frustration or revolt, nor of the vacuity of man faced with metaphysical absurdity. He expressed man in his fear, joy, humor, stupidity and ambition. He is always concerned with the human condition as it is today. Pinter writes:

I am not concerned with making general statements. I am not interested in theatre used simply as a means of self-expression on the part of people engaged in it. I find in so much group theatre, under the sweat and assault and noise, nothing but valueless generations, naïve and quite untruthful. I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them except to say: that is what happened. That is what they say. That is what they did. (Scott 9)

Martin Esslin lists Pinter as one of the prominent children in the article ‘*Godot and His Children: The Theatre of Beckett and Pinter*’. He writes:

“Like Beckett, Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature of man’s situation in the world. However, in his dialogues, however naturalistic some of his situations may superficially appear Pinter’s plays are also basically images of human condition”.

Pinter himself has openly avowed his indebtedness to Beckett. He writes:

‘Beckett is a writer whom I admire very much and have admired for a number of years. If Beckett’s influence shows in any work that is alright with me. You don’t write in a vacuum; you are bound to absorb and digest other writing and I admire Beckett’s work so much that something of its texture might appear in my own.’ (Iyer 35)

But Pinter is not like Beckett. Compared to Beckett Pinter looks too thin and very much English. Beckett’s revolt or existential anguish hardly enters Pinter’s world. When Beckett’s plays have vague cosmic implications, Pinter seems to be more concerned with an obsessive probing into the primeval fears of man. Beckett’s setting is thin and bare and has overtones of the cosmic void. Pinter’s world on the other hand is thoroughly British. It is at once naturalistic and firmly realized.

Dramatist of the absurd believed that life is not rational. It does not follow any laws or logical pattern. The mist of awe and fear always envelops the environment. Security in life is simply a dream. Anxiety, despair and a change of loss at the disappearance of situations, illusions and purposefulness pervades in every sphere of life. In much of Harold Pinter's plays one can easily find all these features. He seems to convey in almost all his plays that security is an illusion, which is susceptible to sudden destruction by the appearance of an intruder, from the outside world. The security of the inhabitants is shown to be false and vain and these shattered by someone from outside. In his play *The Room* Pinter presents an allusive symbolism of fear and nightmare. It dramatizes the inarticulate existential fears. The play symbolizes the realistic marital relationship between a tyrannical husband and a sentimental wife tormented by dark forebodings and existential fears. The old couple is subtly contrasted with the new couple, who too are in search of the room. The blind Negro is clearly an allegorical figure. He has been loitering at the basement for many days and has or seems to have a fore knowledge of the future. He seems to know beforehand that the room no 7 will soon become vacant of its inmates. So, the Negro must be a being from beyond this world. He may be either a dead man or a messenger of the dead itself; perhaps Rose's own dead father. His blackness and blindness further reinforce these allegorical implications. The going blind of Rose at the end of the play is also symbolic; it means the snapping of her marital relationship with Bert. But perhaps much more than that, it symbolizes her own death. The Negro and Bert intrude into the world of Rose; she is the victim. Bert's role is a role of villain. Menace comes to Rose in the person of Bert. The play has no single conclusive meaning.

His other play *The Dumb Waiter* shows us the restlessness of an ordeal. The two assassins are like cogs in a machine. They are like ignorant soldiers, sent on an unknown destination having no precise idea of what they are about. The system has suppressed the individual. The individual has been the humanized. Gus betrays signs of revolt. Both the assassins work under an organization that functions entirely above their reach. They have to carry out instructions which apparently have no meaning for them. Each of the two men has a feeling of insecurity. Gus shows signs of revolt from the beginning. He refuses to be only a cog in the machine of modern industrial hierarchy. Definitely, the mysterious boss might have taken note of it and might have thought it better to oust him out of the way of organization. Hence the play possibly endeavors to dramatize the process of alienation to which man are subjected in a highly organized industrial society. The play depicts the frustration which such a process leads to and the violence which is a natural corollary of such a frustration.

The play *The Caretaker* by Pinter is hopelessly allusive and seems to be defying all interpretations aimed at understanding its meaning. It seems to challenge the critical faculty of readers. To Martin Esslin, the end of the play is reminiscent of the last scene of the Beckett's *End Game*. Esslin also traces echoes of *Waiting for Godot* in the tramp and also in the characters of two complementary brothers. While in his earlier plays such as *The Room*, *The Birthday party* etc. Pinter presents the main character living in a room, living in a milieu

of fear and some inimical force introduces in his consciousness from the outer world. But here the situation is turned just upside down. In this play a homeless wonderer is making hectic efforts to fix his steps somehow in a home. But here it is Davies own inherent weakness that does not let him obtain the room. He tries to put one brother against the other and starts dodging a going against his benefactor Aston. This is his original sin.

In his third full length play *The Homecoming* Pinter brilliantly succeeds in merging the theme of reality and the fantasy of wish fulfillment intriguingly ambivalent whole. The play presents a cross section of the depraved and degenerate humanity. It has been amply hinted beforehand that Max started his life as a butcher by trade and his intimate friend Mac Gregor too traded in flesh of animals at Max's. It appears that along with trading in flesh, both the friends have close links with pimps, prostitutes and gangsters, of course as a side business. In the very first scene, Max reminisces how in older days, He and Macgregor had been the worst hated men in the industrial locality of the East End of London where they used to live. Lenny too at least of all his brothers adopted his ancestral profession and worked as pimp somewhere in the locality of Soho. Lenny's revelation about his beating up of diseased prostitutes in the early part of the play sufficiently proves his degenerate profession. Besides Lenny's proposition to Ruth and her husband's placid acceptance of her as a whore are the only elements in the play to place it in the list of the theatre of the absurd. This type of setting is quite impossible in a realistic play.

Pinter's *No Man's Land* highlights and explores the fear of the age. Hirst is an aged successful writer whose marriage has either failed or who has never married and who is condemned to live a solitary life in his old age, made a prisoner by his own domestics, with liquor as his only comfort and real companion. Spooner also has grown old; his marriage too has failed or has never taken place; but he is unsuccessful and poor. Though a free man yet he longs for the bondages of a home, trying to breakout into freshness of freedom but unable to gather courage to break his bonds. Now throughout a man's life there remains at least the possibility of choice as long as some of youth's plasticity is available to him. But there comes a point of time. With the coming of old age, the possibility disappears. Then the life freezes into endless winter of the *No Man's Land* swaying between life and death.

The absurd plays do not have a pin downable meaning or a moral. It always ends with a question. They present human situations as it is and not as it ought to be. After going through the plays of Pinter it becomes crystal clear that he never tries to give a meaning or a moral to his plays. Pinter writes:

"The play is itself. It is no other. It has its own life (whatever its merits in dramatic terms or accomplishment may be and despite the dissatisfaction others may experience with regards to it). I take it you would like me to insert a clarification or moral judgment or author's angle on it, straight from the Horse's mouth. I appreciate your desire for this but I can't do it."
(Pinter 80)

Pinter's plays have meanings but one can't point out it properly, it is precisely because of his technique which is also known as 'Painteresque'. As for example in his play *The Room* Pinter successfully presents Rose and Bret in their cozy room. But the appearance of the Negro and his death at the wild kick of Bret unquestionably create confusion in the mind of the audience. Besides the abrupt ending of the play give a shock to the audience.

His other play *The Dumb waiter* also leaves a question at the end of the play. It is owing to the action of the gunmen Ben and Gus. In the play both are looking very nervous. But when Gus goes to get a glass of water, Ben gets his final instruction to kill his associate Gus. At the end Ben and Gus confront each other and the curtain slowly falls leaving a question mark to the audience.

In the play *A Night Out* also we are told how a prostitute takes the hero to her room and how he had to run away from there to discover that his mother is alive. Has the hero really broken free during his night out? The question remains unanswered.

In *Betrayal* Pinter deals with the theme of the erotic triangle again with a woman disputed by two men. It is the story of an adultery told backwards, starting with the breakup of an affair and pursuing its inception and development to its initiation ten years earlier. The question this finally plotted play shoots up is: whom has the wife betrayed? Is it the husband or is the lover?

The characters in an absurd play exist only in the mind of the authors and as such they are shadows without substance. They are poetic images. Speaking on Pinter's characters prominent critic Nigel Alexander in his article *Past, Present and Pinter* writes: '*There is no future for the characters created by Harold Pinter. In play after play the curtain comes down on a terrible state of stasis in which the only possible development for the individuals concerned is at best continued stagnation, at worst, putrefaction.*' (Alexander 39). Pinter always presents a small group of characters in a complex situation. At first both characters and situations are presented by him obscurely. But through a number of surprises or shocks the audience is led to a clearer and deeper knowledge of the characters. The actions of his plays can almost be represented by a formula so that every revue can now have its pinter-play and at small art theatres sub-pinters flourished. His plays are half character studies and half fantasy where one can hardly find any future.

As Pinter focuses more sharply on the wriggle for existence, each of his successive hero-victims seems more vulnerable than the last. Villain assaults victims in a telling and murderous idiom. Although Pinter's first two plays are in one act, and the second two in three acts each successive drama seems to begin closer to its own and highlighting the throes of the hero-victims. In Pinter's first play *The Room*, after a blind Negro is kicked into inertness, the heroine, Rose, is suddenly stricken with blindness. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the curtain falls as Gus and his perspective murderer stare at each other. Stanley Webber the hero in the play *The Birthday Party* is taken from his refuge for 'special treatment' by Goldberg and McCann to

Monty. In *The Caretaker* the final curtain falls on an old man's fragmentary pleas to remain in his refuge. But Pinter gives little hints about both his villains and victims. They are the most non-descriptive villains and victims. Pinter's victims usually emerge from a vague past to go to their ineluctable destruction. His villains are messengers from mysterious organizations as in the works of Kafka and Beckett. If Pinter has repeatedly been named as Beckett's heir on the English stage, it is precisely because the characters of both lead lives of complex and unique desperation, - a desperation expressed with extreme economy of theatrical resources.

The treatment of grotesque and menace in an absurd drama give an alienation effect and a shock therapy to the audience. In the works of Beckett (specially in his waiting for Godot) on can easily find menace but compared to Pinter, Beckett it is turned mild and blunt by its cosmic implications. Pinter particularizes the situation, simply to intensify and sharpen the menace. Pinter is different from Beckett and his menace is greater than that of Beckett, because it exists in the house next door.

For invoking the right attention for his plays Pinter uses menace and muddle. Particularly in his earliest plays he contrives the action with Hitchcock alertness. He relies on the unexpected call or the sudden descent of a previously unidentified lift in *The Dumb Waiter*. Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, tells Meg, a story of men coming with a van containing a wheel-barrow and knocking on her door and then immediately, Lulu knocks on the door. In the later plays Pinter is more discreet in the use of external stimuli to attention. But his use of middle, or confused and confusing exposition, continues into his latest plays. The audience does not know what characters are called or what has happened. It does not know whether Goldberg is Nat or Simey. At other times the places and names are left vague. The audience does not know, who is Monty to whom Stanley was taken at the end of the play *The Birthday Party*. Or doubt is thrown on an apparently simple fact by confusion in related facts. In the play *The Caretaker*, are Davies' papers at sidcup? - his case was not at the café. The audience is puzzled and therefore wished to notice.

Pinter as an East End Jew grew up during the war, when menace was a familiar pattern of society. Undoubtedly Pinter's plays produce a gruesome sense of awe and fear, but it is present in a particular English way. That is Pinter excellently adapts the European Absurd to the English native wit. The awe is conveyed through the most ordinary concrete objects, and ordinary people. There is an exquisite synchronization of the nightmare and normality in Pinter's plays. The menace emanates from a collision of man's basic need for security recognition and acceptance on the one hand and the pressures of society for deadening conformity on the other. At that time his plays more than those of any other playwrights were responsible for the term 'Comedy of Menace'.

Another important characteristic of an absurd drama is the devaluation of language. Pinter also shares this distrust of language with Beckett and other playwrights of the absurd drama.

While Beckett's plays stress upon the difficulty of communication Pinter's plays stress upon the dangers of communication.

Pinter on several occasions expressed his distrust of language. The more acute the experience, what Pinter has said, the less articulate its expression. Pinter explores the decay of language and capitalizes on the impression of speech. He uses it as dramatic device. His purpose is to give a startling glimpse of the chaotic world we carry within us. For Pinter words are not bridges. They are bards to protect the wired enclosure of the self. The oft quoted words of Pinter on the subject bear repetition: "*I think we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening to disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.*" (Almansi 71). This interplay between confidence in words and fear of them and between what is meant and what is betrayed is constant source of excitement in Pinter.

Yet Pinter remains inimitable. His individual quality is now clearly recognized. The substance of his plays, their moment-to-moment life as sustained by dialogue remains Pinter's own and repays closest attention. As for example we can quote from his play *The Collection*: here two men- Bill and Harry are having breakfast together:

Bill : What time did you get in?
 Harry : Four
 Bill : Good party?
Pause
 Harry : You did not make any toast this morning.
 Bill : No. Do you want some?
 Harry : No. I do not.
 Bill : I can if you take.
 Harry : It's all right. Don't bother
Pause

This is a remarkable dialogue. Obviously banal, it must be scrutinized to the ways in which it works, and how well it works. The dialogue's triviality first claims attention. Pinter is not trying to show that unconsidered elements of life are very important. He does not sweep the dust off the little rooms we live in, and make them and the action 'fine' or 'more meaningful'.

Sometimes he uses like Chekhov, the allusive or representational importance of small details, their inner truths. Here is a passage from *The Dwarfs* about Mark's new suit:

Mark: It's got a zip at the hips.
 Len: A zip at the hips? What for?
 Mark: Instead of a buckle. It's neat.
 Len: Neat? I should say it's neat.

This is modishly trivial, yet something like the talk about the green belt on Natasha's (a character in Chekhov's play) pink dress in *The Three Sisters*. Only in Chekhov the effect is more overt. The belt enables Chekhov to give size, clarity and generality to Natasha.

In stage dialogue triviality can thus impress character immediately and subtly and can express unconscious reactions especially in situations which obviously can forward for greater import. Pinter uses trivia in this way constantly. Through the usually 'unnoticed' details of speech, Pinter can let a penetrating eye at once into a man's soul. His dramas cannot be received without a continuous intimation of the unconscious lives of his characters.

In an absurd drama dialogue often endeavours to communicate a vision, rather than a story or a theme through an elusive static image or a complex pattern of images. It does not give us argumentative dialogue that moves on to a conclusion. Pinter is a perfect follower of this technique. He believes that both language and memory are unreliable agencies. In his plays words are rather deliberately used to hinder communication so as not to let other people know the truth. Pinter also believes that people are too frightened of real communication, to use language for this purpose, because the genuine communication might reveal to others their own weaknesses and deficiencies. Thus, much of language is an attempt to cover up and evade the truth. Obviously much of the language in Pinter's dialogues is smoke screen through up round reality.

Figure of repetition in dialogue is another important feature of an absurd plays. In most of Pinter's plays the uses of the figure of repetition in dialogues is quite visible. Though critics often overlook this figure of repetition as mere mannerism yet it is obvious that the playwrights employ this device deliberately with a definite aim to achieve. The characters in Pinter's plays repeat a word, a phrase or a sentence many times, either of their own or someone else's. Here we can cite an example from his play *The Caretaker* where Aston and Davies try to communicate with each other:

Aston: Sit down.

Davies: Thanks (Looking about) Uuh...

Aston: Just a minute.

(Aston looks around for a chair, sees one lying on its side by the rolled carpet at the fire place, and starts to get it out)

Davies: Sit down? Huh...I haven't had a good sit down... I haven't had a proper sit down... well, I couldn't tell you...

Aston (Placing the chair): Here you are.

Davies: Ten minutes off for a tea break in the meal of the night in that place and I couldn't find a sit, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there... they had me working ...

(Aston sits on the bed, takes out a tobacco tin and papers, and begin to roll himself a cigarette. Davies watches him.)

All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of the seat, treating me like dirt. When he come at me tonight, I told him.

(Pause)

Aston: Take a seat.

Davies: Yes, but what I got to do first, you see what I got to do. I got to loosen myself up, you see what I mean? I could have got done in down there.

The suggestions that Davies should 'Sit down' provokes 'Thanks' but also a repetition of his Looking about together with an inarticulate 'Uuh...'. Aston interprets this as looking for a chair and --- looking *around* with simple purpose- he gets a chair from the various piles of possessions that fill the room. He places it with 'Here you are', but Davies does not sit down; he talks of the need for a 'sit down', but he does not make the expected movement.

The uses of 'pause' 'silence' and 'three dots' are another important feature of Pinter's language. In his plays we seldom encounter any superfluity of a word or a phrase. Each word is indispensable to the structure and contributes substantially to the totality of overall impression of it. However, in Pinter there is a difference between a pause and a silence and three dots. According to Peter Hall, a pause is really a bridge where the audience thinks that you are this side of the audience, thinks that you are this side of the river. And a pause is often alarming. It is a gape which retrospectively gets filled in by the audiences and on lookers. However, it is not a dead stop- that is a silence. In a silence the confrontation becomes so extreme that there remains almost nothing to be said until both the temperature or intensity of the feeling goes down or goes up, and then something quite new happens (Hall 4-17). Now, the punctuation of three dots is a very tiny hesitation, but it is there and it is quite different from a semi colon, which Pinter almost never uses and it is also different from a coma. The punctuation of coma as we know already, is something that you catch up on, you go through it. While, a full stop is just a full stop. Let us see how Pinter uses these devices in his play *The Homecoming*. Here Ruth takes no notice of the aggression thus harmlessly sublimated, and designed to join in the verbal fisticuffs only when Lenny stops feigning and threatens a direct attack. He wants to take away a glass of water he has earlier brought her, an act of taking as purposeless as the gesture of giving:

Ruth: I haven't quite finished.

Lenny: You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

Ruth: No, I haven't.

Lenny: Quite sufficient in my own opinion.

Ruth: Not in mine, Leonard.

Lenny: Don't call me that please.

Ruth: Why not?

Lenny: That's the name my mother gave me.

(Pause)

Just give me the glass.

Ruth: No.

(Pause)

Lenny: I'll take it then.

Ruth: If you take the glass...I'll take you.

Thus, in Harold Pinter's plays one can easily find various characteristics of an absurd drama. His plays are more tightly constructed than the plays of Beckett and others. They are more psychologically probing, and outwardly closer to life in what they portray. Their effective unsettling quality, with its fusion of realism and nonrealism, distinguishes Pinter's artistic signature, from those of the other writers of this genre. As events and actions are unexplained in Pinter's plays and apparently illogical and unmotivated, his world seems to be capricious and malevolent. For Pinter what is apparently secure is not secure. Fear of menace may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of English Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition, Singapore: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001.
2. Almansi Guido *Pinter's Idiom of Lies Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Care Taker & The Homecoming, A Casebook*, Hong Kong: Macmillan 1993.
3. Bantock, G.H. *The Social and Intellectual Background, The New Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol. 7 James to Eliot*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983.
4. Bradbury, Malcolm *the Modern World: Ten Great Writers* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1989.
5. Coldewey, John C. & W.R. Streitberger, *Drama Classical to Contemporary*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998.
6. Esslin, Martin *The Theatre of the Absurd* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983.
7. Freyer, Grattan *The Irish Literary Scene, The New Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol. 7 James to Eliot*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983.
8. Hall, Peter *Directing Pinter's theater Quaterly 4 (Nov1974-Jan1975)*
9. Iyer T.R.S. *The Birthday Party: A Critical Study* Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot 2003.
10. Moody, William Vaughn & Robert Morss Lovett *A History of English Literature* New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1986.
11. Nigel Alexander *Past Present and Pinter, Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Care Taker & The Homecoming, A Casebook*, Hong Kong: Macmillan 1993.
12. Pinter, Harold *A Letter to Peter Wood Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Care Taker & The Homecoming, A Casebook*, Hong Kong: Macmillan 1993.
13. A Pinter, Harold *the Birthday Party* London: Eyre Methuen,1981

14. Scott, Michael (Ed.) *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Care Taker & The Homecoming, A Casebook*, Hong Kong: Macmillan 1993.