

The age of Harold Pinter – The period of transition and trauma

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Abstract

The type of plays writers like Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter and many more of their times wrote and staged were called as Theatre of the Absurd – as they did not have a cleverly constructed story or plot, no subtlety of characterization and motivation, no fully explained theme, neither a beginning nor an end. Their works reflected the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of the mass in the western world. Their plays depicted the picture of the mid and late twentieth century society – which saw the divorce of man and his life, devoid of purpose, life of man became ABSURD, i.e., out of harmony – cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots – which found its expression in the Theatre of the Absurd – in its originality.

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It won't be an exaggeration to say that the writings of a particular period generally reflect the mass attitude of that age, although it is not always a homogeneous pattern. The age of Pinter was certainly a period of transition which displayed a bewildering stratified picture. The medieval beliefs still held and, yet, overlaid by eighteenth century rationalism and mid-nineteenth century Marxism. The period also was rocked by sudden volcanic eruptions of prehistoric fascinations and primitive tribal cults. But the attitude of the young generation was sweeping away all the old beliefs, traditions and cultural patterns- which were tested and found wanting, described as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The Second World War unmasked the pretentious faith in religion, Progress, nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies. Man found himself in the cross-roads where everything seemed disillusioned, felt completely a stranger-facing the world as if like a lone outsider, cut off from all human bonding of love, compassion, fellow-feeling, trust and harmony. Man found himself devoid of purpose. This situation of out of harmony is explained by Ionesco in the following terms "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless."

This sense of metaphysical anguish, the absurdity of the human condition, the trauma of modern man, is the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter and others such as John Osborne. A similar sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose, is also the theme of much of the work of dramatists like Sartre, Camus. and others too. Yet these writers differ from writers like Pinter and others of the same group in an important respect: they presented their sense of irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while writers like Pinter strove to "express the sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, Pinter, Osborne and some others went a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed.

Pinter, who acknowledges the influence of Kafka and Beckett, is, like these two writers, preoccupied with man at the limit of his being.

What separates Pinter from the social realists among the young British playwrights of his generation with whom he shares the ability to put contemporary speech on to the stage is his depiction of the 'preoccupation with the problem of the self'. When Kenneth Tynan reproached him in a radio interview for writing plays unconcerned with ideas and showing only a very limited aspect of the life of their characters, omitting their politics, ideas, and even their sex life, Pinter replied that he was dealing with his characters at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone; at a point, that is when they are back in their rooms, confronted with the basic problem of being.

Pinter's characters are seen in the process of their essential adjustments to the world, at a time when they have to solve their basic problem. Whether they would be able to confront or come to terms with is reality at all. He argues that it is only after they have made the fundamental adjustment that they will become able to become part of society and share in the games of sex or politics. Pinter maintains that his plays deal with a short period in the lives of his characters which could be a few days to a fortnight (*Caretaker*). The story is concerned with what is happening then, in that particular moment of these people's lives, and hence, there is no reason to suppose that at one time or another they did not listen at a political meeting or that they haven't ever had girl friends or been concerned with ideas.

Pinter is, paradoxically, a more uncompromising, ruthless realist than the champions of 'social realism' could ever be. He criticizes the social realists of watering down the reality of their picture of the world by presupposing that they have solutions for problems that have not yet been solved - and that may well be insoluble. He argues that it is not possible to know the complete motivation of a character, and hence, it is futile to claim to have depicted the real by presenting a slice of the reality - which makes it less true and less real. According to Pinter oversimplification leads to the suppression of essential factors and reality expurgated and over simplification become make-believe. He says by focusing the attention on inessential and exaggerating their importance, only a limited objective is achieved, and, the sense of a happy life after the resolution is a fallacy. By choosing the wrong slice of life altogether, it falls into the error of drawing-room comedy that ends when the boy gets the girl - at the very point when their real problem, marriage and the process of ageing begin. After the social realist establishes the need for his reform, the basic problem of existence remains - loneliness, the impenetrable mystery of the universe, death.

Home is a recurring theme in many of Pinter's plays. Home is a sanctuary in many of his plays which the protagonists try to defend themselves from intruders - in plays such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*". In the play *Home Coming*, Ruth tries to assert for domination and a place in the house. In the play *The Caretaker*, Davies tries to find a home for himself or tries to assert his presence in Aston's house, which turns out traumatic for all - Aston, Davies and Mick. In *The Birthday Party*, the sheltered young man fears visitors. In *The Dumb Waiter*, outside forces menace a questioning killer. In *A Slight Ache*, a psychologically disturbed man fears a man he invites inside. While menace may take the shape of particular characters, it is usually unspecified or unexplained Thus the menace becomes more ominous, traumatic.

Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological, or potential violence, sometimes in varying sequence. Terror inheres in a statement in *The Room* that the onstage room, which is occupied, is to let. Thus in such plays menace lurks outside but has its physical roots as well.

Readers and reviewers find it difficult against the absence of realistic explanation. One fails to understand why characters visit others and why they commit inexplicable actions and why the others fear them. But it is a deliberate attempt by Pinter, to express the menace, the absurdity, and the traumatic situations of life, not, by focusing on answers to 'who?' and 'Why?' rather than focusing on answers to 'what?' and 'How?' For him, present activities, interrelationships and stratagems are more important than past actions, as Dukore points out that his drama is not a matter of 'They have been, therefore they are; but rather, They do, therefore they are.'

Thus the plays of Pinter depicts the effective unsettling quality, which its fusion of realism and non realism. The events and actions are unexplained and make them illogical or unmotivated, making the world seem capricious or malevolent. One can rely upon nothing. What is apparently secure is unsecured. A haven does not protect. Linguistic absurdity may suggest the absurdity of human condition. Fear of a menace may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe.

The time of Harold Pinter's birth, as it was on 10 October 1930 in Hackney - a working - class neighborhood in London's East End, was a period of great turmoil. The fascists who took over governments in Germany and Italy during the 1930s, followed their racial policies, and, favored by English fascists, threatened Jews in England.

At the start of England's war with Germany, in 1939, Pinter was evacuated, with other children, to the country. As Pinter and others had to evacuate and return to their homes several times during the war, the searing experience of the rocket raids made an impression in his mind. The memory of a safe and unsafe home continuously haunted his memory. As he recalls, after the war, the fascists " were coming back to life in England." If one were Jewish, as he was, or looked as if he were a communist, as he was not - though carrying books, Pinter says, seemed to be prima facie evidence for such a political belief - he might be accosted by a group of fascist thugs. "I got into quite a few fights down there ", says Pinter, who adds, " there was a good deal of violence there, in those days."

The age to which Pinter belonged was a period of transition, depicting a bewilderingly stratified picture, when the old medieval beliefs still held and overlaid by eighteenth century rationalism and mid-nineteenth-century Marxism, rocked by sudden eruptions of prehistoric fanaticisms and primitive tribal cults. Each of these components of the cultural pattern of the age found its own artistic expression. The Theatre of the Absurd to which Pinter belongs, also reflected the attitude of the age in its own way.

Various literary artists put away their perceptions of the world in their own way. While John Osborne depicted the Post-War World, the disillusionment of the Youth, problems pertaining to unemployment, bourgeois attitude of the upper-middle class, the apathetic attitude of the politicians, and the struggle of the lower-middle-class through his plays such as "Look Back in Anger", Edward Bond produced "LEAR", marking the beginning for another chapter ,symbolizing the need for a complete change in the attitude of the so called middle and ruling class. Poets like T. S. Eliot had already depicted the progressive degradation of human values, commercialization of sex and mechanization of human emotions, thus symbolizing "Wasteland" of futility, frustration and spiritual bareness of modern 20th century Western Civilization . Poets like Auden , Owen and Spender described the horrors of wars, Sufferings of people , and the indifferent attitude of man toward man through their poems such as Muse Des Beaux Arts", "Anthem For Domed Youth", "The Prisoners," and many more.

The unshakable basic assumptions of former ages had been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish allusions. The decline of religious faith was marked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism and Various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. In a universe that was suddenly deprived of illusion and of light, man felt a stranger. He felt as if in an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacked the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life constituted the feeling of absurdity. This absurdity, the sense of out-of-harmony with reason and propriety, has been rightly depicted in the works of the play-wrights such as Beckett, Adamov Ionesco, Genet, Harold Pinter and many others.

A similar sense of the senselessness of life of the inevitable devaluation of ideas, purity, and purpose have been the theme of other dramatists like Sartre, and Camus. But they presented their sense of irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning ; whereas the Theatre of the Absurd strived to express its senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

While Sartre and Camus expressed the new content in the old convention the Theatre of the Absurd went a step ahead in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumption and the form in which these were expressed. The Theatre of the Absurd renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presented it in being-that is, in terms of concrete stage images.

Realism is accuracy in the portrayal of life in a work of literature. Realism, in contrast to Romanticism, Impressionism and expressionism is a movement that started in the nineteenth century in England , America and a few countries in Europe, aimed at establishing the fact that novel and drama could reflect the life of an ordinary man realistically. The middle-class readers demanded realistic novels and drama as the realists wrote about the problems and conflicts of characters and the readers identified themselves with such characters.

Characterization is the strength of the realists and they did not invent anything new in their craft. In their works they made a right choice of settings and dialogue, which were true to life, the realists focused more on Characters than on Plots and indeed , they made a psychological analysis of Characters . The works on Psychological and stream of consciousness are the offshoots of realism.

Realism is the basis of much of Pinter's comedy. This can be found / observed a great deal in the personal style and idiom of Pinter's successful works – “The uncanny cruel accuracy of his reproduction of the inflections and rambling irrelevancy of everyday speech; the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread, and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action.”

In 1961, Pinter hinted that what goes on in his plays is realistic. Peter Hall, who has directed Pinter's plays for stage and film, discussed them in terms of realistic Production.

One of the important aspects of Pinter's work is his focus on answers to ‘What?’ and ‘How’, not on ‘who?’ and ‘Why?’ In other words, present activities, interrelationships, and stratagems are more dramatically important than past actions. His drama is not a matter of “They have been, therefore they are; but rather, They do, therefore there are.”

When one thinks of what a play might mean, the immediate thing that comes to our mind is the play's theme or moral. Even though Chekhov, Beckett and Pinter don't underscore their themes in their plays, they deliberately avoid injecting their own voices into the play. What they want is that their characters should reveal themselves, not to tell audiences what to infer or to believe - they refuse to reduce their meanings to paraphrase.

Pinter does not consider himself obliged to inject a remedy or thematic summary in the final act to provide an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image, to him, seems facile, impertinent and dishonest. Theatre / drama for him is not a cross word puzzle. Like Beckett and unlike Bernard Shaw, Pinter tries to avoid commenting on the meanings of his plays, he does not consider it part of his job to help audiences to understand them, he feels that understanding “can only come through the work itself” and is “entirely their own responsibility” What he wishes to say is ‘form itself is content, content is form’; Thus Pinter's plays are not about something, they embody that something in dramatic and theatrical form. Meaning inheres in the direct impact of what happens on stage, not in an explanatory character of discursive dialogue.

Pinter emphatically puts forth that logic of his characterization in the following words: I start writing a play from an image of a situation and a couple of characters involved , and these people always remain for me a quite real; if they were not the play could not be written”.

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