

## THE ABSURD WORLD OF SAMUEL BECKETT AND HAROLD PINTER

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### Abstract

‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ is the phrase used in reference to the form of drama based on absurdism. The ‘absurd’ plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others all share the view that man inhabits a universe with which he is out of key. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that life is inherently without meaning. The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are marked by the artist’s vision of the world into which their characters are placed. They deal with the position and the situation of man in their surrounding world. The dramatic message in their plays is that the world we live in is all meaningless, nonsense and absurd. Pinter and Beckett share certain elements of the absurd drama - the violation of the Aristotelian principles of cause and effect, the inconsistency in identity and actions of characters, the unverifiability of situations, repetition of inconsequential action, disjointed dialogues and multiple patterns of meaning.

**Keywords:-** absurdism, philosophy, inconsequential action, disjointed dialogues

Absurdism is one of the most exciting and creative movements in the modern theatre. ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ is the phrase used in reference to the form of drama based on absurdism. The term ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ was coined by the American critic Martin Esslin who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. This phrase is used in reference to particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. The term ‘absurd’ is derived from an essay by Albert Camus. In his *Myth of Sisyphus*, written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The ‘absurd’ plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others all share the view that man inhabits a universe with which he is out of key. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that life is inherently without meaning. These plays offers its audience an existentialist point of view of the outside world where there appears to be no true order or meaning.

In practice, The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Time, place and identity are vague and fluid and even

basic casualty frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like or even nightmare-like moods. Most absurdist plays have no logical plot. The absence of the plot pushes an emphasis on proving the pointless existence of man. Quite often, such plays reveal the human condition at its absolute worst.

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are marked by the artist's vision of the world into which their characters are placed. They deal with the position and the situation of man in their surrounding world. Their hero is a Sisyphusean type of man waiting for the fulfilment of his fate, which seems to be eternal through his suffering and hoping. He is alienated from the world, which is unknown, remote, and indifferent, and from which he is isolated by the walls of his self. It is the labour of Sisyphus to continue to live in this world. The conflict between two different substances – the world and the human subject, leads to the feelings of Absurdity and to fundamental existential question, about the meaning of human life in a world where he lives as a stranger.

Their characters are creatures grounded in Absurdity; there is no meaning in their Being, which is why their lives involve mere waiting for the end, the death. The waiting is a pure experience of time itself, time which disintegrates into smaller and shorter periods, so that their waiting is a never-ending fate having no purpose, but the only aim – the end. The whole greatness of their absurd man is his intractability with which he continually fills up his precarious fate, and although his suffering increases as time stops he does not live without hope and joy in life

The dramatic message in their plays is that the world we live in is all meaningless, nonsense and absurd. One of Pinter's statements makes it easy to follow his stand: "The preference for 'Life' with a capital L, which is held up to be very different to life with small l, I mean the life we in fact live."<sup>1</sup> In his plays it is shown that this life with a small l, which one has to live with aching hands and bleeding feet, is tied to the human predicament. As in *The Birthday Party* Stanley will have to accept such a life, for him there is no escape. After being roughed up by Goldberg and McCann, who may be taken for the inexorable forces of life, he resigns himself to this life. A well-dressed and clean shaved Stanley shows his conformity with the world reality, into a life with a small l. Stanley wanted frantically to get released from the clutches of life and refused doggedly to accept a branded, superimposed 'birthday' for himself. He wanted to negate this so-called birth into this reality. But life has been finally thrust upon Stanley forever.

Similarly Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* protests against the mysterious organisation for which he works. His search for identity is ultimately crushed by the system. The search for territory and security in Pinter's plays, which is synonymous with man's search for identity, is thwarted by his ego. In *The Caretaker* Davies' illusion based on his pride threatens the illusion of Mick and Aston based on their pretence of living. Albert, who in *A Night Out*, goes out for a free and open life, finds the outside life equally blinding and returns back. Edward's predicament in *A Slight Ache* exemplifies the individual's confrontation with natural decay. In *The Lover* the vision is that of man's attempt at securing an illusion of vitalising love against the background of fleeting reality.

Beckett and Pinter's language reflects strategy that lets the audience waver between the text and the subtext, from one startling revelation to another. What the audience realises ultimately is that life is bewilderingly enigmatic. The unverifiability of characters, situations and actions in their plays throws up a number of questions which keep on recurring. Questions about the antecedents of the characters and the logicity of their actions lead to the basic question of

the purpose of the universe and human existence. Their plays while trying to satisfy one's curiosity for ordinary details, raises fresh doubts and ultimately leads to the root of all questions. Mr. Sand's question, "Who did bring me into the world?" (The Room) and Lenny's query, '...That night. You know...the night you got...that night with Mum, what was it like?' and Goldberg's question 'What makes you think you exist?' and Lens' question, 'The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what....You are a sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of?' (Basement) are the unanswered questions that keep one troubling.

Pinter shares with Beckett certain elements of the absurd drama - the violation of the Aristotelian principles of cause and effect, the inconsistency in identity and actions of characters, the unverifiability of situations, repetition of inconsequential action, disjointed dialogues and multiple patterns of meaning. Pinter, unlike Beckett, works out his theatrical action into shocking climaxes. Rose being suddenly blinded, Davies being thrown out, Stanley being taken away, Edward being dispossessed, Gus being threatened with death.

The problem of communication is a common theme in absurd drama. In the plays of Beckett, Ionesco and Albee, the characters fail to communicate. But in Pinter's plays there is evasion rather than failure of communication. Beckett's characters try to communicate but stumble, whereas Pinter's characters maintain a non-communicative posture against all provocation, till they break down under pressure.

Beckett achieves the depersonalization of his characters by presenting them as bare and abstract figures bereft of any specificity. One of the techniques Beckett employs for this purpose is concealing the parts of the body of his characters - burying them in dustbin, and in heaps of sand (as in Happy Days) and concealing the parts of body and face through heavy make-up (as in Not I), one can see nothing except the face of the character.

Stage-setting in Beckett is reduced to simplification and generalisation: a low mound with one tree, an unfurnished room, three unlocalised urns. Pinter's setting is a realistic representation of a room, a boarding house or a deserted hotel, although these settings are so bare that they often appear as unlocalised as Beckett's. In Pinter's plays there is fusion of the commonplace and the mysterious, reality and fantasy. The sudden blinding of Rose, the mysterious placing of order and lifting of food by the speaking-tube dumb-waiter, Edward suddenly turning mute, are treated as naturally as men turning into rhinoceroses in Ionesco's Rhinoceros or the growth of the corpse in Amedee.

Pinter, like Beckett communicates the mystery, the problematical nature of man's situation in the world. However natural his dialogue, 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... I admire Beckett's work so much that some thing of its lecture might appear in my own."<sup>2</sup>

To rank Pinter with Beckett is to be unfair to both. 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 overtone of the cosmic void. Pinter's world on the other hand is thoroughly British. It is at once naturalistic and firmly realised. Unlike Beckett's characters Pinter gives a recognizable personality to his characters. Goldberg and McCann are sharply distinguished. In Beckett language does not communicate. It insulates the characters almost

pathetically. On the other hand Pinter uses language as a camouflage or ‘smoke-screen’ to hide one’s meaning. Language in his hands becomes an excellent instrument for evasion of meaning. Pinter is more realistic in his dialogue than his master. Both Beckett and Pinter are socially non-committal and if at all they are committed they are committed to their own private vision of life and values. Pinter, being a professional actor and stage-manager, has a surer grasp of stagecraft than Beckett.

The term ‘Comedy of Menace’ when applied to Pinter points to a mixture of genres. This is a comedy that frightens and causes pain. In Pinter’s plays the potency of menace derives from an inability to define its source. Fear envelops the play like mist. If it can be categorised it is simply the constant threat to the individual personality by the forces of the conformity or the system. There is menace in *Waiting for Godot* but it is weakened by the symbolic landscape and its cosmic implications. Pinter particularises the situation to intensify the menace. Pinter’s menace is greater because it exists in the house next door. Mysterious outsiders humorously but horrifically menace his characters.

The uniqueness of Pinter’s play lies in his peculiar way of using common man’s language. Pinter exploits the vitality and raciness of common man’s language. He creates an effective linguistic tool, even poetry. He is adept in poetic orchestration of pauses and silences. Beckett, on the other hand, uses stylized prose - good English with correct grammar mainly because he depicts bare situations and abstract figures that are free from empirical peculiarities. Like Beckett’s, Pinter’s speeches rest on great gaps. In *Landscape*, Pinter has beautifully used the gaps in speech, as found in Beckett’s *Happy Days*.

The events and characters in the plays of Pinter are spatially recognizable. Beckett isolates his characters from space. Vladimir and Estragon the two characters of *Waiting for Godot* are beyond any particular social identity and are outside the pale of society. They are reduced to abstractions. But Pinter’s characters have some kind of social identity. Bert is a van driver, Edward and Richard are from the aristocratic class, Ruth is from an upcoming middle class, and Davies, a poor tramp. However, Pinter delinks characters from the past and the future.

Pinter’s plays reflect on life and death as do the works of Beckett and Kafka - Pinter admits the influence of Beckett and Kafka on him : “When I read them (Kafka and Beckett) it rang a bell, that’s all within me. I thought something is going on here which is going in me too.”<sup>3</sup> Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, know nothing of the motives or goals for which they are to kill the man they are waiting for, nor do they know who the man is. Their action is devoid of any contextual basis. Nothing is certain except the necessity of action. Their action consists largely of waiting, like Beckett’s tramps (who waited for Godot to appear)

Playwrights like Sartre, Camus, Jean Anouilh wanted to deal with the meaninglessness or absurdity of life; but they could only put their abstract philosophy of life, underlined by the irrationality of human condition, through a neatly diagrammed style based on discursive seasoning. Their new content could hardly fit into the prevalent form. Their plays highlighted their ideas, but failed to make much impact on the audience in the absence of an appropriate lingual idiom. Samuel Beckett and Pinter tried to project the meaninglessness of life, the absurdity of human situation, by a deliberate and open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. Beckett and Pinter bring in a new conversational tonality in the dialogue in which phrases and rhythms of day-to-day talk are reproduced with startling accuracy. The way they handle the ordinariness of the tonal conversation, its repetition and inconsequentiality carries overtones of uncertainty, menace and cruelty. Their work unites form and content into

one perfect pattern. The peculiar richness of these plays lies in the fact that they open vistas on so many different perspectives. They are open to philosophical, religious, and psychological interpretations, yet above all, they are poem on time and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity.

**Endnotes**

1. Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," Plays One: The Birthday Party, The Room, The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache, The Hothouse and A Night Out (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) xi.
2. Harold Pinter, interviewed by Harry Thompson," New Theatre Magazine, vol.2, no. 2, January 1961 qtd. in Batty,105.
3. Harold Pinter, interviewed by John Sherwood, BBC European Service, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1960, qtd. in Esslin, The Peopled Wound 36.