

PINTER'S STYLISTIC CONTRIBUTION IN DRAMA

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In terms of stylistic contribution to one's plays, Harold Pinter (1930-2008) undoubtedly regarded as the foremost runner in comparison to his contemporaries like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet etc. The term 'Pinteresque' named after Pinter, occupies an admirable place in literary English to describe a peculiar kind of environment in drama, and signifies his name and fame in terms of the most stylistic playwright. Simon Trussler writes in his study of Pinter's plays that 'more rubbish has been written about Harold Pinter than all his contemporaries put together.' (Trussler 13). In fact since his appearance in the English Theatre in 1957, Harold Pinter has been as highly praised by one group of critics as he has been fiercely castigated by another. During the forty seven years of his career as a dramatist, he has tried different styles- realist, surrealist, absurdist, and lyrical.

Pinter finds 'theories of drama' quite unreadable, so theory is antagonistic to him. He never writes introductions to his plays. He believes that it is the responsibility of audience to understand his plays. In conversation with Gussow, he expresses his views:

Mel Gussow: You never write introductions to your plays.

Harold Pinter: A play has to speak for itself. I have written letters to directors- very concrete, I think, not theoretical. About how-to-do, particularly when I can't be there. But I was extremely angry when I wrote a letter to a very nice German director, an elderly man called Schweikart, who was doing *Landscape* and *Silence* in Hamburg. I wrote him a letter about the plays, which I hoped would be helpful. And eventually the programme reached me and there was my private letter, printed in the programme. He didn't do it, but the theatre got the letter from him and damn well printed it. It's not public, that business. I was talking, practically, to my director.

Mel Gussow: Do you think it hurt the appreciation or the understanding of the play to have that in the programme?

Harold Pinter: No, it probably helped. But that wasn't point. And equally I'm not interested in helping people to understand it

Mel Gussow: But the communication is very important to you. You want people to be moved by the work.

Harold Pinter: But that can only come through the work itself. If it's going to move them, it's going to move them. It's entirely their own responsibility. Naturally I'm very happy when the lays actually do communicate, when the audience enjoys them or finds them recognizable. It is naturally gratifying. Nut if they don't, they simply don't. And it's not my business to try to encourage them. I have very mixed feelings about audiences. I love some of them. Unfortunately, I did develop as an actor hostility towards audiences. It may sound childish, but I tend to regard the audience as my enemy. (Gussow 42-43)

To Pinter, title does not come first but last. He doesn't begin with certain system or follow any theory either. Few words come into his mind and he starts writing. He recalls:

I remember when I wrote *No Man's Land*, I was in a taxi one night coming back from somewhere and suddenly a line, a few words came into mind. I had no pencil. I got back to the house and wrote those lines down. I can't remember exactly what they were, but it was the very beginning of the play, and I didn't know who said them. As you know, I don't proceed from any kind of system or theory. (50)

His stylistic and thematic contribution is unique in contemporary English literary world. Here we would like to discuss some of his prominent styles briefly.

Pinteresque

Harold Pinter's name is used as an adjective to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama. The term 'Pinteresque' places him in the company of authors considered unique or influential enough to elicit eponymous adjectives. It has an established place in the English language for almost thirty years.

Pinter's plays are typically characterized by implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, and long pauses. His characters are often ordinary and belong to common class. They are unimportant and not so influential. They find it difficult to communicate properly with each other. His plays combine humour with an atmosphere of unhappiness and danger. The word Pinteresque is used to describe these qualities.

Menace and the Absurd

"In 1957 David Campton coined the term 'Comedies of Menace' as the subtitle of his one-act plays collectively called *The Lunatic View*." (Dukore 23). In a review published in 1958, borrowing from this sub title, theatre critic Irving Wardle called Pinter's *The Birthday Party* as "comedy of menace" (Wardle 33), although he subsequently wanted to withdraw the label, its aptness made it stick. Such plays begin with an apparently innocent situation that becomes both threatening and absurd as Pinter's characters behave in ways often perceived as inexplicable by his audiences and one another.

Pinter restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretence crumbles. With a minimum of plot, drama emerges from the power struggle and hide-and-seek of interlocution. Pinter's

drama was first perceived as a variation of absurd theatre, but has later more aptly been characterised as 'comedy of menace'.

'Comedies of Menace' puns on 'Comedies of Manners'. Pinter, like Congreve, provokes laughter through balanced phraseology, antithesis, and the language and manners of social classes- though the classes in his plays are usually lower than those in Congreve's. We can see an antithesis in a dialogue in *The Birthday Party*: 'Is Stanley up yet' 'I don't know. Is he?' 'I don't know. I haven't seen him down yet.' 'Well then he can't be up.' In this dialogue 'down' is the opposite of 'up'. This antithesis helps create comedy. Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological and potential violence. Plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* are comic but end on a note of physical violence.

In Pinter's early plays menace waits outside secretly, but it has psychological roots also. In *The Birthday Party* Stanley fears visitors. In *A Slight Ache* a psychologically disturbed man fears a man he invites inside. In *The Dumb Waiter* outside forces menace a questioning killer. Sometime menace may take the shape of particular character. It is unexplained because realistic explanations are absent. One is confused why characters visit others, why they perform unspecified actions, why the others fear them. Reviewers and readers accuse Pinter of wilful obfuscation.

Later on menacing aspect became less important in his plays. When asked by Gussow if he was tired of menace, he replied:

Oh, yes, absolutely. You must understand however that when I said I was tired of menace, I was using a word that I didn't coin. I never thought of menace myself. It was called 'comedy of menace' quite a long time ago. I never stuck categories on myself, or on any of us. But if what I understand the word menace to mean is certain elements that I have employed in the past in the shape of a particular play, then I don't think it's worthy of much more exploration. After *The Homecoming* I tried writing- odds and ends- and failed, for some time. I remember one or two of them, writing a couple of pages in which again someone came into a room and all that. And it was quite dry, quite dry really. No, I'm not at all interested in 'threatening behaviour' any more although I don't think this makes plays like *The Homecoming* and *The Birthday Party* invalid. But you're always stuck. You're stuck as a writer. I'm stuck in my own tracks, whatever they are- for so long. Forever, just because I think I've managed to get out of one trap doesn't mean that I'm not still in a trap. (Gussow 24)

As Pinter developed, the naturalistic side of his art became less pronounced. Even the early critics recognised that despite their surface naturalism his plays had links to the then- new Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin coined the term the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, published in 1961, Martin Esslin classified him among the English dramatists of the absurd. He cites Ionesco's statement that the absurd has no purpose. In this sense man's existence in the universe is absurd. "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots", says Ionesco, "man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (Esslin 5-6). The sensation of metaphysical anguish when confronted by the absurdity of the human condition is the chief theme of the Theatre of the Absurd. Some critics pointed that absurdists like Kafka, Beckett, and Ionesco influenced Pinter. (Kitchin 114). Pinter has admired Beckett and Kafka. He called Beckett 'the best prose writer living' (Bensky 19-20), but admitted

that he had not heard of Ionesco until after he had written his first few plays. Pinter's early plays conform to the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd. Events in his plays are illogical or unmotivated and actions are unexplained. "Linguistic absurdity may suggest the absurdity of the human condition. Fear of the menace may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe." (Dukore 25). Harold Pinter's *The Room* is one of the most astonishing first plays ever written. *The Room* speaks in a distinctive, resounding, and authoritative voice, employing themes and techniques his later plays would develop. *The Room* belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd.

In the play Rose talks to her husband Bert Hudd, a silent van driver while she prepares food for him. They are interrupted by the landlord, Kidd. With Kidd she talks at cross purposes. After some time he leaves and Bert also goes out. Soon Mr and Mrs Sands enter and say that they are hunting for an apartment. They want to meet the landlord who told them of a vacant flat: the flat where Rose and Bert live. Sands depart and Kidd comes in with a request to receive the man in the basement who wants to see her alone. Kidd's earlier visit was to discover whether Bert had gone. The visitor is a blind Negro named Riley. He calls her Sal and says that her father wants her to come home. Meanwhile Bert comes and finds them together. He knocks Riley to the floor and kicks him until he lies still- possibly dead. Rose then cries out that she is blind.

The Room is the fine example of the menace and absurd. Insecurity and fear create dramatic tensions. "She (Rose) insists that no one bothers Bert and her in the room, but the action demonstrates a succession of intruders who bother them." (27). The major concern is not the characters' background but their avoidance of revealing it. When Riley calls Rose 'Sal', she tells him not to call her by it. Though both may be the nicknames of Rosalie, she doesn't want to be called Sal because a different name frightens her.

As in *The Room*, in *The Birthday Party*, Stanley, like Rose, fears visitors. Menace shows the absurdity of the human condition. Non realism mixes with realism. Meaningless questions and accusations are suggestive of the absurd. When two visitors Mc Cann and Goldberg arrive Stanley peeks through the kitchen serving-hatch and tries to go away secretly through the rear door. Mystery and menace increase when Mc Cann asks Goldberg if they are in the right house, for he saw no number on the gate. On seeing them Stanley is greatly scared and we don't know the reason. Menace is demonstrated in the form of two visitors menacingly interrogating Stanley and violence that taking place at the end.

In *A Slight Ache* the menace is an external manifestation of internal, psychological disturbance. Flora cultivates her garden and understands its flowers. Her husband Edward is not interested in the garden and flowers. A Matchseller stands outside of the gate. Edward wonders why the Matchseller stands there and calls him inside. He is called inside by Edward. He tries to elicit information from him, but the Matchseller says nothing. When Flora is alone with him she is seductive. Next time when Edward tries to get information from him, he is unable to cope with the Matchseller's silence. Edward loses control of himself and collapses. Flora puts the Matchseller's tray in her husband's hands and takes the Matchseller into the garden for lunch. Edward's physical ache is a manifestation of his psychological ache. Confronted with it he cannot maintain his equilibrium. The destruction of the man and renewal of the woman are absurd.

Realism

Pinter said in 1961 that “what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I am doing is not realism.” (Pinter 11). Realism is a style in art or literature that shows things and people as they are in real life. This is a way of seeing, accepting and dealing with situations as they really are without being influenced by your emotions or false hopes. Peter Hall has directed plays of Pinter for stage and movies. He has called them “realistic production.” (Hall 4-17). Clive Donner and Joan Kemp- Welch, who have directed them for movies and television respectively, agree upon the need for a basically realistic approach to Pinter’s drama. (Burkman 121).

Authors of the discursive plays want viewers to understand their thematic purposes. They employ a spokesman to make the meaning clear. They inject a remedy or thematic summary in the final act. By contrast, playwrights like Beckett and Chekhov avoid their characters to reveal themselves. Pinter, like Beckett, doesn’t consider it part of his job to help audiences to understand his plays. He feels that understanding ‘can only come through the work itself’ and is ‘entirely their own responsibility’. (Gussow, *A Conversation (Pause)*, 134). Pinter has always tried to avoid commenting on the meanings of his plays. He rejects any allegorical interpretation to his plays. Terence Rattigan saw *The Caretaker*. He gave an allegorical meaning to it: “It’s the Old Testament God and the New Testament God, with the caretaker as humanity- that’s what it’s about, isn’t it?”. Pinter disagreed: “It’s about two brothers and a caretaker.”(Watts 26).

There is no difference between form and content of his plays. His plays are not about something; that something is present in his plays in dramatic and theatrical form. This is realistic approach. He shows real working class people in his characters. No manipulation in characters is required. Things and people are presented as they are in real life. Meaning embodies in the direct impact of what happens on stage, not in an explanatory character.

When Pinter’s characters try to explain themselves they fail to clarify. Problem is not whether they are real or not but one fails to understand them- a failure that is the dramatic point. Pinter objects to ‘the because of the drama’ and asks, “What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy?” (Taylor 184). Pinter’s dramaturgy makes his characters inexpressive, unreliable, difficult to define, and unwilling to give clear answers to questions. When one understands the intense reality of such dramaturgy, a worried and sad feeling which is caused by an unpleasant surprise is turned into fascination. This is opposite of conventionally realistic and symbolic drama but it creates a greater realism. It casts a direct impact upon the spectators and readers.

This method can be observed in Pinter’s response to a woman who wrote to him:

Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play *The Birthday Party*. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I can not fully understand your play.

Pinter replied:

Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that

without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your letter. (Daily Mail, Esslin 37-8)

Indirectly, Pinter answered the woman's questions. He responded to woman in the same terms in which she reacted to his characters. He suggested her to respond to his characters in the same terms in which one responded to a real human being.

Silence and Pauses

These are two most discussed techniques of Pinter. Actors and directors interpreted these two techniques differently. Some opine that pause means stopping for short duration and silence means stopping for long duration; but these are not formal conveniences or voluntary actions. These are involuntary actions of the body. In our conversation we don't pause or remain silent purposely, but mental state prompts us to do so. Pinter clarifies this in his conversation to Gussow:

Mel Gussow: You're very clear about the difference between the pause and the silence. The silence is the end of a movement?

Harold Pinter: Oh, no. These pauses and silences! I've been appalled. Occasionally when I've run into groups of actors, normally abroad, they say a silence is obviously longer than a pause. Right. O.K., so it is. They'll say, this is a pause, so we'll stop. And after the pause we'll start again. I'm sure this happens all over the place and thank goodness I don't know anything about it. From my point of view, these are not in any sense a formal kind of arrangement. The pause is a pause because of what has just happened in the minds and guts of the characters. They spring out of the text. They're not formal conveniences or stresses but part of the body of the action. I'm simply suggesting that if they play it properly they will find that a pause- or whatever the hell it is- is inevitable. And a silence equally means that something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time- until they can recover from whatever happened before the silence.

Mel Gussow: In a sense they stand in for dialogue.

Harold Pinter: Yes. This is part of the life of the thing. And that's why it's quite distressing to find actors stopping just because it says 'pause. (Gussow 36)

Silence is the peculiar quality of Pinter's plays. Framed by dialogue, and achieving their effects in relationship to words, are various types of silence. According to Peter Hall there are differences between Pinter's three dots, pauses, and silences. Three dots constitute 'a very tiny hesitation'. A pause "is really a bridge between where the audience thinks that you're this side of the river, and then when you speak again, you're on the other side. It's a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in." (Hall 10). Silence is more extreme, "a dead stop where the confrontation has become so extreme, there is nothing to be said until either the temperature has gone down, or the temperature has gone up, and then something quite new happens." (10).

Among the most-commonly cited of Pinter's comments on his own work are his remarks about two kinds of silence. According to Pinter there are two silences- One when no word is spoken, and the other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is

speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are near to nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. Generally it is considered that Pinter's characters suffer from 'failure of communication'. On the contrary it is a fact that sometime we communicate best in our silence, and say many things without saying. In fact Pinter's characters communicate well in their silence.

In view of the above facts, Pinter still holds a position of the most original, stylistic and enigmatic writer. His stylistic techniques find their very roots in the real life, yet seem to have come from imaginary world. What we see in his plays, is realism but still his plays are far from realism. His 'Silence' and 'Pauses' may seem to be strange and enigmatic but, don't we talk in this way? Pinter should hold prospects of being staged in India.

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