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Absurd dramatic tradition and Pintereque elements: A study with reference to
The Room and The Birthday Party

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Abstract

*The present paper aims to contribute to a scholastic study of dramatic elements in Noble prize winning British dramatist Harold Pinter's two early plays *The Room* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1957), and make an analysis of their proximity to the absurd dramatic tradition. Harold Pinter (1930-2008) established himself as one of the most prominent modern dramatist in the post second world war era through his path breaking plays. From the beginning he was considered as a young British dramatist of the famous absurd dramatic tradition. Even though his early plays have the absurd elements in them but his later plays are more vocal for their political and social views. Going a step further he created a special niche for himself in the firmament of British theatre and became so famous that Pintereque became an adjective in English language. During his life time he was called as one among the most successful living dramatists of his time. He was greatly influenced by Samuel Beckett which he unhesitatingly acknowledged.*

Key words: *Pintereque, Pinter, Absurd, The Room, The Birthday Party.*

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The Absurd drama mainly focuses on the cultural disintegration, the decline of moral values in the collapsing society, the dissolution of language and action on the stage. The dramatists like Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard have tried to present loss of identity of human being and described him not as an individual but as a machine. These play always attempt to create something new by re-trying, subverting, transcending and transforming. The absurd dramatists reject the existing artistic rules. We get satire, humour and incongruity as chief ingredients of the absurd tradition. This mode of dramatic form presents the condition of human nothingness and negation. The tradition of Absurd can be traced back to the older stages of Greek theatre (old comedy). Martin Esslin, while explaining the tradition of Absurd, says :

The Theatre of the Absurd is a return to old, even archaic, traditions. Its novelty lies in its somewhat unusual combination of such antecedents, and a survey of these will show that what may strike the unprepared spectator as iconoclastic and incomprehensible innovation is in fact merely an expansion, revaluation, and development of procedures that are familiar and completely acceptable in only slightly different contexts.(327)

In the absurd dramatic tradition we don't find a well-defined storyline but depiction of events that audience is free to interpret. It focuses on the incomprehensibility of the world and makes a presentation of an order less world. In these dramas language acts as barrier for communication with dialogues without a clear meaning. It depicts an environment which is full of isolation. The absurd dramatists tries to justify that the human existence is absurd as they come to this world without asking to be born and also die without seeking death for themselves (Oliver,3). Human beings are trapped between this birth and death. The hopelessness of human existence is manifested in the writings of the absurd dramatists. The theatre of absurd is also called as theatre of non-communication. Samuel Beckett, an Irish dramatist, was a great exponent of this theatre and his most famous play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is a milestone in this tradition. His plays focus on very personal memories, obsession and Christian nihilism. McMullen presents Samuel Beckett as a trend setter. The other great absurd dramatists are Eugene Ionesco, a Rumanian ; Arthur Adamov, who was born in Russia and began his career in Paris ; Fernando Arrabal, who was born in Spain but wrote in French ; and Edward Albee ,an American dramatist. According to Esslin ,the plays of these masters of absurd drama bewildered

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the mind of the critics and puzzled the audience on their first appearance. Ignoring the age old standard elements of dramatic art these plays provoked the theatre critics to ponder over the novelty of the dramatists. Without any well observable characters on the stage and with little convincing actions these plays challenged the traditional pattern of drama. Nonsense and repetitive talk on trivial matters are a recurring feature of these dramas. These plays start with irrational beginning and end arbitrarily without a well made narration. These plays by all the traditional standards of critical appreciation of the drama are not only abominably bad but they do not even deserve the name of drama (Esslin,7). The theatre of absurd was not only worked because of its new form but it mainly worked for the difference in objective and the use of a different artistic means. These plays were both creating and applying a difference convention of drama (Esslin,8). When Samuel Beckett was writing *Waiting For Godot* he never wished to tell a well defined story. He even didn't try to give the cathartic effect that the Greek dramas are famous for. He never tried to give any solution to the problem of human beings. The absurd dramatists tried to present their vision of the world. They perhaps felt an artistic urge to do so. The theatre of Absurd also presents a poetic image or sometimes several complex poetic images. Ionesco's *Amédée* (1954) presents this kind of poetic image. Similarly Arrabal's *The Two Executioners* (1958) is a complex image of the mother son relationship. These plays are the result of absence of many clear and well defined systems of beliefs or value.

Harold Pinter belongs to the younger generation of absurd dramatists. His dramatic career falls into the post-modern era of British Literature. He was twenty-four years younger than Beckett. He was from a family of immigrants who had their origin in Eastern Europe like many of the absurd dramatists. He admitted the influence of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett on his dramas. Unlike the modern playwrights' vision of realism who believe in achieving some limited objective for a happy world, Pinter tried to project the basic problems of existence like loneliness, helplessness in front of human misery and death. Pinter has rejected the well made polished dialogue of everyday speech of his characters as they are not the exact reproduction of human speech. According to his belief no human beings speak in such accuracy and polished style. Thus he used real life

dialogue with lots of pauses and silences instead of the well structured logical dialogues of traditional drama. Pinter didn't mince any word when he admitted his admiration of Samuel Beckett. He admitted that some of Beckett's texture might have appeared in his plays. Pinter first witnessed *Waiting for Godot* in London in 1956. He first met Beckett in Paris in 1961. Beckett's trademark dramatic techniques influenced him in his very first meeting. There are a few deviations in Pinter's techniques. Unlike Beckett's, his plays are naturalistic. He has the art of combining the frightening with farcical. Pinter first discovered a part of Beckett's *Watt* (1953) in a poetry magazine called *Poetry Ireland* edited by David Marcus. After this accidental encounter with Beckett's writing, he tried to know more about Beckett, who later became both a literary influence and a close personal friend. Ruby Cohn in her critical essay justifies Pinter as a true heir of Beckett as far as absurd dramatic tradition is concerned.

If Pinter has repeatedly been named as Beckett's heir on the English stage, it is because the characters of both lead lives of complex and unquiet desperation – a desperation expressed with extreme economy of theatrical resources. The clutter of our world is mocked by the stinginess of the stage-worlds of Beckett and Pinter. Sets, props, characters and language are stripped by both playwrights to what one is tempted to call their essence.

However, Pinter is not only Beckett's son. He is at least a cousin of the Angry young Englishmen of his generation, for Pinter's anger, like theirs, is directed vitriolically against the system.(55)

However Marc Silverstein tries to challenge Esslin's assessment of Pinter as an absurd dramatist in the following lines.

There are two problems with Esslin's attempt to make Pinter conform to his definition of the 'absurd': (1) a tendency to generalize the category of "Metaphysical anguish", and (2) a privileging of the metaphysical at the expense of the social and the political. I would argue that appealing to thematic concern with the

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“anguish”, “dream” and “mystery of the Universe” that Esslin views as central to absurdist Zeitgeist hardly constitutes an adequate response to the issues of cultural power Pinter’s work explores. While renouncing the ideological and epistemological reassurance implicit in the realism of an Osborne or Wesker, Pinter’s plays, “we have always seen man stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or...context”. At issue more is not whether Esslin is simply incorrect in his reading of the plays as offering a poetic image of a fundamental –i.e., a cultural and universal –existential anxiety, but now such a reading allows him to ignore the very real concern with the structures of domination and cultural power that, as I have argued throughout this study, play a central role in Pinter’s work. Seizing upon the thematics of ‘metaphysical anguish’, Esslin excludes a consideration of the all too infrequently remarked political dimension of these plays. While Pinter may indeed accept Ionesco’s proposition that, ‘cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost,’ the immediate problem facing Stanley, Stella, Ruth and Kate is their inability either to cut themselves off from or to dismantle a cultural order that, as Barthes writes, “remains in place, like an imperishable corpse. (144-145)

Though there is a lot of realistic touch as far as the characters and their varied mood are concerned, a Pinter play confirms to the absurd theatrical tradition due to the depiction of human isolation, non-communication, identity crisis and lack of verification. Pinter's plays present on the stage a relatively more real world than his other fellow absurd dramatists with social and political overtone. The plays represent uses and abuses of power, and the powerlessness of human beings in front of a massive force. Pinter uses a language which is often charged with mystery and

ambiguity. *Pintereque* is a term used as an adjective to describe something illogical and menacing situation, and also to present a more fractured world where individuals struggle to find a meaning. *The Room* (1957) is the first one act play of Pinter where we see an old woman, Rose, who takes excess care of her husband Bert Hudd. She takes all trouble to give a comfortable life to her husband who is ten years younger to her. This extreme care is probably to keep an otherwise violent man whose real brutal force is only seen towards the end of the play. Rose feels insecure as Bert is preparing to venture outside on some unspecified trip. Her anxieties are visible from her movements. She repeats the cosiness of the room and the hostile weather outside. *It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.....the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway.....Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough. There wasn't a soul about....* Her constant apprehension of danger outside and the basement room creates a mysterious feeling. *Those walls would have finished you off. I don't know who lives down there now. Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance .Maybe they're foreigners.* She constantly tries to reassure herself that this room is a safe place. But this is essentially unprovoked and unreasonable in a normal situation. Rose is not simply afraid of the weather outside but something more and that is the reason she tells Bert not to go outside. Pinter uses hidden identity and this supplies a lot of tension to the general thread of the play. The fear of some imminent danger is heightened by the arrival of Mr Kidd. But it becomes more serious as Rose finds Mr and Mrs Sands there enquiring about the landlord.

ROSE. What were you looking for ?

MRS SANDS. The man who runs the house.

MR SANDS. The landlord. We're trying to get hold of the landlord.

MRS SANDS. What's his name, Toddy ?

ROSE. His name's Mr Kidd.

MRS SANDS. Kidd, Was that the name, Toddy ?

MR SANDS. Kidd ? No, that's not it.

ROSE. Mr Kidd. That's his name.

MR SANDS. Well, that's not the bloke we're looking for.

ROSE. Well, you must be looking for someone else.(Act I,95)

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Finally the fear of Rose becomes true with the entry of Riley when Bert is away from the house. This blind Negro calls Rose as *Sal*. He tells that he has a message from her father. His repeated call -*Come home, Sal...Come home now, Sal*- is quite significant and points to an unknown past of Rose. Initially Rose denies any relation with this man or his message. *I don't know you and anybody knows I'm here and I don't know anybody anyway*. This statement of Rose implies her intention of hiding certain identity and her relationship with her past. Rose's straight rejection of return to home also indicates her sharp denial of her past. *Home ?Go now. Come on. It's late. It's late*. It is this past that constantly haunts Rose throughout the play. This is the reason she does not want to leave the room. Her excess caring nature for her husband reveals her extreme fear for the past which she doesn't want to tell her husband. On his arrival Bert finds Riley in the room but ignores him first. Bert describes his journey with a murderous tone by using violent language. Then suddenly he raises and strikes Riley with all brutality till the latter lies motionless on the ground. Rose closing her eyes shouts *Can't see .I can't see. I can't see*. The play ends with Bert leaving the place.

The highlighted tension and insecurity, the unfounded fear and anxiety are the characteristics of absurd drama that we find here in this play. The language, though limited to everyday conversation, highlights the constant fear of some unknown entity. The outside menace and Rose's waiting for this definitely fits the absurd tradition. Like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the news of somebody's arrival increases anxiety and tension. Though delayed it comes at the end in the form of Riley, the blind Negro. Bert's sudden attack of Riley gives a shock to the audience and stresses human vulnerability to unknown dangers. Riley comes to the room as danger but he falls prey to the danger which is there inside the room. Of course it is Rose who faces the existential uncertainties of human life whose state appears quite precariousness as she has lost everything at the end - the safety of a room, the protection of a husband and even the love of a father. Her predicament reminds us the situation of human beings who can never get a permanent protection in life. She is finally paralysed and succumbs to the threat which she has been avoiding for a long time.

The Birthday Party (1957) is the first full length play that satisfies the absurd theatrical tradition. At the very beginning we find a small talk between Petey and Meg both in their sixties. This stereotype conversation is a common feature of absurd drama which don't have any significant meaning.

MEG. Is that you, Petey ?

Pause.

Petey, is that you ?

Pause

Petey ?

PETEY. What ?

MEG. Is that you ?

PETEY. Yes, it's me. (Act I,1)

Stanley Webber is the main character in the play whose situation is quite similar to the modern human beings. It depicts the basic human condition. It is again set in a closed sea-side boarding house where we find Stanley a young man too much pampered by an old lady named Meg. Stanley's deliberate avoidance of outside world and living in this dingy sea-side guest house does not seem quite normal which creates the initial anxiety in the mind of the audience. The neurotic anxiety of Stanley is visible when he hears about some visitor searching about this house. His withdrawal and isolation reflect the psychological fear of a man for an unknown danger. Satisfying the absurd tradition Pinter has presented Stanley's character with elements of mystery, menace and a lot of humour. Stanley's insecurity originates from his existential fears. In spite of the all the avoidance, the arrival of two intruders- Goldberg and McCann- makes her life miserable. The language used by them is full of sophistication but unnerves the confidence of an otherwise silent young man. Under the guise of gentle men this two intruders arrange a birthday party of Stanley only to subjugate him. Language is used as a weapon to terrorize and compel him to break. Through the game of blind man's buff they demolish the individuality of Stanley and later takes him for final interrogation. The attack is so severe that it turns Stanley into a speechless creature. Here is an example of verbal attack on Stanley.

GOLDBERG. Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left.

MCCANN. You betrayed our land.

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GOLDBERG. You betray our breed.

MCCANN. Who are you, Webber ?

GOLDBERG. What makes you think you exist ?

MCCANN. You're dead.

GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You are nothing but an odour. (Act II,46)

The use of pauses and silences by Pinter intensifies the menace. Human vulnerability is manifested through the characters of Stanley and Meg. In the play it is quite obvious that Meg has a troubled relation with Petey her husband. There is no love which Meg tries to get from Stanley. It could be motherly love or somewhat sensual love. Stanley on the other hand behaves in a peculiar way and does not reciprocate this love of Meg with any sincerity. So both of them are at some extreme edge of life where they need some affection and protection which is quite elusive. The verbal attack of Goldberg and McCann forces Stanley to surrender. We mark the complete disintegration of an individual in front of a some unknown power. The arrival of the two outsiders shatters the security of Stanley that forces him to think in an absurd manner.

STANLEY. (advancing) They're coming today. They are coming in a van.

MEG. Who?

STANLEY. And do you know what they've got in that van ?

MEG. What ?

STANLEY. They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.

MEG (breathlessly). They haven't.

STANLEY. Oh yes they have. (Act 1,18)

It is quite mysterious that Meg behaves in a strange manner after the birthday party as if she does not know anything about Stanley's condition. Goldberg and McCann finally take Stanley in a black car to refine him.

Problem of verification of characters and their actions is one of the major characteristics of absurd drama that we observe here in *The Birthday Party*. It is very difficult here in this play to know the past life of Stanley and it is equally difficult why he has been taken by Goldberg and McCann to an unknown place. Stanley job, identity and family background is unclear. Goldberg and McCann's character are quite mysterious and ambiguous. Another feature we observe here is the strange and incomprehensible behaviour of characters which often bewilders the audience and they don't associate themselves with the characters on the stage. Thus they don't sympathise with the condition of these characters. Without a credible plot and due to its non-linear progress *The Birthday Party* is closer to the absurd tradition.

The chief aim of the theatre of absurd is not to present all negatives and depress the audience but to bring them closer to reality whatever it may be. It is more realistic as it tries to present the real state of human life. Pinter as an absurd dramatist uses words very meticulously with a lot of repetition, bad syntax and often with contradictory statements. He uses dramatic tools like illusions and reminiscences to relieve the characters from the burden of tension and excess fear. Human solitude, anxieties, vulnerabilities, meaninglessness, despair, futility of life and isolation are the essential features of the absurd dramatic tradition and we observe all these in many plays of Harold Pinter. The theatre of absurd simply does not try to project or reflect the despair of modern man and let him lead to dark irrational forces but it is an endeavour to help modern man to come face to face with the world where he lives. This theatre has emerged due to the necessity of modern man and own requirement of theatre. It is a projection of the intellectual and true reflection of the conditions of human beings during the post-war Europe. Instead of the projection the external world it focuses on the internal turmoil of human beings.

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