

The Spectrum of Postmodernism in Harold Pinter play *The Caretaker*

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Abstract:

The world in which we live and survive today is considered as the world of Postmodernism. This period is full of uncertainty, dreams, isolation and ambiguity. In his plays Harold Pinter has given an expression to this absurdity prevailing in the society. Pinter is considered as a postmodern author. His plays depict the fragmented lives of the characters that are more or less a portrayal of us ‘human beings’ living in the real world. All the three characters in the play undergoes deep dilemma in relation to their identity, relationships and they delve between reality and ambiguity. The elements of postmodernism can be easily identified in the plays of Pinter. This research paper proposes to study the play *The Caretaker* from the postmodernist point of view. The play focuses on the life of three characters. The vagueness in their lives, indeterminacy in the language and action, insecurity for the future, trembling family roots and disruption leading their lives are the themes predominantly used in the play.

Pinter wrote in the post war decade, which was a great era of transformation in political realm and in literature too. With the advent of postmodernism, Pinter has adopted the techniques of postmodernism in his early plays. His plays are replete with the elements of sarcasm, violence, alienation etc. The playwright has introduced a pattern of silences and unspoken violence which is called ‘Pinter Pause’ by the critics of the absurd theatre. Further there is an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty in the narrative of Pinter. He has dared to change the audience’s expectation of the language of the characters in the stage. We don’t really understand when the characters are in a discourse with each other, their irregular responses to each other and indefinite replies while they are involved in a conversation. This way the episodes in the play become uncertain. These common features of postmodernism have been beautifully crafted in this play by Pinter.

Key words: Postmodernism, absurdity, alienation.

Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1959) is a representation of the postmodern period. It is a story of two brothers, Mick and Aston and a tramp, Davies. They live in a world of uncertainty and meaninglessness. They remain alienated in the entire play. The themes of loneliness, isolation, absurdity, lack of communication, identity crisis, menace, dreamy existence has been dealt with in this metanarrative. The play depicts the condition of lack of communication among the characters which is very common among the modern people. To portray this situation, Pinter has made use of several pauses and silences in his plays. In the play *The Caretaker* silences and pauses are presented as a means of expressing strong feelings and emotions though without using words or without utterance. At times, modern man fails to communicate with each other, even with their near ones most probably due to engagement in several tasks, hectic life or certain other issues. Here, Pinter gives important place to pauses, which indicates the need of the gap one require during a conversation to gather the emotions and sentiments in order to convey the dialogue. Sometimes during these pauses and silences much relevant ideas are conveyed than in actual discourse. The ambiguity and vagueness revolving around the characters mostly originated from the 'silences'. This use of language can be called a 'language game' as Lyotard says. Most postmodernist agree to the use of 'language game' which seems to be followed in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting For Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon engage in 'language games.' Lyotard defines the postmodernism condition as "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Jean. P.xxiv)

The initial act of *The Caretaker* shows a messy room with a lot of junk items and a leaking roof with a bucket hanging from the ceiling which collects the water drop and often breaks the silence with its tapping voice. This too finds significance in the postmodern world, the condition of the room inside shows the chaos and misery on the one hand and the condition of the modern man on the other hand. The situation arises due to the advent of technology and weapons leading to destruction. Pinter's characters are well aware of the scenario and show the lack of security either inside or outside. The characters, Mick and Aston, who play the role of two brothers, are seen seldom in a discourse in the play. This shows how the modern age people are involved in their personal lives, where they rarely get chance to communicate directly or indirectly to their near ones. This is how we all have inclined to recently. The reader could notice without much precision the use of the word 'silence' and 'pause' with adjacent sentences. This needs an explanation in the postmodern scenario. Pauses are a radical device which Harold Pinter has incorporated in his plays. They are known as 'Pinter Pauses'. They are quite significant in many respects. Through his works he has depicted the unpredictability of human discourse, the need to take pause while in a conversation and when it's time to remain silent. These are some tricks; Pinter plays with in his works. An ellipses, a pause and a silence are the three categories under these Pinter pauses. We know, ellipses are the three dots which denotes the hesitation of a writer in revealing or accepting something, while a pause means an extended gap while having a discourse with

the other character. This may be due to the deep thought procedure, the character is undergoing. A silence means an end to the entire discourse. Often in a silence, the character has met some conflict, nuances or action or something absurd that inclines them to go in silence. Pauses are inseparable parts of Pinter's plays. A larger section of the play is covered by them. As Morgan says, "we must look not towards what they say, but towards when they keep silent." (Azharul. 3)

The use of Pinter pauses creates an atmosphere of psychological drama filled with suspense, pathos, anxiety and suspense too. These characteristic features have made him unique among the other playwrights of his time.

In the play *The Caretaker* there are 40 pauses in act I and total 140 pause approx in all the three acts. In the first act most of the dialogues are in between Aston and Davies. They are stranger to each other, when they accompanied in the apartment of Aston and his brother Mick, the conversation between them shows that to gain familiarity they talked diversely for that need time to think and continue. This increases the number of pauses in the play. After each pause they discuss a new incident, happening or life situation probably because they hardly find relevance in things. While discussing about the room of Aston, Davies asks, "What about downstairs?"

Aston: That's closed up. Needs seeing to...the floors...

Pause Davies: I was lucky you come into the café. I might have done by that Scotch git. I been left for the dead more than once.

Pause" (*Caretaker* 10)

Another characteristic feature of postmodernism is absurdism. Absurdism is permeated in Postmodernism. After WW II the advent of absurdism was clearly visible. The idea that life is illogical, irrational, incongruous and unreasonable is centered in the postmodern backdrop. The idea of the 'The Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by the critic Martin Esslin in his work 'Ansurd Drama' in 1961. Samuel Beckett popularized the term in his play *Waiting For Godot*. Pinter and Beckett depict the realistic conditions of life in the scenario of the post world war. Both these authors portray the lives of the characters in their play in a beautiful manner. The story of Estragon and Davies are similar in a way that both of them wait for something. Estragon waits for the arrival of Godot on the other hand Davies was waiting for the weather to favour him as he wanted to move to Sidcup to bring his belongings. Absurdism focuses on the tension between a meaningless universe and the striving and struggling of human beings or the characters to find some meaning. A closer analysis of the idea of absurdism shows our real life situation, all of us are leading the same life. Sometimes we embrace it exactly and one with the situation. When we are tensed with our meaningless existence we try to suicide or take shelter under the roof of religion and myths. The last two alternatives are the outcomes of extreme troubles when one is not ready to continue with the meaninglessness of the universe and the tensions that arises out of it. Here, the famous philosophical essay of Albert Camus "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) can be illustrated, where Sisyphus is shown pushing a boulder. Camus uses the Greek legend of Sisyphus,

who was condemned to repeat the task of rolling up the boulder every time it rolls down, as a metaphor to the persistent struggle of human beings against the absurdity of life. The acceptance of the struggle whole heartedly and joyfully; flowing with the flow of meaning and meaningless universe is the key to achieve an identity and definition in life.

The myth has a relevance to the life of Aston who is shown mending an electric toaster from the first act of the play. Though his attempts of success are all futile still he never quits. He keeps on making it by adjusting the wires, plug and switches on the electric board. Every time Davies feels hungry, Aston tries to mend the toaster but fails at each attempt. This is a task similar to that of legendary Sisyphus. Furthermore, Aston's dreams to make a shed outside also remain a cherished dream in his heart. The character in the play reflects the same absurd endeavor in the pattern of Camus. The place which Pinter tries to provide to his characters in all his plays finds a way in Camus' existential absurdism.

The Caretaker is also the best paradigm of the comedy of menace. Pinter's dramatic genius has created a world in which violence and menace exists side by side. These features can arise in a character in several ways – physical, psychological or mental and emotional. The first act reveals violence when we come to know about the story of Davies, his quarrelling in a bar and Aston's rescue and bringing him to his apartment. Davies becomes a victim to the physical retaliation of Mick when he enters the room and "Mick swiftly forces him to the floor, with Davies struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring." (Caretaker 41)

The reaction of Davies to varied situations in the play is often violent and full of menace. He has developed an attitude of condemning others for his mistake. For instance, he groans and makes peculiar noises while sleeping but he disagrees to the same before Aston. "I don't jabber, man. Nobody ever told me that before. Pause. What would I be jabbering about?" (Caretaker 30)

There are other episodes in the play where Mick is seen practicing violence physically or verbally with Davies. He calls Davies a trouble maker and a strange man, he says, "you're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian..."(Caretaker 119)

Pinter's plays highlight all the key features of postmodernist writings. Pinter and his connections to the 'The Theatre of Absurd' and 'The Comedy of Menace' his pauses and silences are at the core of his writings. The characteristics features of postmodern world be it irony, chaos, language, existence, metanarrative techniques are beautifully amalgamated in this play.

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