The Survey of Camusian Absurdity in Pinter’s Theatre

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I. INTRODUCTION

What drama is in pursuit of staging at the postmodern era, for sure, is the manifestation of the existential problems of modern man as its prime responsibility. In this regard, it tries to highlight this idea that God is in the logical sense, an impossibility, and it is just as impossible that he should not exist as that he should”[1]. Historically, “the modern(ist) drama is still persistently viewed as moving from the realistic (yet formally neoclassical) Ibsen and the naturalistic Strindberg to the socially, politically, and psychologically oriented “problem plays” of the twentieth century (and beyond), occasionally by assorted “techniques” from aberrant avant-garde movements”[2]. This historical survey of the tradition of drama paves the way for Pinter and those who try to follow what Sisyphus had to do and was aspirant of. His reading of the Sisyphus myth promises to reconsider the apparently misery and helplessness of the absurd life with five words: ‘One must imagine Sisyphus happy’. He asserts this possibility with an unlikely proclamation: "It is during that return [downhill]… that Sisyphus interests me… I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torrent of which he will never know the end… that is the hour of consciousness. Sisyphus, the proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent… All Sisyphus’s silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing”[3].

II. ABSURDITY AND IDENTITY

Sisyphus is “stronger than his rock” not because he resigns himself to fate, but because he makes that tragic fate his own by accepting the hand that he has been dealt with. The fate of the condemned man can be sensed differently. Some time, he gets back to his reality of his absurd being and gets lost in this sheer absurdity. The other time, this absurdity give rise to the futile efforts of Sisyphus whose more exemplification can be clearly seen in Pinter’s Plays. His attitude is made possible by his ability to make the best of his plight through scorn and revolt, conscious reflection, and contemplation. Camus celebrates the confrontation of absurd existence in meaningful ways despite the “void” that awaits us at the grave; he compares Sisyphus to that other tragic Greek hero, the blind Oedipus, who even in the worst of times, announces to the world: “Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well”[3]. The assertion of the tragic sense of loss in battle against the aggressive existential thoughts at the violation of final certainties the Theatre of the Absurd, though seem a little strange, resides symbols of what look like the real problems we are handling as modern people. Nevertheless, what man should be tapped on the back for that like that of Sisyphus is our relentless effort in our quest at this modern age, however timid and tentative, to sing, to laugh, to weep, and to get along and move on.

III. ABSURDITY AND SURVEY

Albert Camus wrote The Myth of Sisyphus in 1942, after the horrors of WWI, the own break of WWII, and the nihilism which resulted from the war. The essay is an analysis of the contemporary diseases of recognizing the absurdity of human life [4]. A close look shows such view of absurd life can be inferred from the misery of Pinter's characters in his theatre. Pinter’s place in Camusian existential absurdism can be found in many of his plays. At the post modern era, he idiosyncratically portrayed man’s uphill campaign to put together the absurdity of desire and the consciousness of existence. His characters suffering in a sense resemble that of Sisyphus, but in their attempt to laugh and be happy, time and again, are over flooded by the many unwanted, unpredictable, and imminent menace, violation, and alteration. Such dangling situation of his characters shown in the theatre of the absurd via the flavour of the comedy of menace well illustrates a host of social, economical, psychological, and political problems that modern man is exposed to either directly like the uproar and chaos people in some parts of the world are afflicted with, or indirectly through the prevalence of information via diverse types of media. Where Sisyphus’s
intruders are turned out, a large number of unknown
violating either his existence or his self and identity.
set of disturbances and troubles emerge over flooding
the characters' mind and body and in the end targeting
and revealing such absurdity. His image of room can
strike the mind diverse forms such as a refuge, a prison room, or
absurd act out as just the provision of painkillers
in an obviously unjust world, render happiness
meaningful with various intentions. Through highlighting these
factors, through the characteristics of the theater of
Absurd, and the exercise of the Comedy of menace, he
tries to follow the same implications and procedures of
Camus as introduced by Cruickshank who quotes from
one of Camus' essays, that "we must refuse to accept it
and do what is necessary to eradicate it. Camus explains
"the myth as a spiritual issue of the common man" [4].
Our task as men is to find some formulas to pacify the
great anguish of human kind… make justice a possibility
of Aston in the Endgame, or the hospital officials' mental surgery
of Aston in the Caretaker. The problem is that once the
intruders are turned out, a large number of unknown new
set of disturbances and troubles emerge over flooding the
characters' mind and body and in the end targeting and
violating either his existence or his self and identity.

IV. PINTER’S WORKS

Pinter's deployment of and manipulation of diverse
characteristics of the theater shows his idiosyncratic tact in
revealing such absurdity. His image of room can strike the
mind diverse forms such as a refuge, a prison room, or
even a trap. Within this simply selected types of settings
like Beckett's skull-like room in the Endgame, Pinter, in
the Birthday Party in a far-off lodging house near the
beach, or the old, damped, leaky house of Mick in the
Caretaker illustrates and implicates the reasons behind
the characters' misery on the one hand, and the modern
man's condition on the other hand. As one of the great
prevalent obsession of modern man's social life at the age
of ever-increasing growth of technology and the
destructive weapons ahead of these advances to which all
humanity is aware; what Pinter's settings all have in
common is the potentiality of threat in which can arise.
There is no peace and security either in or out of the
rooms. The outside world is frightening and demanding on
Pinter's characters. That is why his characters salvation is
out of reach and to a large extent such a view originates
from lack of security. As Esslin maintains, 'Pinter's people
are in a room, and they are frightened, scared. What are
they scared of? Obviously, they are scared of what is
outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing
upon them, which is frightening"[7]. Outside the room,
there is no comfort; there is assault and violence instead
like the crimes happening in the streets or in public in
different parts of the world nowadays. Davies reminds us
of the many victims who due to lack of financial afford are
assaulted, ridiculed, and thrown out in the society.

Aston: Yes, I saw him have a go at you.

Davies: All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of
pigs. I might have been on the road a few years but you
can take it from me I’ m clean. I keep myself up. [8](7).

Maybe like Aston for lack of conformity with the
society and system norms, one may be called under
reformation and identity forging; an act which may be on
behalf of some system like what can be envisaged in
Aldus Huxley in The Brave New World; or may be due to
reformation and redecoration of the whole globe, all the
globe has gone through defragmenting and reformation
like the catastrophe of unknown type which has happened
in The Endgame of Samuel Beckett. Aston seemingly has
gone through the condition of his country or society which
has assigned him a special “ shape and destiny”[9] which
gave him a special identity. In case of the existence of
people of this ilk whose examples are numerous in some
societies; whose impact on the society can be detected in
the media; neither the person nor those around him feel
secure and are psychologically obsessed with his imminent
dangers.

Aston: …he said we're going to do something to your
brain. He said …if we don’t, you’ll be here for the rest of
your life, but if we do, you stand a chance. You can go
out, he said, and live like the others. What do you
want to do to my brain? I said. But he just repeated what
he'd said. Well, I wasn’t a fool. I knew I was a minor. [8]

At the same time, Davies’ concerns in his presence are
some things which add up to the many other obsessions he
has.

Davies: (standing and moving): He goes out, I don’t
know where he goes to, where’s he go, he never tells me.
We used to have a bit of chat, not any more. I never see
him, he goes out, he comes in late, next thing I know he’s
showing me about in the middle of the night. (Pause)
Listen! I wake up in the morning... I wake up in the
morning and he's smiling at me! I can see him, you see, I
can see him through the blanket. He puts on his coat, he
turns himself round, he looks down at my bed, there's a
smile on his face! What the hell's he smiling at me?

Alongside the deployment of the physical characteristics
of the theater, the kind of themes running through his
theater gives rise to and indicates the same mood of
absurdity. The way women are treated in his plays shows a
deeper level of absurdity and lack if identity. Marc
Silverstein, after quoting this passage, goes on to comment
that this analysis of Pinter's own play is problematic.
Surely a woman who engages in prostitution, but chooses
not to acknowledge it in her own mind, is not wielding
power, but rather repressing a role she is being forced to
play [10]. As a to the point and dominant theme detected in
the majority of most of his plays, we can have a reference
to the question of identity and the possible failure in
achieving the decent one in the society may be one of the
great obsessions of Pinter's characters which indeed haunts
the individual's mind and affects his status in the society
due to the sociability nature of man. Different threats on
the way of one's identity which in the long-run culminate
in a sense of disintegration is, to my recollection if not
higher, is not lower in priority in comparison with the
philosophical view of existence discussed with regard to
the ideas of Camus in the framework of absurdity. The
individual's hold identity is at the mercy of innumerable
types of unpredictable threats hovering over him. When
the individual is confronted by an ominous and omnipotent force, no doubt, his sense of individuality and
self-esteem tend to fade away. The individual is constantly
scrutinizing his self and identity from his own viewpoint
and that of the others regarding his status from personal,
social, familial, financial, and many more other aspects
due to the complexity of human nature and his needs.
Those who cannot have all these aspects under their
control, no doubt, will be the victims and before any other
outside interference and trouble, they fall in the habit of
self-torture, self-trial, self-punishment, and unending
absurdity of being and existence. This in a sense, may be
because "with each moment of his life, each subject under
goes the radical reformation of his entire being [11].
Temporarily, they find some justification for themselves,
or run away to somewhere else to get rid of the sources of
uneasiness and trouble, not knowing the fact that it does not
prolong too much like the of Stanley's challenge for
his self selected mode of living and his adopted identity.

In his refuge to a remote lodging house at the beach, as
mentioned he does not find peace and comfort, as he is
intruded by the omnipotent and omniscient strangers.
More to guarantee the eradication of his past identity, he
has adopted a new name to lead a better name under this
self forged identity, but this private information is already
shared by the intruders like the susceptibility of modern
man's status to the imminent danger of being robbed of his
personal privileges and crucial information which act as a
great existential aguish for him nowadays. The stranger-
intruders, so famous for their menacing ways in Pinter's
works are not new comers in the dramatic scene; in
classical drama, they fulfill an important dramatic
function:

As [the intruders] drop from the blue and have done
nothing to earn a share, their generic character is that of
Imposter—an epithet several times flung at them by the
exasperated hero. Their common fate is well-deserved
rebuff. When they have made an exhibition of themselves,
they are driven off with abuse, frequently seconded by
blows. The Imposters are always pitted against the hero,
who draws out their absurdities with mocking irony"[13].
The instance of many a people whose identities and
fame have been violated by the frauds, or those who have
been suppressed driven to the corner due to the awareness
of his/her information can be enormously detected and
seen as one of the routines of post modern era whose
microcosmic manifestation is manifested in case of
Stanley.

Goldberg: Webber! Why did you change your name?
Stanley: I forgot the other one.

Goldberg: What's your name now?
Stanley: Joe Soap.

Goldberg: You stink of sin. [12] (44)

A much worse condition can be the revelation of Davies
in the Caretaker. An old miserable man being thrown out
of the café, being beaten heavily, and being treated as a
piece of dirt and as a social derelict, no doubt, has been
posed drastic threats targeting his sense of individuality. It
is the revelation of the condition of a man who may have
been cut off his religion, society, and is lost. Hence, his
being and identity has become senseless, absurd, and
upside down. He does not even possess a real identity card
to prove his own being, knowing the fact that this is as
Esslín maintains is a real existential threat, "not as an
abstraction, not as a surreal phantasmagoria, but as
something real, ordinary and acceptable as an everyday
occurrence"[7] from its shortage he suffers. Davies who is
badly in need of a pair of shoes is even rejected by the
monk who signifies the disappearance of religious values
of the time. Although people” live together in the same
house all their lives and at the end they are as far apart as
ever” [14] He is turned down by every members of the
society in his search for shelter, job, comfort, and above
all identity which he can build his identity upon their
achievement signifying what can be seen in the endeavors
of the young generation who borrow the trouble of getting
trained in a specific major and then run through the society
to find the appropriate job upon which they could make
their life and build their identities. Alber Camus himself
has asserted that we live in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger.

It is clearly deduced that "his plays are fictional statements of brutal facts of the modern world. An overall survey of his plays reveals that Pinter has always been fascinated with man's fear, anxiety, and the abuse of power. In his dramatic work, Pinter has attempted to depict man in a world controlled by those who hold power by which they try to dominate individuals"[15]. The individuals' identity and self in this society is called into question and they are assigned the identity and self in accordance with the system's expectations and criteria. This may be in a sense the harrowing condition of "modern men [who] are also ignorant and they have no useful information and knowledge even modern man doesn’t know about the purpose of his life"[16].

V. CONCLUSION

Harold Pinter’s manifestation of truth on the stage may be seen as a means to an end, but the way this truth is reflected on the grounds of Absurdity or other backgrounds requires a vast scrutiny of an eclectic justification of facts for the sake of clarification of reality. These techniques to penetrate into the deeper layers of reality cannot be the same as the ordinary ones. The playwright, no doubt, turns to different techniques to highlight different sources giving rise to an idea, a phenomenon, or an ontological problem. Alber Camus’ ideas of existence intermingled with absurd characteristic are well realized in the theme, setting, moode, and characterization of Pinter’s theatre specifically in The Caretaker. Through the framework of Camus, Pinter play arouses our accepted certainties, takes us, as it were, out of our rooms, exposes us through an internal dialogue to what we try to avoid its imagination, the absurd existence, the futile effort to live and achieve one’s identity. Then he leaves us but not with a problem, or obsession to tackle or to solve, but with the crucial secret of our human condition. The ways through which these upside down conditions of man are dealt with resemble the ways Camus has tried to manifest in his works regarding the condition of human being.

Pinter’s maneuver over different aspects of drama, and his specific themes discussed in the article can be the mirror of many of the realities portrayed in Camus’ themes. What he has staged in his major plays can be seen as a means to an end, but the way this truth is reflected on the grounds of Absurdity or other backgrounds requires a vast scrutiny of an eclectic justification of facts for the sake of clarification of reality. These techniques to penetrate into the deeper layers of reality cannot be the same as the ordinary ones. The playwright, no doubt, turns to different techniques to highlight different sources giving rise to an idea, a phenomenon, or an ontological problem. Alber Camus’ ideas of existence intermingled with absurd characteristic are well realized in the theme, setting, moode, and characterization of Pinter’s theatre specifically in The Caretaker. Through the framework of Camus, Pinter play arouses our accepted certainties, takes us, as it were, out of our rooms, exposes us through an internal dialogue to what we try to avoid its imagination, the absurd existence, the futile effort to live and achieve one’s identity. Then he leaves us but not with a problem, or obsession to tackle or to solve, but with the crucial secret of our human condition. The ways through which these upside down conditions of man are dealt with resemble the ways Camus has tried to manifest in his works regarding the condition of human being.

Pinter’s maneuver over different aspects of drama, and his specific themes discussed in the article can be the mirror of many of the realities portrayed in Camus’ themes. What he has staged in his major plays can be a good perspective for viewing Sisyphus in different roles with different existential identities in a micro level scope and the post modern man’s condition at a macro level one.

REFERENCES