

The Survey of Camusian Absurdity in Pinter's Theatre

Saeid Rahimipour*

Assistant Professor, Farhangian University, Ilam Shahid Moddarress Campus

Email : sdrahimipour@yahoo.com

Abstract – Pinter, through the Theatre of the Absurd, has tried to reveal modern man's existential problems. But his approach, though hinging on the same view of existentialism, has more realistically social, psychological, and political orientation in approach to the reflection of the absurd existential problems. He is a practitioner of this new movement. From the view of Camusian Sisyphus, what Pinter has tried to depict in his theater is modern man's futile efforts to roll the rock and get to the top of the hill. The characters' absurd endeavour to prove their identities and being reflects the same camusian efforts on the line of bringing back meaning to the absurdity. The current paper has tried to mirror this view of Camus in the behaviour of Pinter's characters in his plays with the special orientation of The Caretaker.

Keywords – Pinter, Absurdity, Theatre, Camus, Survey.

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 torment 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]. What is supposed to be detected is the absurd futile efforts of all the characters of the major plays of Pinter in their constant struggle to maintain, achieve, or get along with an opportunity.

II. DISCUSSION

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 IDENTITY

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, unpredicted, 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

rock rolls back downhill every time it reaches the apex of the mountain, the desires and endeavors of Pinter's characters bear no practical effort due to the imminent, everlasting, and relentless sources of violation, assault, and annihilation like the miserable case of Davies in *the Caretaker*, Stanley in *the Birthday Party*, and many other characters of his plays. The detachment of modern man from all the metaphysical and transcendental origins such as the catastrophic view of death of God has left Pinter's characters susceptible to every threat; without that much resistance, perseverance, and hope. "The Theatre of the Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity—the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties," and more importantly, it shows man's courageous efforts to "stake out a modest place for himself in the cold and darkness that envelopes him"[5]. There is redemption in disappointment, hope in despondency, and if Pinter's humour proves nothing else, it provides some sort of solace for the anguish. He has drowned in his empty made world of his understanding of life, his existence, and ways of salvation. What he introduces as the driving force behind these through the theater of absurd act out as just the provision of painkillers like that of Hamm for man's suffering from the problems like those of the characters. Alongside the idea of absurdity, there are ever present factors giving rise to this absurdity in his theatre like the ideas of intrusion, menace, failure of religion, the negative impact of technology on social and psychological status of man in his personal and social life, and tricky politics deployed by many in diverse forms and 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 in an obviously unjust world, render happiness meaningful to people poisoned by the sufferings of our age"[6]. In his theater, the intrusion in the form of threat, at first, shows in the form of the stranger-intruder figure that arrives to undermine the authority of the characters in a room on behalf of an unknown authoritative system like Monty in *the Birthday Party*, 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? [8](61)

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 of 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 view point 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.

Goldberg: Why did you come here?

Stanley: My feet hurt!

Goldberg: Why did you stay?

Stanley: I had a headache!

Goldberg: Did you take anything for it?

Stanley: Yes.

Goldberg: Fruit salts!

Goldberg: Enos or Andrews?

Stanley: En-An-[12](42)

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 privacies and crucial information which act as a great existential anguish 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 Esslin 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, mood, 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

- [1] Coe Richard N., "God and Samuel Beckett" Melborne: *Meanjin Quarterly* No.100, 1964. 66-85. (68)
- [2] Bert Cardullo. Brecht, Pinter, and the Avant-Garde: Three Essays on Modernist Drama. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. (1)
- [3] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, New York: Vintage, 1955. (335)
- [4] Concalves, Tatiane. "A reading of the theme of Exiles in the light of n the Myth of Sisyphus," *Fragmentos*, no 30, jan. 2006. (13)
- [5] Esslin. M. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. 3rd ed. New York. Vintage Books, 2004. (287)
- [6] Cruickshank, John. Introduction. In Albert Camus, *Caligula, cross purpose, the just, the possessed*. Harmonds worth: Penguin books, 1984. (256)
- [7] Esslin. M *Reflection: Essays on Modern Theater*. New York: Doubleday and Company.1969. (35)
- [8] Pinter, Harold. *The Caretaker*. London: Methuen, 1960.78
- [9] Budgen, Frank. "conversations with Joyce (1934)". In: James Joyce's *Ulysses-A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford Univesity Press, 2004.257-266
- [10] Silverstein, Marc. "*One for the Road, Mountain Language and the Impasse of Politics.*" *Modern Drama*, Volume 34, Number 3, Fall 1991, 422-440. *Project Muse*. Web. 26th April 2015.
- [11] Ekberg Jeremy. *The Myth of Identity In Modern Drama*.UK, Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, 2015. (30)
- [12] Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. London: Encore, 1959. (96)
- [13] Cited in Shafer, p.40. Yvonne Shafer, "Archetypal Figures in 'The Caretaker': Trickster versus Intruder." *Literature in Performance: A Journal of Literary and Performing Art* 6/2 ,1986.38-43
- [14] Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1983.
- [15] Bakhshizadeh, Y. & Gandhi, L. Critiquing Power Dynamics: A Reading of Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*. *COLLEGE SADHANA – Journal for Bloomers of Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, AUGUST 2010, 110-120
- [16] Khan Abdul Bari, et. al. The Impact of Absurdism in "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Becket. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education* vol. 1 issue 2, 2015.(4)

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Saeid Rahimpour

Assistant Professor, Farhangian University
Faculty Member

Fields of Interest: Literature, Teaching, Drama,
Interdisciplinary Research

Current Position: Head of Moddares Campus
Humanities Educational Group,

His working and teaching experiences are as follows:
Instructor of Iranian Educational Complex In Kuwait
Manager and Instructor of Navid Language Institute In Ilam
Dean of Shahid Moddarres Universtiy Campus