

Harold Pinter's Dramatic Art in *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*

Dr. Mangesh R. Adgokar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

G. S. Tompe Arts, Commerce & Science College, Chandur Bazar.

Abstract:

Harold Pinter is one of the few dramatists of the second half of the twentieth century who has been the most and foremost influential English playwright since Bernard Shaw on English stage. The work of Harold Pinter remains amongst the most respected and authentic representation of modern man not only in British theatre, but in the theatre of the world even today after his death. His place in British Drama was strongly secured after Martin Esslin's acknowledgement of him in his celebrated book '*The Theatre of the Absurd*' in 1960. His plays are an image of the emptiness of human relationship and meaningless effort of man to reconcile with the situation. They better represent the unsatisfying desire of man to find the peaceful haven for secluded life where they find everything at their command. The present paper is an elaborate discussion on Pinter's dramatic technique and vision in his three important plays.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, The Homecoming, The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, Dramatic Art, Vision.

Introduction:

The aim of present paper is to examine the dramatic technique and the vision of life presented in his plays *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*. Pinter uses in his plays the devices of dramatic technique including plot: its development, the premise and opening, exposition, the protagonist and objective, obstacle, conflict, Major crisis and climax, resolution, three unities, blackouts and curtain lines, characterization, dialogue: language of dialogue, language of characters, long diatribes and technical jargon, device of repetition, stage setting and direction, costumes and props, space and time, sounds and lights, which made his plays distinct and outstanding to win him the prestigious Nobel Prize. Pinter's vision of life is clear in his all plays. He conveys it through all the significant aspects of illusion and reality, struggle for dominance and existence, menace and violence, threat of intrusion, terror and mystery, victim of society, comic elements and tragic reality, loss of identity and verification, failure of communication, room as a symbol of safety, family love, ritual, absurdity of life, realistic stage setting, archetypical women, and exclusively private world of the characters.

Pinter didn't profess any theory or morality of an idealized life to teach the most accepted tradition and culture of human beings in his plays, but the way he presents the characters and their dilemmas in particular situation is the unreal reality and realistic unreality of those who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his future aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives in concrete thought to defend his position. Pinter regards the acute and the distressed experience of such characters 'as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who alarming can do all things' in his/her desperate situation of life. By studying Pinter's play-text, the researcher tried to imagine them as in performance to consider his dramatic technique and vision.

Pinter expresses in his Nobel speech about the evasive truth in the drama:

"Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives in endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you

stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.”

He further continues, ‘But as I have said, the search for the truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot.’ But I have feeling to catch such elusive truth in Pinter’s plays in the form of my thesis. Though truth and reality are not absolute qualities; the harmonizing of it with illusion gives the perception of reality beyond the reasoning and understanding of it.

Pinter presented such characters with their shabby, unavoidable and relentless situations to exemplify a section of society which is neglected by the most of playwrights. These characters faced the terror and fear from the outside structure of society which leaves them in a state of dereliction. They are outcast from their family and society. It is difficult them to adjust with the society which imposed the obligation. Stanley, Ruth and Davies are the victims of such society because they are atypical with their thoughts and activities. They have their own ways of living life and they don’t bother with the formality and tradition of the society. So Stanley lives in seaside boarding house, Davies needs shoes which ‘life and death’ to him and secure place, and Ruth returns home where she get ‘a certain kind of freedom’. Pinter himself regards the disillusion of his characters, an atmosphere of menace, fear of unspecific terror and their less articulation as trustworthy and legitimate as our own life. He says:

“We’re writing about something to do with ourselves and observable reality about us. We’re not writing about the moon. But I think, as long as the work is written with understanding, it is legitimate. I’m not using words like ‘compassion’, because that is not what drama has to do ... I don’t think compassion registers as a relevant virtue in relation to the writing of plays ... I’d go so far as that a hard, clear understanding with throws a light on a state of affairs is what you’re aiming at. If you’re true to that, then you’re not doing any harm ... I’m hesitant to defend what one does as a dramatist in creating characters which are loosely or glancingly or obliquely based on others.”(258)

The due ex machina of his plays turns the situation of them in an unexpected and complex manoeuvre of human situation in the end. Pinter’s boyhood experience obviously influenced the themes of his plays. His plays are the example of his original and creative talent. Though his plays are imbued with influence of acknowledged debts of his masters Beckett and Franz Kafka; the voice of his vision in his plays is distinct and individual. The clue to his plays emerges from his personal experiences of life, but it is the natural talent of Pinter to transcend them into the universal image of human beings. As Michael Billington says that all his early plays including *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Homecoming* ‘were triggered, to a greater or lesser degree, by personal experience; but Pinter’s genius is to apprehend the universal meaning that lies within the particular moment. This is what distinguishes the true artist from the mere recorder of events: the ability to incorporate her or his experience and at the same time transcend it.’ (177)

Being influenced by Beckett and Kafka, Pinter is regarded as the most original theatre talent of the modern age. His practical knowledge of theatre in the repertory as an actor played the decisive role to help him to form shape and unified sense of overall structural unity in his plays. He uses his brilliant skill as a technician of dramatic technique being the first hand practical experience at ground level of the process of drama, the staging of drama and the basic material of plays. He considers himself as ‘a very traditional playwright’ using a certain lines in all his plays and ‘not a very inventive writer in the sense of technical devices like other playwrights. Despite his insistence on the traditional nature of his dramatic technique, Pinter is regarded as the

most original of the English dramatists of the second half of the century. His theatre, like his silence and pauses, always seems to be the drama of ordinary life where the man confronted with their own secrets, their own dreams, their own fears, their own imaginations and desperately trapped between reality and illusion. He has been celebrated for his distinctive original style of using some elements in a dexterous way that his various dramatic techniques as well as his themes are equally accepted as his Pinteresque hallmark in the theatre world.

Pinter's use of a highly tight controlled sequence of significant actions in his plays reveals his skill of dramatic technique in handling unified plot artistically in the most traditional manner. His use of Blackout and Curtain lines are the punch to create interest in his story and to push the structure of his drama towards the culmination and perfection. His characterization is distinct from other playwrights with his lack of details about the motivation and the past history of his characters. The vague account of his characters in the plays makes them more realistic and life-like on the surface level and more universal with their mystic approach on the deeper level. He has created the most distinct and an original style of dramatic dialogue. His unique selection of speech pattern of lower class people gives the tape record accuracy to his dialogue. His use repetition, jargon, silence and pause in his dialogue obviously reveal him an acute observer of common human behaviour in a particular situation. He is specific about the way characters speak and their movement on the stage. His stage directions are exhibited his skillfully planned craft of the pictorial quality, specific description, pauses and silences. His plays usually sets in a room in the midst of totally stripped to bare essentials with the greatest economy and suggestive precision. Though his plays seem unfamiliar and obscure, the overall arrangement of Pinter's stage directions including scenery, furniture, props, lights, sounds and temperature make a visual poetic image of human beings. His plays for the research are best examples of his use of plot, characterization, realistic dialogue with repetition, pause and silence, curtain lines, blackout and stage directions which reveal mechanical evidences of his skill and talent in handling the material in most perfect traditional ways.

Pinter manipulates in his plays the vision of desperate human beings with a more sure traditional technique and control than any other contemporary British playwrights. His plays are always set in a closed room, isolated from the outside world with a few persons including the intruders, huddled together inside for vain attempt of non-communicative conversation to establish bond of relationship. He begins his plays with a vision of certain image of physical relationship between people in a room either sitting, standing, lying or kneeling. His plays communicates the sequence of poetic image of the situation in the life of particular characters, the essence of his approach to life, his understanding of the human puzzling condition, the more 'acute experience' of 'less articulate' man. His stage is not populated just like others. The conversation of his characters is intermittent with pauses and silence and in an incoherent slovenly manner to hide the information fearing imminent disaster from outside invaders.

A complex and multifaceted views may result from the study of his plays, so that we are forced to see vision of life in terms not merely of lacking of meaning, of communication, of loss of identity and of potent image of silence and pause; but as a complexity of human beings open to conflicting, differing and deferring which is equally valid from the evidence of his plays for the interpretations of universally recognized struggle of man in his illogical situation with sense of senselessness to exist in inexplicable, frightening and alarming violence of the terrified world. Pinter's view of life is incomprehensible and certainly remains mysterious, inexplicable, unpredictable, unavoidable, unrecognized, unraveled, unrelenting and unfathomable expression of hopeless human beings in his plays. Cornish Roger and Violet Ketels present the desperate plight of human beings in his plays:

“Most scholars and critics look for the secret of Pinter's dramatic mastery in the clever manipulation of language and the silence that punctuates it. He creates a world that is absurd in the existential sense of being emptied of meaning, a world where horror lurks at the root of human actions, however harmless they may seem, yet a word eerily familiar. His characters are pathetically funny in their obtuseness and their circumscribed preoccupations; they are frightening in their elemental

helplessness. And they are incessantly struggling, vainly – for safety, power, territory, relationships, their very identities. They are usually stripped –down losers, denied nobility or even the aspiration to nobility of traditional dramatic characters. ‘They are exactly animals! [...] Like human animals. And they act out of instinctual acquisitiveness, primal drives, and terrors. Like most of us.’

Pinter’s vision of life in his plays is as important as the dramatic presentation of this vision with all the essence of dramatic technique, for it is his acute theatrical sense of being the actor the vision of life in his plays surpasses all the expectation of his contemporary dramatists. He is not concerned with the social problems of man in the society like social realist or with abstract notion of man, but he deals with the constant agitation of human psyche in the closed room, the intrusion of the outside unspecific and unknown menace, the realities of the state of man in such situation and his struggle to save secure haven, his kingdom, domain. His plays are the concrete experience of human being presented in the funniest way and the pathetic situation of neglected persons of the society because of their less articulation. Pinter always remains detached observer of extreme edge of situation of his characters. Ronald Hayman says in this regard:

“Pinter peers in through the glass wall with no reverence for humanity, no belief in our lives being mapped out by divine powers and a keen eye for the cracks in the surface of normal conversation and normal behaviour. He is always on the alert for the moments when his characters betray what is underneath and then he simply records what he sees and what he hears, not in order to evolve theories and not in order to warn us against ourselves. His vision and his hearing are both highly turned instruments, invaluable in his one-man forays into the unarticulated and irrational no-man’s land inside the modern Everyman.”

Pinter’s plays present the problem of contemporary man and the sense of isolation and fear in the tumult of violence society. His plays concentrate on the nature of modern man’s existence and his senseless situation. In his plays man is ultimately trapped in the isolation, immobility, menace and his own web of the past. His plays are an attempt of his own inner world to catch the elusive truth about the absurdity of human life. His plays represent his own basic insight about life, the loneliness, the lack of communication among people and the problem of human existence. The presentation of certain insight about humanity and life in general make up the ontological and intellectual nature of his plays. He presented his characters with the mechanical aspect of their daily existence. *The Birthday Party* deals with the idea of an individual’s fear without exploring the original of menace, while *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* present different psychological aspect of need with an emphasis on movement and change of their primarily relationship.

Pinter depicts in his plays a character ‘actually fighting a battle for his life’ in which he must desperately attempt to avoid being caught in no man’s land where he would be opened to unspecific forces of the society. The significance of his multiple themes, the insight into complex nature of human beings, his skill of combination of real and unreal atmosphere in his works have made Pinter one of the most influential and significant playwrights in the history of English drama. According to Chandra Shekhar Tiwari, Pinter’s plays are the picture of contemporary man defeated by society:

“Throughout his drama we are confronted with a picture of contemporary man defeated by society around him as he fails to communicate with other men. The constant threat of disruption of the status quo, menace, is felt through his work. Although there is a change of emphasis in the tone and technique as Pinter progresses in his writing, there is no fundamental change in his vision. For example, in the early plays Pinter uses cabaret devices and blackouts to bewilder the audience or create a mood of menace. In the later plays he does not resort to such tactics; instead he uses memory and past recollections to produce the intrusion.”

Pinter’s plays are essentially concerned with human confrontations, the problem of less articulate man, life-sized people, every day language of the uneducated lower class people, tangible tension and consecutive

events of day to day life which seem the audience their own story on the stage. He presents the vision of life where the man in a perpetual series of rebounds constantly finds himself solitude, isolation, and peace in a closed room, but someone intrudes his isolation and terrors him with unspecific forces. The bizarre behaviour of his characters, their psychological modes, pervasive menace, violence and isolation, mixture of reality and unreality, lack of communication, struggle for dominance and existence, his sense of comic elements under the tone of tragic reality, failure of communication with intermittent colloquial language of his characters, mystery about their past, loss of identity and verification and unique element bourgeois family are all significant devices for conveying Pinter's vision throughout his plays.

Though often criticizes for the limitation of his delineation of small world; Pinter's undisputed place among the foremost playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century is unshaken after fifty six years of his first play in the theatre world. Even today Pinter's plays are challenged for his critics, scholars and researchers on the ground of his deliberate attempt to deny the explanatory note about their unreliable past histories and unpredictable futures motives. His first hand experience of an actor in the repertories inculcated in him the fundamental principles of structural pattern and unification of the dramatic action of a play. It reoriented his ideas about the drama which led him to reshape structure and renovate the stories of plays according to realistic and photogenic picture of modern man's dialogue, dilemmas, and way of thinking in his plays. He does not like to interpret everything about his characters and about the story of his plays, which is one of the original and outstanding qualities of him as the dramatist. His plays do not give too much exposition and neat resolution in the play which he keeps himself to himself for the realistic representation of human condition because as we do not know much about the people who live with us in the society. Alexander Nigel points out the significance of the characteristic way of structuring plays to present his view of life:

“The meaning of the play does not depend upon some display of thought or intellect voiced by the characters. It depends upon the conclusions which the audience draw from the process which they observe acted before them on the stage. The fact that a Pinter play does not contain ‘great thoughts’ which explain ‘what it all means’ does not deprive it of dramatic or philosophical significance. The demonstrable fact that Harold Pinter has a characteristic way of structuring his plays is important because it reveals some similarity in the kinds of conclusion towards which he directs his audience. In the control exercised over the feelings and thoughts of the audience is expressed the dramatist's ‘view of life’.”

. The purpose of this brief paper is concluded with the identification of his various dramatic techniques including ‘Plot, Thought, Character, Diction, Music and Spectacle’ in the select plays and with the recognition of his philosophy of life, his concept of human condition and his representation of human being as a man struggling to exist without basic qualities of articulation like others. Pinter's experimenting with subjects and techniques give ample opportunity of expression to his experienced masterly craft and vision in the form of plays. His plays are centered on urban life of the mid-twentieth century. They best represents ‘a consistent vision of competitiveness,’ loneliness, isolation, struggle, insecurity, mystery, fear and violence of lower-middle working class of urban Britain. The paper is a constant stratagem to uncover the nakedness of his plays with reference to his dramatic technique and vision of life manifested in them. Michael Billington said that there is obviously no golden rule that covers all his plays and no fixed quota of personal recollection that applied to them. Even one cannot possibly sum up Harold Pinter in a nutshell: he is too complex, too elusive, too contradictory to come up to the conclusive statement.

Conclusion:

It is neither feasible to cover all his plays, nor all the aspects of them in a single research paper. The paper is only on these plays of Harold Pinter including *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* in considering the restricted scope and space of the research. The intensity of suffering and

struggle for the existence of his characters are no more personal and limited to them, it conveys greater anguish and acute experience of the second half of the twentieth century man. His delineation of the man who feels insecure, menace from outside world, mostly unable to articulate his experience and motives, lose of identity and respectable place in the society, failed and frustrated from social life, unpredictable, inwardly and outwardly mysterious, isolated and victimized in a closed room provide insight into the universal condition of neglected human beings by the society. His perception of human behaviour, his ability to convey meticulously what he sees through character in the tape record accuracy of everyday speech and his use of linear/vertical plot structure, scrupulous about the significant of pause and silence in the structure of his plays as the words, important of blackout and curtain lines, his use of minimum stage direction with the maximum effect including realistic stage setting with costume and props, sound and lights, space and time all these dramatic art have established him as one of the most distinguished and original British dramatists of the second half of the twentieth century.

Reference:-

- Hayman, Ronald, *Contemporary Playwrights*, London: Heinemann, 1970. p. 93.
- Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, rpt. 2007, p. 258.
- Nigel, Alexander, *Past, Present and Pinter*, Ed. Michael Scott, Harold Pinter *The Birthday Party The Caretaker The Homecoming: A Casebook*, London, Macmillan Education Ltd, 1986, p. 42.
- Pinter, Harold, *The Birthday Party*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd rpt. 1971.
-, *The Caretaker*, London: Faber and Faber, rpt. 2000.
-, *The Homecoming*, London: Faber and Faber, rpt. 1991.
-, *Art, Truth and Politic The Nobel Lecture*, December 8, 2005. Appendix in Michael Billington, Harold Pinter, London: Faber and Faber Limited, rpt 2007. p. 431 & p. 432.
- Roger Cornish and Violet Ketels, *Landmarks of Modern British Drama Volume One: The Plays of The Sixties*, London: Methuen London Ltd, 1985, pp. 193-194.
- Tiwari, Chandra Shekhar, *Harold Pinter and The Theatre of the Absurd*, “<<http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Chandra-Shekhar-Tiwari-15.Pdf>>.” web. 4 March 2013, p. 13.
