

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE ECHO OF ISOLATION IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE ROOM AND THE CARETAKER*

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness or seclusion is a very significant feature in Absurd plays. In this kind of theatre, characters feel alone profoundly. They are isolated from their family, friends and society. They even are strange with themselves and don't know themselves properly. Furthermore, this characteristic makes them lose their identity. All Pinter's Absurd works observe this pattern and depict human isolation. The characters usually accept this seclusion spontaneously but sometimes this isolation is forced on them. This paper aims to foreground the concept of loneliness and isolation in Pinter's *The Room* and *The Caretaker*. Pinter employs limited characters to highlight the absurdity of life. This study demonstrates how Pinter's characters are isolated not only from the real world but also of one another. They confine themselves in their chaffy microcosm and see nothing except their ideal place: one individual room. They do their best to keep their room safe from the invasion of strangers as they all assume they are secure in their room, unaware of this fact that danger hovers on the exact safe spot. The fright of losing the room lead Pinter's characters to some kind of loneliness that contributes to audience's sympathy.

Key Words: Isolation, *The Room*, *The Caretaker*

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INTRODUCTION

Pinter's first phase of writing is categorized into the Theatre of the Absurd which reflects the individuals' concerns in the mundane world. The Absurd dramatists attempt to show the vivid reflection of the modern man and his bewilderment in their dramatic oeuvres by applying some specific elements. One of the fundamental themes of such drama is isolation. Absurdists mostly put their

accusing finger on this weakness of man to prove his fragility of being alone. However, Absurd dramatists employ minimum characters and setting to make this sense stronger.

In this way, in Pinter's first phase of writing, the motif of isolation was used to picture the absurdity of man in the modern society. Even the plays' setting stresses on this inevitable fact of modern world as they begin and end in an isolated room.

On the other hand, one room in each play explicitly describes the limitation of characters. The characters' sense of loneliness in the plays can be felt from very beginning of the plays. Lack of communication or failure in communication is another important feature of this kind of drama that alienates man from his fellowmen. This estrangement has its own consequences such as loneliness and seclusion which makes life more meaningless.

CRITICAL NARRATIVE OF CHARACTERS' ISOLATION

Pinter reveals isolation in *The Room* through his main character Rose: "The nullity of her isolation is first seen in the way she ministers to Bert's silent domination" (Knowles, 1986: 114). In the opening lines of the play, the audience witness the unusual behavior of this odd couple. Their strange demeanor becomes apparent in this scene while Rose is serving food to Bert, and talks continuously, but in contrast Bert doesn't reply her at all, even by shaking his head or hand, neither rejecting nor confirming her words. It appears as if nobody is there; he doesn't respond to her even when she addresses him directly.

This silence might wrongly signify the audience that he might be deaf or dumb, whilst he is not. Bert's silence foregrounds Rose's loneliness and indicates this point that though they live together physically, mentally they are far from each other. This is the real problem of people in the modern society. There are many people around, who just live together without any affection. These individuals are alone, attempting to come out of their loneliness through speaking.

In spite of Bert's silence, Rose keeps on talking without any grievance. Bert also does not complain or ask his wife to keep quiet. Though, the couple's monologue and silence are in contrast, it displays their satisfaction of their present situation. Rose's monologue and Bert's silence convey a lot of latent points: Bert's silence is not a sign of indifference; it demonstrates his dissatisfaction with his married life, because Rose attempts to play a motherly role rather than a spousal role. Here Pinter's main character seems happy with her situation as well as the place she lives. Rose, herself desires to lead the life in isolation.

Rose, like the other characters in Pinter's works, uses words as a weapon to cover her defects, and defend herself against aliens. She endeavors to conceal her isolation behind her babble and break the deadly silence of the room. To escape from such issues, she prefers to share it with somebody in order to not tolerate the burden on her own. Hence her mind's imagination finds a way through her tongue.

Bert is another pathetic character who feels alone as his wife treats him like her son not a real husband. Boulton stresses on this mother-son relationship: "The whole scene, linguistically and visually, suggests a mother-son relationship rather than wife-husband" (1930: 95). Bert's words about his van and explaining his driving, demonstrates another aspect of isolation of modern man. Bert's loneliness and lack of communication with Rose, makes him talk and behave with his van as a woman:

I drove her down hard ... Then I drove her back, hard. I sped her. I caned her along. She was good. Then, I got back ... She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back. (Pinter, 1973: 32)

Bert's attention to his van is more than his care towards Rose. This is apparent from his manner of talking about his van. After his long silence before Rose, his words about his van evoke a sexual image in the audience's mind. Accordingly, such characters in *Absurd Theatre* indicate the loneliness of man in the modern society.

Pinter again depicts the absurdity and meaninglessness of life through Riley. This character possesses almost all the features of a miserable person: an old, blind, alone man who comes to take his daughter home. There are many people like Riley in the real world: some old, blind and lonely individuals who are abandoned by others. The dramatist attempts to portray the picture of these poor people through their absurd condition. Riley enters into Rose's world to bring her back to real life but faces her apathy. He attempts to break the cocoon of loneliness which is wrapped tightly around her. She is called back to her race, to her real family, to her real identity, her

real home, but she resists rebelliously and rejects overtly her father's request to accompany him. So she chooses her seclusion voluntarily and she does not wish to change her situation. Riley not only can't save Rose from her isolation but also shatters the column of her life, fractures her assurance and questions her identity. Furthermore, "according to Pinter's justice tradition, he is the "slight ache" in Mrs. Hudd's life who threatens retribution" (Trussler, 1974: 33). Apart from Rose's mental mess, Riley physically makes Rose lonelier by transferring his blindness to her.

In the same way, in another play *The Caretaker*, dark and depressive setting, cartoon characters, broken communication as well as verbal nonsense, tragic and comic actions picture the isolation of characters. Characters in this play are alienated from other individuals as well as the society. They are encompassed by loneliness and despite their attempt to escape from their isolation, they all remain alone by the end of the play. *The Caretaker* foregrounds this problem of modern civilization by its real characters and each of its personas picture this motif in a different way. The realistic picture of seclusion of the real people in the world is depicted by Pinter's absurd characters in a real manner.

As *The Caretaker* ends, the audiences return back to the initial state of the play, as if nothing has happened: Davies returns to his former status of being a lonely waif and the two brothers get back to their mood of loneliness: Aston is back to his seclusion and Mick remains in his non communicative mood with his older brother. In *The Caretaker* almost all three characters experience the sense of isolation and each of them is alienated in his own manner.

To make the long story short, it revolves around Davies, a nomad old man who is rescued by Aston from a brawl in a café. In the first place, he is a kind of Pinterian tramp that in the course of the play represents the characteristics of a real waif. Davies is an intruder as well as a pathetic figure in the play, exactly like Riley in *The Room*, with this difference that he was invited by the owner of the house. So he can be considered as a guest; accordingly, Gale titles his article *The Caretaker (The Guest)*. On the other hand, Riley and Davies share another

similarity as both of them are victims and outside intruders simultaneously.

Davies, despite his interloper role in the play, arouses the audience's sympathy because of his status as a pathetic, isolated and alienated man. He has no one around and no place to live. He is alienated from the society and his "life consists of an attempt—foredoomed to failure—to convince society that he exists, and occupies a legitimate position on the social ladder" (Baker and Tabachnick, 1973: 72). As a real citizen he suffers from being contemptible in the society. "For him, 'society' remains an elusive spectre with which he cannot come to terms" (Baker and Tabachnick, 1973: 72).

His entire attempt to find a better condition and situation in life ends in misery. Davies finds a chance to improve his life a bit but his selfishness and his vicious and murmurous nature doesn't let him step forward; instead, at the end of the play he gets back to his first place: being waif and alone. He becomes a tramp without any shelter. His silliness about events around and his foolish effort to annihilate the two brothers' relationship causes him to lose his friendship with Aston and become alone again. Like Rose, Davies's isolation was self imposed and accepted willingly by him. It seems this isolation does not bother him since it arouses his covetousness nature. After his acquaintance with Aston, he doesn't try to make a friendship with his savior, but attempts to take advantage of Aston for his comfort. In this case, Davies' loneliness is certain and unavoidable.

Aston is another lonely character in *The Caretaker*. His isolation forces him to invite an unknown guest-intruder to his place. From the beginning of their acquaintance, Aston leaves no stone unturned to fill up his lonely vacuum as Gale points out "the recuperating brother rescues the tramp from an unpleasant situation and invites him into his room, which is in a house owned by the younger brother (Mick)" (2003: 101). In fact, he wishes to help himself by letting Davies stay in his room; he tries to share his loneliness with someone else. This issue is vividly discernible in Rose's behavior with her husband as she desires to fill her loneliness by talking to her closest one. Rose and Aston both have chosen the wrong ones for their purpose,

since in spite of their favour and kindness to them, by the end of the plays both characters remain alone.

Unlike Rose and Davies, Aston's isolation was not voluntary as his family forced him to have electric shock treatment, and after this kind of therapy subsequently he was forced to be alone. Before the electric shock, Aston used to be a chatty person and talked about everything to everyone, but later, his sense of chattiness was suppressed by having the electric shock therapy which resulted into his seclusion from the out world. But finally the pressure of isolation makes him invite Davies to his place and let him enter to his privacy.

All Aston's actions and dialogues represent him as an absurd character who attempts to make his situation better by trying to have more communication with others. For sure, he is tired of seclusion as he mentions in his solitude: "I never go into them now. I don't talk to anyone ... like that" (Pinter, 1962: 57). By bringing Davies into his territory, he strives to conquer his awe and distrust of others. This uncertainty originates from his bitter experiences in the asylum.

Aston even talks about his mental problem and his hospitalization in mental hospital with Davies, since he needs to talk with someone about his experiences. Like the real people all around the world who desire to talk and share their thoughts, ambitions, wishes and concerns, Aston reveals his heart to Davies: "the confession of a helpless man to another man, whom he regards as a friend" (Choudhuri, 1976: 108). But unfortunately he finds a wrong person for filling his isolation.

Aston and Davies are both isolated and need someone to fill their desire. Unlike Davies' desire which is physical, Aston's desire is mental. Aston wish for a real companionship for his lonely moments but in contrast, for Davies, shelter, food and job are more important than companionship. Therefore, when Davies perceives the truth that he can gain anything he likes, he prefers to live alone in Aston's room. Thus, he starts to kick Aston out by complaining about Aston to Mick (Aston's younger brother). The actual problem of Aston and Davies is summarized in one word: Trust. Basically simple, Aston trusts anyone undoubtedly and positively

while Davies trusts no one, even those who helped him in his difficulties.

In the same way, a meticulous analysis of Mick's personality establishes his status as a lonely individual in the society. In spite of his protective role towards his brain damaged brother, he is almost alienated from him. As they appeared together in the room rarely and they don't talk too much with each other in the course of the play. So in *The Caretaker* "there are simply people living very much alone" (Hinchliffe, 1967: 96).

CONCLUSION

The audiences feel pity for the characters of *The Room* and *The Caretaker*. Despite being the interlopers, Riley and Davies arouse the audience's sympathy as much as Rose and Aston as the pathetic figures in the plays do. Rose's isolation forces her to live with a silent man and Aston's loneliness stimulates him to invite greedy Davies to his place. In this sense, both characters are lonely human beings who just make every effort to find someone in order to fill their solitude. On the other hand, Riley and Davies' situation is also piteous. Blind Riley, is an isolated cripple man either who is insulted by Rose and Bert and eventually murdered by Bert.

In this play, death reminds one, this bitter fact of life that man is born alone and passes away in solitary. Davies also has been fired recently from his job and has nowhere to live. However he has no clear identity and he is not the man who claims he is as from his way of treatment, anyone can easily find the hidden rotten layers of him. In spite of his malicious demeanor towards Aston, he creates the feeling of compassion in the audience as he is a person who is deceived and manipulated by Mick.

To put it in a nutshell, Pinter's particular setting is an isolated room consists of few characters in it. These characters all suffer from fracture in their communication as one can see clearly the failure of communication between the closest people in one room, such as Rose and her husband Bert as well as Aston and his brother Mick. Their broken communication contributes them to the status of loneliness. In this way, Davies' lack of communication with Aston affects on his later situation and makes him homeless again. By the

end of the plays all the characters sink in their own isolation.

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