

Pinterisque in Terms of Psychoanalysis: Harold Pinters Stage and Psyche in the Context of Modern Stage.

C.S.Biju Ph.D. Associate Professor, Department of English, St.Thomas' College, Thrissur.

Harold Pinter established a theater which challenged conventions of twentieth century theater through interrogating bizarre and complex situations, characters and actions. 'Language is a strategy to cover nakedness', said Pinter once. Based on the assumptions of psychoanalytic approach of Jacques Lacan, the article attempts to explore Pinter's experimental theater and its language.

Keywords: Modernism in Theater, Theater Language, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis.

Pinter is widely regarded as one of the foremost living dramatists in English theatre. He began his career as a playwright during an era of Angry-Young man generation of British authors, whose works were typified by a sense of disillusionment, working class characters and by bleakly mundane settings. The fifties gave rise to the Theatre of the Absurd, an experimental dramatic style evident in the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, with such elements as contradiction, indecipherable dialogue and bizarre images and situations. Pinter's early plays exemplifies a synthesis of these theatrical trends.

Pinter's material is people, who are standing at "essential turning points in their life"¹ He says, "I am dealing with these characters at the extreme edge of their living."² Scholars appropriated his experiments in theatre as existential adjustment like that of Samuel Beckett's or Franz Kafka's. The genesis of such a theatre is in man's confrontation with himself, which paves

the way for the existential anxiety of being due to the threat of non-being in an existentialist point of view.

A brief chronology of Pinter's theatrical activity is helpful here. *The Hot House*, written in 1958 is a satiric, surrealistic portrayal of a government-run lunatic asylum. This drama is often regarded as an implicit condemnation of modern bureaucratic institutions and their dehumanizing efforts. Following the radio plays *A Slight Ache* and *a Night Out*, Pinter produced *The Care Taker* (1960), his first critical success, which delineates a more recognizably realistic situation. Aston, a former Lunatic, brings Davies, an opportunistic vagrant, to the house owned by his domineering younger brother, Mick. Mick detects the derelict selfish motives of Davies and abusively cross-examines him. The atmosphere of menace, unlike the earlier plays arises from various gambits for dominance among characters: "Perhaps among certain men, only two moralities are possible, that of the slave and the ruler".³

The One act play *The Room* (1957) appeared as the first production of Pinter. In *The Room* a blind man invades the warm well-lighted flat of Rose, an old woman, entreating her to come home even though she vehemently denies familiarity. Her husband savagely beats him in front of Rose, who is then struck blind. Pinter's first full length play, *The Birthday Party* (1958) focused upon Stanley Weber, living in a shabby seaside hotel, whose birthday celebration is transformed into a torturous interrogation by two strangers; Goldberg and McCann. After demoralizing Stanley into a state of confused submission, with a litany of charges, they take him away for a 'rest cure' at the end of the last act.

These plays are often described as ‘Comedies of Menace’ in which mysterious strangers threaten the inhabitants of an insulated, seemingly secure environment. Critics, daunted by the cryptic plots of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* categorized them as nonsensical. In *The Dumb Waiter*, published in 1960, Gus and Ben two hired murderers are waiting for instructions in the basement of an abandoned restaurant. The *Dumb Waiter*, a mechanical device brings instructions to Ben and Gus. The last instruction is to murder the next man who enters: it’s Gus. In the so called Comedies of Menace; “Is some one going to open the door and come in?” Is a potent question. The people vying for power are spouses and family members rather than strangers in Pinter’s teleplays such as *The Collection* (1965). *The lover* (1963), *Tea Party* (1963), Employing Pinter’s characteristic absurdism; *The Home coming* (1965) focuses on the bizarre events that occur when the eldest son, a philosophy professor in *Home Coming* returns home and attempts to dominate his depressed father and brothers.

The subsequent plays of Pinter center increasingly upon the subjectivity and memory. *Landscape NS Silence*, Two one act plays produced together in 1969 feature exchanges of monologue in which intimately related yet isolated characters recall desperate versions of common events. In Pinter’s next full length drama *Old Times* (1970), memory plays a pivotal role. For Anna; her one time roommate Kala and her husband Deely, the reality of the past fades and memory transforms real events into shadowy remnants of experience which are no more substantial than reveries. Here, “memories arouse rivalry and battles for domination through participation in a past orthrough one’s ability to persuade another to accept an interpretation of it”⁴.

Betrayal (1978) is different from other dramatic treatments of marital infidelity only in its reversal of chronological order. The most unusual aspect is its dramatic sequence; generally backward in time, accompanied by a sporadic forward movement. *Family Voices* (1981) which stylistically resembles *Landscape and Silence* in its use of altering monologues, examines the depressive relationship between mother and her son who lives in a desolate boarding house. *Victoria Station* is a one act play, which concerns the bizarre alliance between a taxi dispatcher and driver.

A Kind of Alaska, based on actual case histories of sleeping sickness victims, who were revived after spending decades in comas together with the two early plays form a trilogy entitled *Other Voices* (1983), *One for the Road* (1984) which preplaced *family Voices* in later productions of *Other Voices*, reflects Pinter's growing concern for political and human rights in its realistic portrayal of the interrogation and torture of a family by a decorous Government representative. *Mountain Language*(1988) examine political repressions. This work focuses upon a group of women waiting to visit their loved ones in prison who are forbidden by guards to speak their own mountain language.

Such topics as the ambiguity and subjectiveness of reality, the failure of inter personal communication and the primary of power in human relationships figure prominently in Pinter's ominous yet humorous works. According to various scholars, central to Pinter's exploration of these concerns is a dramatic tension. This tension is often attributed to the conflict between the meticulously preserved social pretenses of his characters and the subconscious desire they repress. But the playwright is himself baffled and annoyed by most of the interpretations that have appeared so far. Most of the commentators laud his synthesis of menace, silence and

interrogation as most original and perceptive in the contemporary theatre. Still some commentators have derided Pinter's style as confusing and unintelligible.

As far as the critical responses to Pinter's plays are concerned the critics confront with further problems of style, language, meaning and interpretation, after frightening mass of critical efforts. At the moment of recognition of failure, critics blame the author for making such a confusion. "The battlement with undeniable technical competence (in Pinter's Play); often led critics to admit brilliant expertise but suggest that was all these was: beautifully done, but to what end"⁵. For instance, Richard Schechner observes: " the essential characteristic of Pinter's play is that they are structurally complete but conceptually incomplete"⁶.

This kind of affinity towards structural and conceptual completeness prevents the critics from focusing upon the text. Instead they vaguely refer to the sort of 'feeling' and 'experience' it provides. "It is possible to be baffled by a Pinter play and yet to leave the theatre with a feeling of having had an important and memorable experience"⁷. Pinter's plays fundamentally prevent the search for conceptual significance and interpretable meaning. This is a bafflement of the critic in the face of a serious theatrical effort. The quest for exactness of experience, significance and concepts troubles his experience. J.R. Taylor vaguely pointed out that in performance, Pinter's plays have a quality which "forbids any questioning on the exact significance of what is happening"⁸.

Finally almost all the critical efforts on Pinter's plays attempt to elaborate various structural and technical complexities. All of the critical works have the recurring form of an impressionistic metaphor and a list of isolated perceptions. The critical problems discussed in the

pioneering works at the beginning of Pinter criticism, such as *anger and after* by John Russel Taylor (1962) and the *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) seem to have received little modification in the decades since then. Quigly observes in this connection: “Analogies with music, poetry, sculpture, dreams.... Give every suggestion that a critic has understood something about the plays but provide little help for the reader”⁹. Critics of Pinter excessively embark on the discussion of the puzzling variety of language, source of allusions; imaginative interpretation of events and the analysis of statements of earlier critics. In such works, emphasis has been given to various philosophical and literary sources of his plays, puzzling problems of inter subjective communication and the personal biography of Pinter. The critical approaches in the last some decades initiated little improvement in the understanding of his plays to a confused audience.

The widely accepted critical generalization regarding Pinter’s plays have failed to constitute either a comprehensive theory of the stage or a credible methodology in the analysis of individual plays. Certainly Pinter’s plays include issues of existential crisis, menace, illusory nature of self, problems of identity and lack of transparency of human interaction. But many other modern plays can also be listed as examples of such matters.

The understanding of his world will necessarily be a continuing process because Pinter is a dramatist of recent date, and his experiments with stage hasn’t yet ceased. Distinct from the domineering trends in Pinter criticism, my attempt is to trace issues such as Subjectivity, Language and the impact of the ‘gaze’ of spectator and critic in his plays in the light of Lacanian Psychoanalytic theory. Lacan’s most discussed innovation was to yoke Freud’s unconscious to the language of Saussure, Jacobson and Levi-Strauss. As he bring many aspects of Freud to the focus he reveals the underlying kinship between structuralism and metaphysics Through his

writings, Lacan posits a fundamental critique of the concept of a constitutive subject which has a pivotal role in the modernist thought. My attempt is to trace various aspects of this critique of the modernist concept of the subject in Harold Pinter's plays.

In this effort to break new ground, the debate takes its beginnings in an examination of the problems and perspectives in the analysis of Pinter's plays. This attempt isolates and concentrates on some aspects of Pinter criticism, his career and corpus with an eye on the recognition, understanding and resolution of fundamental problems of Pinter's work. The first chapter is a telegraphic summary of Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis. The stress is laid upon the formation of Subjectivity, Desire and Unconscious. The second chapter discuss the centrality of banal rituals of homely living in the formation of the subject of language, focusing upon Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*. An examination of the spectators' absorption into the order of language of the stage supplements this attempt. The third chapter brings into focus the other (object petit 'a' in Lacan's terminology) taking into consideration Pinter's more complex play, *The Home Coming*.

Interaction and interplay between psychoanalysis and theatre has a remarkable history from the times of studies of Aristotle's catharsis and to the contemporary explorations of Greek tragedies in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis. The principal issues in psychoanalytic film theory is by and large used in the study of the interventions of psychoanalysis in theatre studies. The most significant factor in psychoanalytic film studies guess proposed by Christian Metz Laura Mulvey is also phenomenal in establishing the link between psychoanalysis and theatre. In the identification based mimetic theatre, the issue of gaze, identification and fetishism and scopophilia are immensely significant. But this article attempts to introduce the seminality of

Lacanian psychoanalysis in the interpretation and analysis of Harold pinter's plays. The most significant theoretical assumptions of Jacques Lacan consist of the idea of the imaginary, symbolic and the real orders together with the notion of mirror stage, the ego and the subject. The notion of the imaginary order, Lacan used the word imaginary as a fictional virtual plane of human psyche. The notion of imaginary is extremely internalized yet unavoidable aspect of of the speaking subject. The imaginary and fictional aspects of psychological life are intrinsically induced into with factual realistic aspect of human life. The symbolic order is the most significant dimension of Lacanian approach to human psyche. The symbolic represents the world of language and Lacan attempted to design it as the symbolic order on the basis of his understanding of structuralist linguistics. But later Lacan established the sliding of the signifier over the signified in the constitution of sign. With this innovation the structural dimension fade away and the symbolic order has become the domain of the signifier for stop the notion of signification significance signifying chain metaphor and metonymy and the final question of the unconscious are inevitably linked to the idea of the symbolic the order of language for stop the cans renowned expression the unconscious is structured like a language establishes this fact. The third register real is also very important in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis because the order of the real is a tricky concept which problem at Isis many established conceptions of psychoanalysis and the philosophy. The notion of real has taken plenty of connotations and definitions it is a dimension that always trying to dismantle the link between imaginary and the symbolic orders in language. It is also associated with aspects of the libido such as small object a, enjoyment etc. Lacan's most important conceptualization is one that of the mirror stage¹⁰. The idea of mirror stage has been predominant in psychoanalysis and psychology, but Lacan offers a

completely new interpretation of the mirror in the mirror stage of an infant in an effort to interpret the idea of ego and define the subject in psychoanalysis.

1. Esslin, Martin. *Pinter: The Playwright* Methuen, London. 1984 p. 38
2. Pinter, H. Interviewed by Kenneth Tynan in the series *People Today*, BBC Home Service 28th Oct. 1960.
3. Gordon, L.G. *Stratagems to Uncover Nakedness: The Drama of Harold Pinter*. University of Missouri Press, 1969. p. 43
4. Dukore, Bernard.F. *Harold Pinter*. Grover Press. N.Y. 1982 p. 139
5. Hinchliffe, A.P. *Harold Pinter*. N.Y. 1967
6. Schechrer, Richard. Puzzling Pinter *Tulane Drama Review XI*. Winter 1966 p. 177
7. Thornton, P.C. Blindness and the conformation with Death: Three plays of Harold Pinter. *Die Neueren. Sprachen XVII* May 1968 p. 213
8. Taylor, J.R. *Anger and After*. Middlesex 1968. P. 234
9. Quigley, Austin E. *The Pinter Problem*. Princeton, N.J. 1975 p. 18
10. Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection* 1996. Norton.