

HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS AND POSTMODERNISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH OF EAST WEST UNIVERSITY

BY

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ID: 2012-2-93-001

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER IN ENGLISH (ELL)

APRIL 2014

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that I have fully cited and referenced all materials that are not original to this work.

Azharul Islam

Signature :

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my endless gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Farkul Alam with whose invaluable feedback, guidance, encouragement, tolerance as well as constructive attitude I was able to finalise this dissertation.

I wish to thank whole-heartedly Cos Tonmoy who shared his ideas on postmodernism with me and lent me a number of books and materials.

I would like to extend my thanks to my friends Asif Newaz, Maroof Ibn Mannan, Borhan Uddin and Parvin Akter who motivated me at times of distress.

Finally, I want to thank my father for his endless support and my mother, who prayed for me and encouraged me throughout my project with great enthusiasm.

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Introduction

The arrival of Pinter (1930-2008), as a dramatist, revolutionized the theatre world of the 20th century. He belongs to the postwar decades when British society was undergoing a major transformation both in the political realm and in the theatre. It was a period when modernity was being challenged by the new literary movement of Postmodernism. During the 1960s, the voices of the philosopher Derrida, the aesthetician Lyotard, as well as the critic-theorist Hassan were theorizing about postmodernism in the field of literature. They declared a “paradigm shift” from modernity’s ideas of truth and reality. They declared the death of objective truth. According to them, what was right for one person was not necessarily right for another. Pinter’s works also represent changing styles in the arts with the advent of Postmodernism. Since his first play *The Room* (1957), Pinter’s work displayed a very tense and hostile environment where characters show a sense of alienation, sarcasm, and violence. A distinctive style emerged in his plays, a sort of almost disjointed dialogue in which silences punctuated the action and created a thick unspoken violence. This was later termed as the famous “Pinter Pause” by critics of the theatre.

Pinter began writing in the late 1950’s after years of work as an actor. From the very beginning of his career as a dramatist, he utterly changed the public’s expectations of stage language and made the audiences wonder if his characters were talking to communicate effectively or just confusing each other. Language in Pinter’s plays is uncertain. There seems to be no direct reference between a signifier and a signified in his plays. Consequently, meaning falls into a net of possibilities of interpretation. Because of the multiplicity of meanings, Pinter’s characters often remain mysterious. Their thoughts and actions are often ambiguous and this is known as a postmodern characteristic. The ambiguity and vagueness revolving around the characters mostly originated from the speaker’s feelings that always lie in the unspoken words or

“silences”. Pinter’s frequent use of silences and pauses suggest that Pinter’s characters hardly understood each other. Consequently, failure in communication, an outstanding feature of postmodernism, seems to be a dominant theme in most of his plays. The reason why his characters fail to communicate with each other lies in their frequent use of deceptive language. They use language as a weapon to attain personal advantage in what can be seen as a “Language Game”, to use Lyotard’s term. In addition to the above discussed qualities, most of Pinter’s plays also display irony, anarchy, playfulness, indeterminacy and the collapse of metanarratives.

Pinter’s plays are highly confusing and vague. Ambiguity, a familiar feature of postmodernism, is on view in almost all of Pinter’s plays. When we try to analyze what his plays are about, we run into difficulties. We are presented with situations which are at once simple, ambiguous and puzzling. What happens seems to be symbolic, but what it symbolizes is difficult to determine. The characters and their behavior thus symbolize something, but we are never quite sure what that something is. The characters behave in a believable manner, but their motivations are shrouded. We are never precisely sure who they are, why they are there, or what they intend to do. Their motives and backgrounds are vague or unclear. We recognize that there is some kind of motivation, but we are unsure what it is. We recognize that there is a background, but that background is clouded in mystery. Pinter’s plays, therefore, never satisfy our curiosity. As Dukori observes, in Pinter’s plays “each piece of knowledge is a half-knowledge, each answer a springboard to new questions” (44).

Because of their ambiguous setting, Pinter’s plays often appear problematic, another characteristic of postmodernism. His texts are written to be rewritten by the reader with every viewing. They are thus “Writerly texts”, to use Barthes’ term. Pinter always leaves gap to be filled in by readers who can, therefore, come up with their own interpretations of the texts. Thus,

Pinter's plays are open to multiple interpretations, a familiar feature of postmodernism. As Butler observes, postmodern texts "are left open to all sorts of interpretations" (11) and Pinter's plays most definitely are open-ended.

The reason behind the multiple interpretations possible of Pinter's plays mostly lies in the readers' inability to understand the characters' real motives. They hardly reveal themselves. Instead, they remain silent for most of the play. Silence, an important aspect of postmodernism, is of paramount importance in Pinter's plays because it serves multiple functions. As Rayner observes of Pinter's plays, "silences create atmosphere and mood, to be sure, and they may indicate something about character, but they are also part of a signifying structure" (482). Pauses, too, are inseparable parts of Pinter's plays. They constitute a large part of the plays and dominate over spoken words. As Morgan says "We must look not towards what they say, but towards when they keep silent" (490).

The silences and pauses, and the characters' unrevealed feelings create a world in which there is no distinct truth. In most of Pinter's plays, truth is relative to differing standpoints. Pinter himself once said, "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false" (qtd in Faber and Faber ix). In postmodern literature, too, truth is relative and man-made. "For Derridians, truth is really a kind of fiction, reading is always a form of *misreading*, and, most fundamentally, understanding is always a form of *misunderstanding*" (qtd. in Butler 21). Hooti also observes that in postmodernism, "there is no such a thing as objective truth and all definitions and depictions of truth are subjective, a mere creation of the human mind" (53). Hence, in a postmodernist view, "truth itself is relative and depends on the nature and variety of culture and social influences on one's life" (ibid).

In Pinter's plays, then, truth is always relative and varies from person to person. What is true for one person may not be true for another. This is mainly because there is nothing logical and rational in Pinter's plays. His plays portray a world where irrationality rules over rational justification of life. To quote Butler, "There is a deep irrationalism at the heart of postmodernism" (11). Postmodernism explores the limitations of rationality and celebrates irrationality. Power (1990) also notes that, "postmodernism stands for the death of reason" (qtd. in Hassard 303). To quote Stroch as well, "Pinter deliberately destroys all clues for a rational appraisal: the irrationality is the major part of the meaning (703).

Pinter's characters always tend to deceive and take control over others. The language they use to communicate with each other is mostly tactical and deceptive. Consequently, they rarely engage in effective communication. Thus, failure in communication, an outstanding feature of postmodernism, runs throughout most of Pinter's plays. As Lowe observes, "In Pinter's plays, the efficacy of language is questioned and the characters' inability to communicate with each other becomes a source of dramatic tension" (509). In Pinter's plays, there is "a serious breakdown in communication" (Tecuiano 247). In other words, meaningful communication does not take place; there is no communion, no unity in spirit.

The characters' inability to communicate effectively with each other often leads to the extinction of human bondage. As they hardly communicate with each other, the relationship between them often seems to be fragile and empty. They eventually find their existence a mockery. Thus, futility of human relationship and vulnerability of human existence, outstanding concerns of postmodernism, seem to be dominant features of Pinter's plays. Pinter's characters seem to live in a postmodern world where human relationships are fake and simulated. To quote

Butler, in the postmodern world, people are “held together by electronic rather than genuine social relationships between persons” (118).

Because of the inadequacy of language, meaning in Pinter’s plays often falls into a net of possibilities of interpretation. Meaning becomes the property of readers/audiences who are free to play with them. Pinter’s plays are open to as many interpretations as there are reading minds (Tecuciano 249). There are layers and layers of meaning to each text (ibid). Pinter’s plays cannot be said to be about any one subject. Consequently, they cannot be summed up in a single meaning. Each sentence of his plays has multiple meanings, all of which make sense depending on the angle from which the case is considered. In Pinter’s plays, therefore, authorial intention is not trusted; rather, the famous postmodern proclamation “The Death of the Author” seems to be dominant. Pinter’s plays offer multiple interpretations and readers/ audiences are free to choose among them. As Martin Esslin suggests, “the plays amount to poetic metaphors which lie open to an infinite number of interpretations” (qtd. in Hinden 21).

The above discussion makes it clear that Pinter’s plays fulfill the criteria of postmodern theatre in many respects. His plays display ambiguity, pluralism, disintegration, deconstruction and difference; characteristics that Ihab Hassan has identified as qualities of postmodern works. His plays also represent the increasing blurring of reality, of real life and fiction, of reality and signs or concepts which refer to reality. This is what Baudrillard (1988) calls the “hyperreal”.

Moreover, his plays are marked by special kinds of puns, verbal duels, repetition of words and phrases, silences and pauses which result in lack of understanding and lead to the so-called “Language Game” in postmodern philosophy. In addition, his plays display the fall of metanarratives, the futility of human relationships, vulnerability of human existence and failure

of language, all important features of postmodern theatre. Thus, Pinter's plays seem to display a large number of features that are typical of postmodern writing.

The present study focuses on the connections between Pinter's plays and postmodernism. It attempts to show how the emergence of Pinter as a dramatist and the emergence of postmodernism as a movement coincided with each other. It also attempts to focus on the postmodern features present in Pinter's plays. It further attempts to show Pinter's connection with "The Theatre of the Absurd" and "The Comedy of Menace". The study intends to give a clear idea about Pinter and his dramaturgy in the context of postmodernism. It will also throw light on the postmodern condition as presented by Pinter. Hopefully, the study will be of use to anyone interested in viewing Pinter as a postmodern playwright.

Chapter 1 (Literature Review)

When Pinter began writing in the late 1950's, postmodernism was beginning to emerge as a movement. It was a period when avant-garde theatre was already flourishing. Social changes resulting from technological advances and religious uncertainty were moulding the spirit of the age. These factors were, in fact, signs of entrance into a new age that has come to be known as "postmodernism". In other word, Pinter's arrival as a dramatist coincided with the emergence of postmodernism. Pinter's plays illustrate the power of language and its unreliability, which is labeled in postmodernism as "indeterminacy". The power of most of his plays originates from the unspoken words or what has come to be known as "Pinter's pauses". In most of his plays, there is no one meaning, no real authority and no transcendental signified. The lack of a definite message results in lack of closure, another characteristic of postmodernism. In addition to the above discussed qualities, his use of multiple perspectives, parodic echoing and mixture of different genres have led some critics to confidently label his work as "postmodernist". The present study focuses on the connections between Pinter's plays and postmodernism, and highlights Pinter's treatment of issues such as the notion of truth, unreliability of language, sense of non-ending and fall of metanarratives in his plays.

In the world of literature, the term "postmodernism" was first employed and popularized by the American literary critic Ihab Hassan. In his essay "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" (1987), Hassan discusses the chief characteristics of postmodernism. Most of the characteristics he discusses in the essay, including antiform, play, chance, irony, anarchy, silence, difference and indeterminacy (6), are also main elements of Pinter's plays. In his works, Pinter plays with traditional ideas of "form" and his creations are consequently full of irony, playfulness, anarchy, silence and indeterminacy. In his essay, Hassan also mentions a long list of artists from various

disciplines whose names epitomize postmodernism for him. There are very few playwrights on his list but Pinter is one of them (1). Hassan places Pinter in it because his plays fulfill the criteria of postmodern theatre in all aspects.

Language plays an important role in postmodern theatre. It is no longer treated as a medium of communication. As Derrida says, “language never offers us direct contact with reality; it is not a transparent medium, a window on the world” (qtd. in Bertens 126). On the contrary, “it always inserts itself between us and the world – like a smudgy screen or a distorting lens” (ibid). Derrida also says “language is inherently unreliable” (qtd. in Bertens 124). “What enables words to refer to whatever they refer to is their difference from other words, not a direct link to their so-called referents” (ibid). According to Derrida then, language can never be relied upon because meanings are not always derived from the words they refer to.

Pinter also believes in the unreliability of language. In his speech delivered at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol (1962), he said “Language is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken... A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said” (qtd in Faber and Faber xii). Because of the ambiguity of his language, Pinter’s plays often confuse audiences. The language his characters use to communicate with each other is often self-contradictory and leads to confusion and vagueness. As Almansi says, “You can trust his characters neither when they are talking to others nor when they are talking to themselves” (72).

Pinter’s originality and uniqueness depends mostly on his use of language. His dialogue is invariably sparse, interspersed with pauses and silences, and often dependent on lengthy set speeches (Naismith 10). This results in lack of understanding and leads to a so-called “Language Game”. This “Language Game” is a postmodernist feature, for as Lyotard argues, “modern

metanarratives have been replaced by a postmodern heterogeneity of language games” (1984: 266). In the postmodern world, everyone plays the language game according to one’s age, profession, and status in society. To quote Bergfeldt, “language is a free entity to be played with” (17). Pinter’s characters often use language not to communicate with each other, but to attain tactical advantages. Language no longer seems a means of communication rather, it has become a playing instrument. In Bold’s words “they all play games, all the time” (23). “They all tease each other, they all try and get rises out of each other, they all try and disturb each other by saying the opposite of what the other one was hoping or expecting” (ibid). Thus, the use of language is of paramount importance in Pinter’s plays. As Kennedy observes, “Pinter has worked out his plays, and the plays work on us, through words” (62).

In postmodern theatre, words do not stand for a particular meaning because “in postmodernism, there are only signifiers” (Mehrabi 133). The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears, and with it the idea of signified that signifiers point to (ibid). Thus, for postmodern societies, there are only signifiers, and no signified. In Pinter’s plays, each and every word has multiple meanings and readers are left with innumerable options to interpret words in their own ways. According to Naismith, Pinter’s plays are “open to a variety of interpretations” (2). Quicksand notes, “*Almost certainly the key to an understanding*” of *The Caretaker* is Mick’s statement to Davies, “Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations” (qtd in Merritt 65). Thus getting the exact meaning is never possible in Pinter’s plays. In a letter to Peter Wood, the first director of *The Birthday Party*, Pinter wrote, “Meaning begins in the words, in action, continues in your head and ends nowhere. There is no end to meaning. Meaning which is resolved, parceled, labeled and ready for export is dead, impertinent – and meaningless” (qtd in Scott 199).

Because of the ambiguity of meaning, “in postmodern poetics, there is a paradigmatic shift from the idea that language is transparent to the disclosure of its physicality, its intimacy, its obdurate persistence, and its paradoxical fragility” (Mehrabi 131). Thus, language is an insufficient means for transforming the ideas that exist in one's mind (ibid). In Pinter’s plays, language is no longer a transparent means to transfer meaning and understanding. In *Harold Pinter*, Hollis notes that Pinter uses language in order to describe the failure of language and points out the poverty of man’s ability to communicate (qtd in Kim 13). In one of his most quoted statements, Pinter declares, “Communication itself between people is so frightening that ... there is a continual ... talking about other things rather than what is at the root of their relationships” (qtd in Coe 488).

The use of pauses, silences and repetitions confuse Pinter’s characters and result in failure in communication. It is also difficult to differentiate his humor from seriousness. Pinter’s plays make readers laugh aloud in nearly every sentence though readers stop laughing at a certain point when they notice the tension that lurks beneath the surface. To quote Bold, “Pinter uses an instinctively comic vision of humanity ... his humor is often black and his turn of phrase deliberately sinister” (14). Hooti also observes, “Since Pinter has always the ability to draw laughter out of what is commonly regarded as serious events or situations, his humor is often categorized as black humor in which, potentially tragic or unpleasant situations are treated with a cynical amusement” (50). The verbal humor of Pinter enchants the audience, but the pathos underneath makes them feel extreme sadness for what they are enchanted with. As Bold observes, “If Pinter’s vision is fundamentally funny then he is also aware that comedy is most movingly conveyed when it contains pathos” (15). About *The Caretaker*, Bold says, “*The Caretaker* (1960) operates by making three pathetic characters keep each others company” (15).

Pinter's characters are pathetic and devoid of moral values and religious faith. They are not guided by any kind of pre-established rules or norms. Modern justification and rationality seem awkward to them and they believe in postmodernism, something Lyotard defines as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984: 260), implying that postmodernism is suspicious to any final attempts that try to give definitive answers in any sphere. Lyotard has also argued that "The grandnarrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation" (1984:264). In postmodernist theatre, then, there is no exact meaning for metanarratives. Pinter's characters are always busy defending themselves or defeating others. As a result, it is no use for them to look for any grand solution. There is no fixed value for them; rather, what they show is relativity and instability.

Postmodernism believes in indeterminacy and relativity rather than exactness and absolutism (Hooti 51). In a postmodern world "determinacy is dead, indeterminacy holds sway" (Lyotard 1993:422). In his plays, Pinter presents us a world of total relativity where nothing is determinate and nothing is referred to permanently. Pinter himself once said, "It's terribly difficult to define what happened at any time. I think it's terribly difficult to define what happened yesterday" (qtd in Chui 55).

Because of the mobility and variability of the age, postmodern people are more concerned about "use value" than "fixed value". As a result, postmodernism can be seen as an age of extreme capitalism. As Jameson puts it "the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism" (qtd in Wakchaure 4). In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), Jean Baudrillard describes the postmodern world as "the generalized brothel of capitalism, a brothel not for prostitution but for

substitution and commutation” (423). According to Baudrillard, it is a world where everything depends on demand and supply. Capitalism has made the world a brothel where values have been prostituted. As Hulse says, “because of the triumph of capitalism, management is more important than truth; because of the influence of computerization, performance is more important than value” (1-2). Through some of his plays, Pinter presents us a world where everything, including love, family relationship, and humanity seems to be fragile and meaningless in front of capitalism. Irving Wardle believes that “Pinter’s characters ought to be analyzed from an ethological perspective, as humanized animals fighting for territory rather than for sex, or pleasure, or glory, or immortality” (qtd in Almansi 71-72). The problem of Pinter’s characters is the problem of postmodern men, for as Hooti and Azizpour observe “In the contemporary consumer world the problem of postmodern man is, he is not being himself rather, he becomes vehicle for participation in a cycle of production and consumption” (22). He sells a commodity and becomes a commodity himself (ibid).

Pinter has revolutionized the theatre world of the 20th century by introducing a new form of drama which is neither tragedy nor comedy. His plays “play” with genres. They are equally strongly comic and tragic, with many features relating to modernist plays and the theatre of the absurd. “The play is a comedy because the whole state of affairs is absurd and inglorious. It is, however, as you know, a very serious piece of work,” Pinter wrote about *The Birthday Party* to its first director Peter Wood in 1958 (qtd in Brown). As a result, his plays can never be interpreted in a particular way. In his speech delivered at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol (1962), Pinter said “there are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement, depending on where you are standing at the time or on what the weather’s like... No statement I make, therefore, should be interpreted as final and definitive” (qtd in Faber and Faber vii).

Pinter's plays can be interpreted in a number of ways also because of his use of "schizophrenic" language. "Schizophrenia", lack of association and disorder, is, according to Jameson, an aspect of postmodernism (1998: 6). Because of schizophrenic language, Pinter's characters become unable to link thought, emotion and behavior that lead to withdrawal from reality and personal relationships. His characters are not self-evident and self-identified. It is difficult to put them in only one category. Instead of being constructed by the author\creator, characters evolve during the production; that is, they make themselves. In his speech delivered at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol (1962), Pinter said,

"Given characters who possess a momentum of their own, my job is not to impose upon them, not to subject them to a false articulation, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak or making him speak in a way he could not speak. The relationship between author and characters should be a highly respectful one... it doesn't come by leading one's characters into fixed and calculated postures, but by allowing them to carry their own can, by giving them a legitimate elbowroom" (qtd in Faber and Faber xii).

Pinter's characters are also very strange in their way of communication. They communicate with each other not only through language but also through silences, pauses and dots. Silence, an important aspect of postmodernism, is of great importance in Pinter plays because it serves multiple functions. As Banu (2012) notices, "Silence may be the expression of power, strength and determination, or it may stand for weakness, passivity, violence, conflict and alienation" (34). Talking to students in the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol (1962), Pinter said, "I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place in a continual evasion" (qtd in Faber and Faber xiii). As silence can be

interpreted in different ways by the audience, meaning becomes contingent and fluid instead of being fixed.

Pinter belongs to the postwar decades – a time when the absurdist movement had already been established as a unique intellectual event in the world of dramatic art. Samuel Beckett, the archetypal absurdist, broke traditional rules of drama and highlighted the crisis of existence of the contemporary post-war generation by initiating “The Theater of Absurd”. The famous dialogue “Nothing to be done”... uttered by Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, made way to a new arena of life where meaninglessness and absurdity dominate over rational justifications of life. As a follower of Beckett, Pinter carried forward the ideas of “The Theatre of Absurd”. In his classification of the absurdist writers in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin (1964) considers Pinter as “one of the most promising exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd...in the English speaking world” (cited in Aliakbari and Pourgivi 2). Certainly, Pinter’s early plays display some characteristics of absurd drama, such as apparently meaningless plot and repetitive or nonsensical dialogue. The characters are found at the edge and long desperately to survive in a purposeless universe. Gerald Berkowitz observes that “all of Pinter’s plays have started with the assumption that no one can have a secure sense of who he is and how he fits into the scheme of things, and have shown how that central uncertainty controls our lives” (qtd in Kim 154-55). Tiwari too notes that, “Pinter’s plays express the failure of human communication, the meaninglessness of human life, and the absurdity of human existence” (5).

The failure of human communication and the apparent meaningless conversation often makes Pinter’s plays vague and ambiguous. Ambiguity is present in almost all postmodern texts for as Lyotard (1984) says, “Since every text that is written by a postmodern writer, or the work produced by a postmodern artist, as a means of verbalizing the chaotic nature of modern life, is

not governed by pre-established rules, it is filled with ambiguities” (p.81, qtd in Hooti 48).

Pinter’s plays are very ambiguous and their meanings are obscure. They are realistic plays. As Pinter himself said, “I’ve never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory” (V.V., p. 17, qtd in Naismith 5), but his characters are “always mysterious to such an extent that we are never preciously sure who they are, why they are there or what they have come to do” (Hooti 48). Bernard (1962) says, “Pinter’s plays have unreal reality, or an unrealistic reality” (qtd in Johri and Pandey 44). About *The Birthday Party*, W. Darlington (*The Daily Telegraph*) observes: “[*The Birthday Party*] turned out to be one of those plays in which an author wallows in symbols and revels in obscurity” (qtd in Chui 17). M. W. W. (*The Guardian*) warns audiences: “What all this means only Mr Pinter knows, for his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings” (ibid).

However, the ambiguities in Pinter’s plays have also been considered as great dramatic qualities. Hobson thus declares that as far as *The Birthday Party* is concerned, “no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened of them is, of course, one of its greatest merits” (qtd in Kim 156). It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies (ibid).

The ambiguity and vagueness make a postmodern writer play with the idea of non-ending. Consequently, postmodern texts leave the readers with multiple endings. While distinguishing postmodern texts from other texts in terms of “ending”, McHale claims:

One distinguishes between endings that are closed, as in Victorian novels with their compulsory tying-up of loose ends in death and marriage, and those that are open, as in many modernist novels. But what are we to say about texts that seem both open and

closed, somehow poised between the two, because they are either multiple or circular (qtd in Hooti and Schooshtarian, 2010, p.22).

Pinter, in his plays, presents us with events that go nowhere and the reader finds it quite puzzling if there is an ending or not. Brown observes, “Nothing much really happens in *The Caretaker*'. There's no complex plot with surprising shifts, tantalising twists or skeletons that leap out of cupboards”. Brown’s observation is true for other Pinter plays (*The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*) as well, where there are indefinite contradictory meanings and where the reader cannot decide which one to choose as the final signified. Thus, arriving at an exact ending is impossible in Pinter’s plays.

From the above discussion, it is evident that Pinter’s plays frequently contain awkward pauses, confusing language and endlessly wandering plots. He used these techniques to present the unreliability of language, a theme explored by post-structuralists and postmodernists. In presenting apparently confusing dialogue and meandering plots, Pinter shows his skepticism about language, meaning and communication in real life. Apart from the aspects of Pinter’s plays discussed above, there are other features such as irony, parody, pastiche, allusions, stylized language as well as linguistic idiosyncrasies that seem postmodernist. In short, most of the characteristic features of postmodernism are applicable to Pinter’s style. Thus, Pinter’s plays can easily be categorized as postmodern texts.

Pinter’s plays are then connected closely with postmodern theories put forward by famous postmodern thinkers like Derrida, Hassan, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson. This chapter focused on Pinter’s connections with the famous “Theatre of the Absurd”, and “The Comedy of Menace”. It also focused on postmodern features in Pinter’s plays in brief. In the following chapters there will be detailed description on the connections between Pinter’s plays

and postmodernism. Three full-length plays by Pinter *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* will be critically analyzed from the postmodern point of view.

Chapter 2: *The Caretaker* and Postmodernism

Pinter's *The Caretaker* dramatizes a story of two brothers and a tramp. They all live in a world of dreams and uncertainty. Throughout the whole play, all the three characters remain isolated. The most poignant fact of the play is that they are virtually incapable of verbal communication and never converse for any amount of time. They find it difficult to make themselves understood to each other at even the simplest level. The language they use to communicate with each other is often deceptive and self-contradictory. Language, therefore, seems to be unreliable or what is known in postmodernism as indeterminacy. The inability to communicate often results in long silences and pauses. Consequently, the characters' real motives and deeper feelings always remain unknown to themselves as well as to readers\audiences. The play, therefore, revolves around ambiguity and vagueness which are important characteristics of postmodernism. In addition, the play also deals with various postmodern elements such as mixture of genres, failure in communication, irony, playfulness and sense of non-ending.

Failure in communication is a dominant theme of *The Caretaker*. Although Mick and Aston are brothers, they fail to communicate with each other. This becomes obvious as they do not talk to each other even once in the course of the play. They always need a mediator, someone like Davies, who can act as a go-between between them. In fact, both brothers talk to Davies without any problem. They even talk to Davies about each other without difficulty. But they fail to communicate with each other, a major problem of postmodern people.

On the other hand, most of the conversation between Aston and Davies is just talk. They hardly pay attention to each other. Consequently, they never understand each other. Davies, especially, has no understanding of other people. He does not follow what is being said to him.

When Aston tells him that other rooms in the house are “out of commission” (p. 9) he replies, “Get away” (p. 9); and when Aston shows him the statue of Buddha he replies, “Get on” (p. 20). Finally, when Aston suggests that his groaning at night was due to an unfamiliar bed, he replies, “There’s nothing unfamiliar about me with beds. I slept in beds” (p. 31).

The reason why Davies misses what is being said to him is his sense of insecurity. His lack of roots always haunts him. Consequently, he is comfortable nowhere, no matter how secure a place is. His sense of insecurity makes him use defensive language. Davis, therefore, uses language not to communicate but to survive any which way he can. Thus, language seems to be a weapon people use to attain personal advantage. Instead of communicating effectively, they engage in verbal or “Language Games”, to use Lyotard’s term.

However, it is not only Davies that has his own struggle with language in a given situation in the play. Language, which is seemingly a very accurate reproduction of normal speech, becomes a thing to grapple with. Some characters are more powerful than others in doing so simply because they use language more skillfully. For example, Mick’s skillful use of language allows him to play a cat and mouse game with Davies. Mick plays with Davies as a cat plays with a mouse, allowing him to go away and then catch him again, encouraging confidence and then dashing it, as in the following exchange:

MICK: He’s supposed to be doing a little job for me ... I keep him here to do a little job ... but I don’t know ... I’m coming to the conclusion he’s a slow worker.

Pause

What would your advice be?

DAVIES: Well ... he’s a funny bloke, your brother.

MICK: What?

DAVIES: I was saying, he's ... he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother.

MICK *stares at him.*

MICK: Funny? Why?

DAVIES: Well ... he's funny ...

MICK: What's funny about him?

Pause

DAVIES: Not liking work.

MICK: What's funny about that?

DAVIES: Nothing.

Pause

MICK: I don't call it funny.

DAVIES: Nor me.

MICK: You don't want to start getting hypercritical.

DAVIES: No, no, I wasn't that, I wasn't ... I was only saying ... (p. 79-80)

From the above conversation it is evident that Mick plays a language game with Davies. He is self-conscious about his brother's past illness and is sensitive to the term "funny", but keeps control and changes the tack. He is always a long way ahead of Davies and dominates all the dialogues between them.

Because the characters always play a language game, they always fear revealing too much to each other. Consequently, they are not so much engaged in conversation as in covering up their deepest worries. Thus, language becomes a means of hiding the truth rather than revealing it. Language in *The Caretaker*, therefore, seems to be what Derrida calls it: a fundamentally unstable and unreliable means of communication. Derrida destabilizes the

relationship between *signifier* and *signified*. The *signifier* – the word we hear or read – is of course stable enough, but what it signifies – the *signified* – is according to Derrida subject to inherent instability.

In *The Caretaker*, the characters' remarks do not always signify what they say in words. For example, Davies's absurd story about why he left his wife is intended to impress Aston by revealing his high standards. His references to his papers in Sidcup are also designed to convince both Mick and Aston that he is a man with secure identity. Thus, throughout the whole play, Davis keeps talking about what appears to be irrelevant matters, avoiding the real issue. Instead of replying to direct questions put to him, he uses the language of noncommunication in order to hide his real problems. A conversation between Aston and Davies goes on this way:

ASTON: What did you say your name was?

DAVIES: Bernard Jenkins is my assumed one.

ASTON: No, your other one?

DAVIES: Davies. Mac Davies.

ASTON: Welsh, are you?

DAVIES: Eh?

ASTON: You Welsh?

Pause

DAVIES: Well, I been around, you know . . . what I mean . . . I been about . . .

ASTON: Where were you born then?

DAVIES: (*darkly*) What do you mean?

ASTON: Where were you born?

DAVIES: I was . . . uh . . . oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back . . . see what I mean . . . going back . . . a good way . . . lose a bit of track, like . . . you know . . . (p. 35-36)

The above conversation proves that Davies fails to answer to direct questions put to him. His failure to answer them results in lots of pauses in his dialogues. These pauses convey the message that he has no definite identity. As a postmodern play, *The Caretaker* seems to use lots of pauses and silences.

In *The Caretaker*, silences and pauses are used to portray the concept that language is a vague and meaningless tool that people use to hide their own discomfort. More can be said through pauses and silences than in actual dialogue. For example, silence in Mick's dialogue implies more than what he says:

What's the game?

Silence.

Well? (p. 42-43)

Here, silence is used as a form of passive aggression. It creates a feeling of unease and tension. Davies does not answer to Mick, because he finds it difficult to face the aggression he is thrown upon in the form of silence.

Thus, silences and pauses used in *The Caretaker* have their own meanings. Because in the postmodern world language fails to communicate effectively, silences and pauses are used for effective communication. What language fails to convey is conveyed through silences and pauses. An example of the other meaning which is contained in pauses is in Act 1 when Aston tells Davies that he "is jabbering" (p. 30) when he sleeps. Davies does not believe this to be true but Aston insists that he jabbbers.

DAVIES: I don't jabber, man. Nobody ever told me that before.

Pause

What would I be jabbering about?

ASTON: I don't know.

DAVIES: I mean, where's the sense in it?

Pause

Nobody ever told me that before.

Pause

You got hold of the wrong bloke, mate.

ASTON: (*crossing to the bed with the toaster*) No. you woke me up. I thought you might have been dreaming.

DAVIES: I wasn't dreaming. I never had a dream in my life.

Pause (p. 30-31)

The above quotation contains four pauses. Each of these pauses serves a unique purpose and gives us a different message from what Davies says in his own sentences. Davies says that he does not jabber in sleep and he has never had a dream in his life. This means he has no place called home. He feels secure nowhere and consequently never sleeps well. In *The Caretaker*, therefore, true communication takes place not through verbal elements but through non-verbal elements or what have come to be known as theatrical silences and pauses, characteristic of postmodern theatre.

In *The Caretaker*, Pinter makes the best use of pauses in the final scene. In Davies's final speech, his broken phrases, separated by pauses, communicate very effectively how all communication between him and Aston has now failed.

DAVIES: But ... but ... look ... listen ... listen here ... I mean ...

ASTON *turns back to the window.*

What am I going to do?

Pause

What shall I do?

Pause

Where am I going to go? (p. 124)

Throughout the whole play, Davies has been a source of amusement for readers/audiences. His attitude and actions provide instances of humor and laughter throughout the play. His story about why he left his wife, his obsession with shoes and his hatred for Blacks evoke laughter and mirth in the mind of readers/audiences. But they are disturbed with their own reactions when they eventually notice what it is that they are really laughing at. At the end of the play, his pleading to Aston is so despairing that we cannot but pity him. There is a terrible pathos in Davies. He is a victim of a dog eats dog world. He is an outcast in society. Consequently, he does not fit anywhere. At the end of the play, he is cast out onto the street because he is destined to be there. He is guilty of being Davies.

Thus, the play evokes both laughter and pity simultaneously in the mind of readers/audiences. They cannot help laughing at the characters' funny remarks and actions. However, they stop laughing at a certain point when they come to see the vulnerability of the individuals they are laughing at. Thus Pinter seems to play with genres. His play is equally strongly a tragedy and a comedy. *The Caretaker*, therefore, portrays another postmodern quality, hybridity or mixture of different genres.

Though Davies seems to be the most vulnerable character in the play, he is not the only victim. The other two characters are also victims of society. Aston is an almost tragic figure like Davies. His narrative description of the forced electric shock treatment in hospital proves his vulnerability as an individual. Society has made him a recluse. Living amidst thousands of people, he is an outsider and loner. He is as much cut off from society as Davies. The third character, Mick, is also a disturbed individual. Obsessed and worried about his brother, he expresses his frustration in violence against Davies, and eventually the statue of Buddha. All three characters are thus isolated and lonely. Futility of human relationships and vulnerability of human existence are outstanding concerns of postmodernism, and seem to be on display in *The Caretaker*.

Presenting the characters as isolated and loners from the beginning to the end of the play, Pinter plays with the traditional idea of an ending. None of his characters seems to have changed his position a bit in the course of the play. At the end of the play each character is in the same position they were at the beginning. At the very beginning Aston was fixing the electric toaster and at the very end he is still fixing the toaster plug. Mick's dream of converting the room into a luxury penthouse remains static. Davies is once again a vagrant, alienated, dispossessed, and alone. This suggests that nothing was accomplished during the play. In *The Caretaker*, therefore, the readers/audiences come to a dead end, or "aporia", to use a word that Derrida has made popular.

From the above discussion, we can come to the conclusion that *The Caretaker* offers us a bleak vision of humanity. All three characters in the play are isolated, lonely and vulnerable to the extreme. Futility of human relationships and the vulnerability of human existence are dominant themes of the play; these are also among the main elements of postmodernism. Though

the characters at times seem funny, the most tragic fact of the play lies in their inability to understand that they are being funny. For example, the comedy emanating from Davies is never intentional. He is not aware of the fact that his frequent references to Sidcup merely emphasize the fact that no paper is going to change who he is. Thus, the play displays hybridity, another characteristic of postmodernism. The characters' use of defensive and tactful language brings the play into the territory of postmodernity in that we come close to Lyotard's "Language Game" (1984: 266). Playing with the traditional idea of ending, Pinter also shows the meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence and their actions. Thus, *The Caretaker* revolves around postmodern ideas and thoughts.

Chapter 3: *The Birthday Party* and Postmodernism

The Birthday Party is one of Pinter's most shocking plays where readers/audiences are disturbed by their ignorance of the characters' motives and actions. Throughout the whole play, the readers/audiences remain ignorant of the characters' identities and their motives. The protagonist himself seems to have done something wrong in the past. But his real offence is never made clear. The arrival of the two visitors and their intentions also remain ambiguous. Thus, the play presents us with a world of ambiguity and vagueness – the kind of atmosphere typical of postmodernism. Readers/audiences are also shocked at the futility of the relationships presented in the play. Human interactions seem to be breaking up. Relationships between people seem not real. They have exchanges which are fake or “simulated” in Baudrillard's term. The characters have nothing much to say to each other. They rarely use language for effective communication. They can hardly satisfy each other's curiosity. In most cases, questions are answered only with more questions. Thus language, as a means of communication, fails to connect people. It, therefore, appears to be “unreliable” in Derridian term. *The Birthday Party* also deals with various other postmodern elements, including the mixture of different genres, parody, irony and the sense of non-ending.

The Birthday Party shocks readers/audiences and shows the futility of human relationships. The emptiness of the relationship between Meg and Petey is evident from the beginning of the play. Their conversation in their seaside boarding house is banal and inconsequential. She asks him the most obvious and at times even idiotic questions and he replies patiently while having breakfast. The opening conversation is as follows:

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. Yes, it's me.

MEG. What? (*Her face appears at the hatch.*) Are you back?

PETEY. Yes. (p. 3)

From the above conversation, it is evident that much of the supposed conversation is actually just talk. In fact, they have nothing much to say to each other. Here, Pinter pushes the emptiness of a husband-wife conversation to its very limit. The characters suffer from the kind of traditional dialogue that can keep them together. Thus, the banality of human relationships, a familiar feature of postmodernism, seems to be a dominant theme of *The Birthday Party*. Unlike the unified and coherent figures of modern dramas, Pinter seems to portray characters as almost ciphers, perhaps to show the emptiness of their lives.

Throughout the whole play, characters rarely pay attention to each others' feelings and emotions. Consequently, they end up getting misinformation about each other. Early in the play Stanley relates the story of his successful piano concert to Meg (his father did not attend the concert) but when Meg recalls it to Goldberg, she produces a completely incorrect version:

MEG: (*falteringly*) In ... a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked the place up and he couldn't get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait until the morning before he could get out. (p. 26)

Thus, the characters often misunderstand each other because they can hardly feel one another's need. Meg's affection for Stanley is genuine but she hardly understands Stanley's needs. When Meg mentions the two gentlemen who are coming to stay, Stanley feels extremely agitated. He wants to know desperately who they are and if they have already come or not. But Meg fails to satisfy his curiosity:

STANLEY: They've come?

MEG: They're very nice, Stan.

STANLEY: Why didn't they come last night?

MEG: They said the beds were wonderful.

STANLEY: Who are they?

MEG (*sitting*): They're very nice, Stanley.

STANLEY: I said, who are they? (p. 28)

From the above conversation it is evident that the characters can hardly satisfy each others' curiosity and provide each other with correct information. Language, the most crucial means of human communication, fails to connect people. The failure of language leads to the failure of communication, an outstanding concern of postmodernism.

In *The Birthday Party*, the characters can hardly communicate effectively. Even when a character desperately needs to know any information, he is not provided with it. Rather, he is made to feel more confused and puzzled. In most cases, questions are responded to with more questions rather than with answers. In Act 1, when McCann wants to know if they are in the right house, Goldberg responds to his questions with more questions than with answers:

MCCANN: Nat. How do we know this is the right house?

GOLDBERG: What?

MCCANN: How do we know this is the right house?

GOLDBERG: What makes you think it's the wrong house? (p. 22)

From the above conversation it is evident that the characters can hardly provide each other with the desired information. This is because they frequently use language to confuse each other rather than to provide correct information. They use language as a weapon to subjugate and to take control over others. During the interrogation scene, Goldberg and McCann hurl questions at Stanley not expecting to get answers but to threaten and confuse him. This strategy becomes evident when Goldberg asks questions and McCann answers them thus:

GOLDBERG: What have you done with your wife?

MCCANN: He's killed his wife!

GOLDBERG: Why did you kill your wife?

STANLEY: (*sitting, his back to the audience*). What wife?

MCCANN: How did he kill her?

GOLDBERG: How did you kill her?

MCCANN: You throttled her. (p. 43)

Thus throughout the play, the characters use language neither to give information nor to get any. Rather, they use language for personal advantage. They play with language in a kind of postmodernist Language Game. They use language to dominate others. An obvious example of the way language is used to dominate would be Goldberg and McCann's subjugation of Stanley through language during the interrogation scene. The language Goldberg and McCann use in form of questions is nothing but a verbal assault designed to break Stanley down. For page after page Stanley is subjected to quick-fire questioning by Goldberg and McCann. Stanley knows that he is being threatened and makes an effort to survive. Dialogues such as, "Let me – just make

this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke ...” testify to his attempt to survive. But in front of their bizarre and absurd questions, Stanley eventually fails to protect himself. The following dialogue shows how Goldberg and McCann treat Stanley with the utmost cruelty, subjecting him to bizarre questions which eventually make him scream in rage, terror, and helplessness.

GOLDBERG: Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted to – he wanted to – he wanted to....

MCCANN: He doesn't know!

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted to – he wanted to....

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted....

MCCANN: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG: Which came first?

MCCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

GOLDBERG and MCCANN: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

STANLEY *screams*. (p. 45-46)

The above conversation proves that the characters use language as a weapon to take control over others. Because the characters always play such language games with each other, they are always in fear of being victims of others. This fear often makes them tragic characters, even as their indifferent attitude towards each other and their silliness evoke laughter in the mind of audiences/readers.

The Birthday Party, therefore, is a mixture of tragic and comic events, quite characteristic of postmodern texts. Though it has moments of great humor, most of it is of the extremely threatening and violent kind. In fact, much of the humor co-exists alongside unpleasantness. At the beginning of the play, we are presented with an apparently trivial situation which, as it develops, becomes laden with threat, fear, danger and violence.

In Act 2 of the play, the interrogation scene is tragi-comic. It evokes both laughter and horror simultaneously. On the one hand, the style of interrogation is comic; on the other, it is extremely frightening and disturbing. One cannot but laugh at the nonsensical sequence of accusations; ranging from a medieval Catholic heresy, to cricket, to whether the number 846 is possible or necessary, to why the chicken crossed the road. But at the same time, one feels an underlying sense of anguish being aware that they are the means of reducing a man to inarticulate violence. Readers/audiences, therefore, find themselves torn between laughing at the characters and feeling sympathy for them. Thus, the play seems to be a mixture of different genres, an important criterion of postmodernism.

The characters' frequent use of bizarre and absurd language leads the play towards ambiguity, another characteristic of postmodernism. In Act 1, when Stanley describes his past to Meg, he himself seems to be confused about its particulars. Goldberg's description of his past is also vague. His past is made more confusing when McCann calls him Nat, whereas in the past he was called Simey and also Benny. Meg and Lulu also have ambiguous pasts. Thus, *The Birthday Party* presents to us an ambiguous world.

Why Goldberg and McCann have come to get Stanley remains a mystery. We never find out who they are just as we never know what has made Stanley the failure he is. As the play progresses, we become less and less certain about who Stanley actually is, and why he behaves as

he does. We do not know for certain what exactly Stanley has done to cause the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. His behavior on hearing of them, and his reaction when they arrive, both suggest guilt, but the guilt is undefined.

During the game of Blind Man's Buff an unexplained blackout occurs. McCann shines his torch, but it is knocked out of his hand. While Goldberg and McCann look for the torch, Stanley "*picks up Lulu and places her on the table*" (stage direction p. 59). Shortly afterwards McCann recovers the torch and "*shines it on the table and STANLEY* (p. 59)." The next sentence in the stage direction reads: "*Lulu is lying spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her*" (p. 59). The entire incident is ambiguous. Pinter does not tell us if it is Goldberg who tried to seduce her in the darkness or if it is Stanley who intended to rape her. Since Pinter does not present the situation clearly, the readers/audiences have to construct the event out of little hints that may or may not be true, which is a characteristic of the uncertainty typical of postmodernism.

Meg's relation with Stanley also remains a mystery. At the beginning of the play her conversation with Petey about Stanley suggests her motherly affection for Stanley. But a little later when Stanley sarcastically describes the fried bread as "succulent", Meg seems to misunderstand the meaning of the word, interpreting it as having a sexually suggestive connotation. She asks Stanley shyly if she is really succulent. She strokes his hand sensually, speaks of lovely afternoons she has had in Stanley's room, and tickles the back of his neck in a flirtatious manner. All these things suggest that she has a sexual relation with Stanley. Thus, the relationship between Meg and Stanley remains unclear. The play, therefore, revolves around ambiguity, a familiar feature of postmodernism.

The ambiguity surrounding characters and their actions often makes them utter ironical remarks. Meg's remark, for example, that a party will cheer Stanley up is highly ironic. Meg is totally unaware of the menace that characterizes the two gentlemen, Goldberg and McCann, and they are the people Stanley seeks to avoid. Being gullible, she is easily taken in by Goldberg's smooth talk and remains ignorant of the fact that the party is going to result in Stanley's total collapse. The very title *The Birthday Party* is also ironic. A birthday party is supposed to be a happy occasion whereas the party in the play leads to the mental breakdown of the protagonist.

The Birthday Party also plays with the traditional idea of ending. In line with poststructuralist criticism, Pinter has encouraged readers/audiences to keep an open mind concerning the possible meanings of his play. The play closes at the same level of banality with which it opened. At the end of the play, Meg and Petey still converse over the breakfast table, but the play has revolved around the sacrifice of Meg's beloved boarding house guest Stanley who has been taken away. Stanley's departure at the end of the play raises many questions in the mind of audiences/readers. Are they going to kill Stanley? Are they going to take him over to some organization? Or do they have some quite different plan or motive for taking him away? Thus, the ending does not terminate our thinking about Stanley; rather it creates lots of suspense. It seems that it is not an ending, but rather the beginning of a new story.

From the above conversation it is evident that *The Birthday Party* presents us with a world of ambiguity, irony and language inadequacy, known to be important features of postmodernism. Most of what the characters say remains ambiguous and mysterious. Their intentions are never revealed and their actions are never justified. They hardly engage in straightforward conversations. They mostly use language for purposes of self-defence or domination. What they say is rarely what they mean. Thus, language proves to be "unreliable" or

what is labeled in postmodernism as “indeterminacy”. The characters are equally and strangely tragic and comic. Meg’s silliness inevitably arouses laughter. But her inability to understand what is happening around her evokes pity in the mind of the readers/audiences. Thus, the play fulfills another criterion of postmodernism, the mixture of different genres. The birthday party at the center of the play is wholly ironic because what should be a happy celebration becomes a horrible travesty. The play also focuses on the emptiness of human relationships and vulnerability of human existence, outstanding concerns of postmodernism. *The Birthday Party*, therefore, deals with various postmodern elements and revolves around some key postmodern characteristics.

Chapter 4: *The Homecoming* and Postmodernism

The Homecoming is undoubtedly Pinter's most surprising and shocking play. It is a story of a group of people who live side-by-side in a so called "family". Their attitudes towards each other and their actions are so surprising that readers/audiences are shocked to the extreme. An aged father verbally abuses a son and a brother; spits at one son and physically assaults another. A man attempts to seduce his brother's wife on first meeting her. A daughter-in-law is greeted by her father as "a smelly scrubber" (p. 41) and "a stinking pox-ridden slut" (p. 41). A husband proposes to his wife that she sets up as a prostitute and lives with his family in order to serve them as well. The wife agrees to the offer. Thus, the very idea of a family seems to have collapsed. The norms and values of the family are falling apart. The play, therefore, seems to bring into focus a consideration of postmodernity that accords with Lyotard's "Fall of Metanarratives". On the other hand, what happens on stage seems totally incredible and ambiguous. Readers/audiences can hardly understand the real motives of characters. The play, thus, presents us with the ambiguous and vague world, typical of postmodernism. In addition, the play also focuses on the unreliability of language, playfulness, irony and mixture of different genres as is elaborated later in this chapter.

The futility of human relationship proves to be a dominant theme of *The Homecoming*. The people depicted in the play living together in a family are extremely isolated from each other. At the beginning of the play Max is looking for the scissors because he wants to cut something out of last Sunday's paper. He asks Lenny for the scissors:

MAX: What have you done with the scissors?

Pause

I said I am looking for the scissors. What have you done with them?

Pause

Did you hear me? I want to cut out of the paper.

LENNY: I'm reading the paper. (p. 7)

From the above conversation it is evident that Max and Lenny do not share a very congenial relationship. Here, words seem lifeless and empty. They appear to be merely a medium of transaction and not communication. Through the above conversation, Pinter pushes the futility and emptiness of a father-son relationship to its very limit. The play, thus, proves to represent the quality of a postmodern play. The characters seem to live in a world which is devoid of love. It is the kind of world that Baudrillard describes as "a world of simulation" (1993: 430). In *The Homecoming*, Pinter, in effect, presents us a world where all relationships are fake, simulated, fragmented and unsatisfactory.

Pinter's characters in *The Homecoming* are unable to have pleasant relationships because they always use language not to communicate effectively but to confuse and dominate others. Far too often they speak in language which leads to misunderstanding. Here is a conversation between Max and Sam in Act 1, Scene iii:

MAX: When Dad died he said to me, Max look after your brothers. That's exactly what he said to me.

SAM: How could he say that when he was dead?

MAX: What?

SAM: How could he speak if he was dead? (p. 32)

In the above conversation Sam's motives behind his witty answer suggests his resistance to what Max says. However, not only Sam but all the other characters use language to attain

personal advantage. Therefore, so-called “Language Games”, a major postmodern feature, is dramatized by Harold Pinter in *The Homecoming*.

Because the characters always play language games, they always fear each other. They are afraid of revealing their own worries to others. Consequently, they always use defensive language. But they often seem to become victims of their own language games. Sam, for example, is so anxious to assure his brother that although he took Jessie out once or twice in the car, he was always aware that she was his brother’s wife. He persists in trying to convince Max that nothing happened between him and Jessie. This remark makes us curious about what actually occurred. It also makes us wonder if Jessie was the source of friction between the two brothers. Language in *The Homecoming*, therefore, seems to be indeterminate and misleading.

Since human language, especially verbal communication, seems to be ineffective in conveying every human thought, Pinter uses other forms of communication such as pauses and silences, in a manner typical of postmodernism. In *The Homecoming* the word “pause” is used one hundred and five times in Act One and one hundred and fifteen times in Act Two. A pause is used not only as a dramatic device but almost as a separate character of the play. Pauses exist in relation to the characters and situations. In fact, they are an extended form of communication, used for what cannot be conveyed through language.

For example, Ruth’s use of silences and pauses is more effective than what she says through words. Despite the male attempts to silence and marginalize her, she speaks out, ironically, reminding the men that silence may have more power than words: my "lips move. . . Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant . . . than the words which come through them." (p. 51)

Ruth's remark implies that her words are not as significant as the movement of her lips. What she says is not important; rather, the way her lips move is important. The power of her speech, therefore, lies not in the words she uses but in silence.

Another example of the power of pauses scattered between her words is evident in the following dialogue:

RUTH: Don't be too sure though. You've forgotten something. Look at me. I ... move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear ... underwear ... which moves with me ... it ... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg moving. My lips move. Why don't you resist ... your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear ... that ... possibility ... in mind. (p. 52-53)

In the above dialogue, Ruth's pauses, indicated by three dots, are extremely important because they imply her sexuality more than her words do. She uses pauses frequently to catch the attention of the male members of the family. The power of her speech, therefore, depends mostly on her pauses, or what has famously been termed as "Pinter's pauses" by critics of literature.

Because of the frequent use of non-verbal devices such as silences and pauses, the real motives of the characters often remain obscure and ambiguous. From the beginning of *The Homecoming*, Pinter manages to maintain an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty around his characters. A great mystery seems to surround the personality of the now dead mother of the family, Jessie, and Sam somehow seems connected with this mystery. The reason behind Ruth's decision to choose the life of a prostitute also remains mysterious.

The mystery and ambiguity revolving around the characters often make a dual impression in the mind of readers/audiences. We find ourselves torn between wanting to laugh at and

sympathize with them. The characters seem to be equally tragic and comic. For example, Ruth seems to be victorious as she takes control over the male members of the family. But she is, in fact, a tragic character because she is a victim of consumer society. She belongs to a society where materialism and consumerism rule over human bondage and relationship. Ruth's future is, therefore, uncertain. There is a strong possibility that she will be kicked out at a certain time when she will fail to fulfill the need of the family. Thus in *The Homecoming* tragic and comic aspects are amalgamated simultaneously in a manner typical of postmodernism.

There is no doubt that *The Homecoming* is quite shocking and depressing. But in different parts of the play the characters make humorous remarks and appear to be extremely funny. For example, Max has been a source of pleasure to the audience throughout the play. His threatening dialogues with Lenny and his self-contradictory remarks about Jessy evoke laughter and mirth in the mind of audiences/readers. But he is an extremely pathetic character who also invokes the pathos of old age. He reveals himself to Lenny thus:

“Huhh! We were two of the worst hatred men in the West End of London. I tell you, I still got the scars. We'd walk into a place, the whole room'd stand up, they'd make way to let us pass. You never heard such silence.” (p. 8)

Max's remark shows the vulnerability of old age. His importance in the family is gradually fading away. His vulnerability often makes him deliver self-contradictory and ironic remarks and makes him a laughing stock to readers/audiences.

The Homecoming revolves around the ironic remarks made by the characters. When Teddy and Ruth enter the house, Teddy is afraid Ruth will not like his family members. His elaborate assurances to Ruth disclose that fear: "They're very warm people, really. Very warm. They're my family. They're not ogres" (p. 23). The dramatic irony is that we have just seen Max

and Lenny in the opening scene behave precisely like ogres. The most striking irony comes with the title of the work which is a literal description of the dramatic situation and takes on a very different meaning by the end of the play. At the beginning of the play it seems to be an almost typical “homecoming” of the elder son of the family. However, by the end of the play it is proved that it is “Ruth’s homecoming” too. This becomes evident when she says: "I was born quite near here" (53). In fact, Teddy’s homecoming shows him, ironically, that he no longer has a home to come home to.

The play presents a situation which is at once natural in its setting and bizarre in its action. The structure takes the form of a series of ironic reversals. For example, Teddy, the philosopher, is defeated in a verbal duel by his younger brother in a discussion about philosophy; Joey, the boxer, is almost knocked down by a blow from his aged father; Sam, the gentle brother, blurts out the truth about Jessie and Mac; Ruth, who in her first scene speaks of her children, abandons them by the end.

Ruth’s indifferent attitude towards her husband, Teddy, and her children also raises the question of her relationship with Teddy. Readers may wonder if Ruth is actually married to Teddy or not. Even if they are married, it is not certain that the children are Teddy’s because like his father, Max, the true paternity of his three sons might be in question. Thus, in Pinter’s plays nothing is to be taken for granted. Pinter presents us a world of total relativity where nothing can refer to anything else permanently. It is a postmodern world where “indeterminacy” rules over determinacy and fixed value.

In *The Homecoming*, Pinter’s characters refuse the idea of “established rules” opposed to postmodernism and make their own rules according to their position in society. Ruth, for example, upsets our traditional belief of the family as a source of power and support for its

members. She leaves her own family and joins her husband's family as a prostitute. Thus, the play brings into account a consideration of postmodernity according to Lyotard's "Fall of Metanarratives" (1984: 264).

In the second act when Teddy comes downstairs with his and Ruth's luggage, he asks her to go. But Lenny suggests that they dance, just before she leaves. Ruth accepts his offer and dances with him when he kisses her. At this point Max and Joey return from the gym where Joey has been training. Joey takes Ruth from Lenny's arms, sits on the sofa with her, and embraces and kisses her. Max, who was so shocked about Ruth when he first met her, is completely casual about her behavior this time. He assures Teddy that he need not have been ashamed when he married Ruth and praises her beauty and quality. Ruth's behavior in the presence of Teddy could be the sign of a breakdown in their family life.

The final scene of the play totally wrecks the idea of a family as an institution of human bondage, love and respect. Teddy leaves for America without Ruth. What is left behind is a picture of Ruth sitting on a chair, touching Joey's head lightly, Lenny standing still and watching, Sam lying still, and Max kneeling and asking for a kiss from her:

I am not an old man.

Pause

Do you hear me?

He raises his face to her.

Kiss me.

She continues to touch JOEY'S head, lightly.

LENNY *stands, watching.* (p. 97-98)

The above scene obviously portrays a picture of a disintegrating family. In this family, unity and coherence have been collapsing. Although the members of the family live together, they are all isolated and lonely. Lack of understanding and a generation gap are very obvious in the family members, which lead to their disconnection. Therefore, disintegration and isolation, typical of postmodern life, have been portrayed very creatively in the play.

In *The Homecoming*, the lonely and isolated family members are all victims of consumer society. Every person in this play is viewed not in terms of human quality or relationship, but in terms of economic value. They all live in a world of what Baudrillard calls a “brothel of capitalism” (1993: 423). When Ruth agrees to stay with her husband’s family, family members are not satisfied only in using her as a source of sexual pleasure, but begin to try her out to find how she can be put to economic use. Here, Pinter seems to suggest that in the postmodern world, morality is always disregarded as long as there is economic benefit.

As a postmodern play, *The Homecoming* plays with the traditional idea of an ending. The play ends in absurdity. The audiences are confronted with the question of why Ruth as the mother of three children and the wife of an American college professor calmly accepts an offer to leave herself as a prostitute. The play makes one wonder how a husband cannot only consent to such an arrangement but actually make such a proposition to his wife. The play, therefore, does not give us any satisfactory resolution. The last stage direction of the play: “*She [RUTH] continues to touch JOEY’S head, lightly. LENNY stands, watching*”, (p. 82) obviously raises questions in the mind of readers/audiences if it is an ending at all or the beginning of a new story. The play, therefore, leaves readers/audiences with multiple meanings and interpretations. The lack of a sense of ending leads to the lack of closure, another characteristic of postmodernism.

From the above analysis it should be evident that *The Homecoming* shocks readers/audiences by its apparent assault on respectable family values. The aggression and violence shown among family members, and the ruthless assault on the returning son and his wife are all disturbing, shocking and unpleasant. The very idea of a family, as an established social institution, is completely shattered by them. They display the postmodern condition where grand stories are no longer a consolation for people. Instead, as Lyotard mentions, they have given their place to “little narratives” (1984: 264). The family lacks unity and coherence. Consequently, everything seems to be unreliable and ambiguous. Because of the unreliability and ambiguity depicted everywhere, the action of the play is not developed sequentially and readers/audiences cannot come to any sense of an ending. The lack of final meaning leads to the lack of closure, as is characteristic of postmodernism. In addition, the play also deals with irony, playfulness, mixture of different genres and failure in communication, which are also known to be important traits of postmodernism.

Conclusion

The foregoing pages examined the connections between Pinter's plays and postmodernism. The main purpose of this study has been to highlight the postmodern features in Pinter's plays. It also focused on the connection between Pinter's emergence as a dramatist and the era which has come to be labelled "postmodernism". It further attempted to show Pinter's connections with "The Theatre of the Absurd" and "The Comedy of Menace". The famous absurd-dramatist, Samuel Beckett's influence on Pinter was also highlighted. The study also discussed the futility of human relationships, the vulnerability of human existence, the failure of language, the collapse of metanarratives, and aspects of hyperreality, playfulness, irony, anarchy, as well as the mixture of different genres and sense of non-ending as postmodern features present in Pinter's plays.

The first chapter of this dissertation offered an introduction to the connections between Pinter's plays and postmodern theories put forward by famous thinkers such as Derrida, Hassan, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson. Derrida's concept of "deconstruction", Baudrillard's "simulation" and Lyotard's "Fall of Metanarratives" are concepts quite applicable to Pinter's plays. Hassan's long list of postmodern features in his essay, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" including play, irony, chance, antiform, silence, indeterminacy and against interpretation are also quite visible in his plays. His plays seem to bring into view the notion of postmodernity evident in Jameson's ideas of "late capitalism" and "consumer society". The other three chapters offer a critical analysis of three full-length plays by Pinter - *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* seen from a postmodern point of view.

Pinter's famous play, *The Caretaker* (1960) is discussed in this study for its postmodern elements. The play deals with three isolated and lonely individuals. The two brothers Mick and

Aston have a relationship which appears unnatural. They are so separated from each other that they do not talk to each other even once in the course of the play. The third character, Davies, is a tramp. He appears to have no family or place to live. He has no definite identity and his real name is uncertain. The repeated mention of his “papers” in Sidcup merely emphasizes the fact that he is extremely vulnerable and tenuously connected to the society he belongs to.

On the other hand, the language the characters use to communicate with each other is often deceptive and self-contradictory. Often, they do not mean what they say. In most cases, they engage in verbal games or in a “Language Game”, to use Lyotard’s phrase. Davies, for example, uses defensive language to save himself from Mick. Mick, on the other hand, uses language as a weapon to threaten and to confuse Davies. He intimidates Davies from the start, using pauses and repetitions to make Davies feel uneasy. The way he repeats the name “Jenkins” is an excellent illustration of the menace he can generate. Mick’s verbal attacks on Davies undoubtedly make us laugh. However, readers/audiences are extremely shocked when they come to realize what it is they are laughing at. Davies’ final pleads to Aston are so touching that we cannot but pity him though he deserves to be kicked out. Thus, the play seems to be a tragedy as well as a comedy. It is in fact a mixture of genres, a major characteristic of postmodernism.

The Birthday Party (1960) is undoubtedly Pinter’s most ambiguous and puzzling play. It starts with a banal conversation between a husband and a wife in a sea-side boarding house and gradually moves towards a bizarre and ambiguous setting. The play does not provide answers to the questions it raises: Who is Stanley? What did he do to make Goldberg and McCann show up? Where is he taken to at the end of the play? Thus the play does not fulfill our curiosity about the characters and the events in the play. Instead, it leaves the readers/audiences in a world of

ambiguity and uncertainty. Such uncertainty is the essence of *The Birthday Party* and one of its postmodern features.

Derrida's de-logocentrism denies the possibility of finding transparency in language. In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, language is totally ambiguous and puzzling. At the beginning of the play when Stanley describes his past to Meg, he himself seems to be uncertain about its particulars. Goldbeg's name and his past seem shrouded in mystery and delusion. Meg convinces herself to believe things about her life that are clearly not true. Lulu and McCann also have mysterious pasts which are most likely untrue. The play, therefore, seems to have a series of meta-realities and aims at leading the reader to the general conclusion that truth is purely subjective and personal. The only truth of *The Birthday Party* is that there is no truth. The play, therefore, proves to be postmodern according to Baudrillard's theory of "simulation". Because truth is relative in the play, readers/audiences are left with no one meaning. The lack of one meaning leads to the lack of closure, another characteristic of postmodernism.

The Homecoming (1965) is Pinter's most baffling play. It is shocking in that it appears to be a violent assault on traditional family values. The violence shown between the generations and the ruthless assault on the returning son and his wife are all provocative, shocking and disturbing. More shocking, however, is the wife's decision to abandon her three boys in America and stay in London in order to serve her husband's family as a prostitute. These characters, in *The Homecoming*, are not guided by any pre-established norms or values. On the contrary, their attitude towards life reflects the postmodern condition in which old grand narratives of religion and morality have no longer any place. They are guided by their own narratives or "little or local narratives" to use Lyotard's terms.

The members of the family are alienated from each other. They do not share a congenial relationship. Unlike the unified and coherent figures of modern dramas, Pinter seems to portray his characters as ciphers and alienated individuals. The futility of human relationship, an outstanding feature of postmodernism, seems to be a dominant theme of the play. The reason why the characters cannot maintain an agreeable relationship lies in their inability to understand to each other. The characters hardly understand each other and rarely use language for effective communication. Instead, they use language to deceive and to take control over others. Consequently, their conversation often turns into a verbal game or “Language Game” in Lyotard’s sense. Language, as a means of communication, fails to connect the family members. Therefore, failure in language, a basic concern of postmodernism, seems to be a dominant theme of the play.

From the above discussion we can come to the conclusion that the theatre of Pinter portrays a disturbing picture of a postmodern world. It is a picture of postmodern men, adrift without identity and without individuality. It depicts men devoid of moral values and norms. Thus Pinter’s theatre is extremely shocking and disturbing. His plays reflect the postmodern condition in which individuals are vulnerable and rootless. They lack a sense of who they are, where they belong to, and what their place is in the scheme of things. They live in a world where the old grand narratives of religion have no longer any place. Instead, they are guided by “little or local narratives” (1984: 264), to use Lyotard’s term.

Because Pinter belongs to the postwar decades, his plays mostly deal with isolated, frustrated, vulnerable and morally distorted individuals of the second half of the 20th century. The world they live in is fake or “simulated” in Baudrillard’s term. Because of lack of authenticity, nothing seems to be certain in Pinter’s plays. Consequently uncertainty, or what is

known as “delogocentrism” in the realm of Derrida, characterizes Pinter’s plays. His plays are also postmodern according to Hassan’s notions of postmodernism. Hassan’s long list of postmodern features including playfulness, irony, chance, anarchy, antiform, silence and indeterminacy are quite applicable to Pinter’s plays. His plays, therefore, seem to illustrate postmodernity according to some of the great theorists of postmodernism such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida and Hassan.

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