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A Critique of Modernist Absurdism in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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Abstract

Harold Pinter has investigated the circumstances in the second half of the 20th century in which the human state of affairs was totally unfavourable and in complete despair. Most families suffered badly and individuals experienced threats, distress, misery, anxiety, pain, failure of communication, identity crisis and much more. In modern period, most of the families not only in London, but in the whole world were suffering from adversity caused by the World War II. In the play *The Homecoming*, Pinter portrays chaotic family life in England, and depicts the human society in extreme chaos. The play is about the conflicts that erupt between the members of the post-war London family. It represents the human plight in the godless scientific world that has crippled individuals not only in the modern period but in contemporary too.

Keywords

Absurdism; Disharmony; Empowerment; Exploitation; Hegemony; Ontology; Harold Pinter; *The Homecoming*.

The play presents a London family in which all its members are in a state of conflict with one another. The family status is deteriorated and the financial situation is worse due to the irresponsible behaviour of the members. They do not fulfil their domestic obligations. The disharmony and disagreement on certain issues has been constantly haunting all the members who have put the family, collectively, into an absurd mess. Max, the head of the family, is repeatedly striving to maintain his power of dominance over all members. He is often seen rebuking and scolding inmates. The conflict begins at the very opening episode of the play when Lenny expresses unsympathetic language while talking to his father Max, “You’re a dog cook. Honest. You think you’re cooking for a lot of dogs” (Homecoming 11), and gets rebuked for his senseless, insulting and abusive attitude. There is no father-son relationship existing throughout the play. The filial devotion has diminished in the modern age. Nelson declares: “Pinter has stated that he begins his plays with a vision of certain physical relationships between people in a room: sitting, standing, lying, kneeling” (150). His plays inspire the audience and compel a contemplation of the problems that ail the human society. His plays performed on the stage have affected the audience as the action appears to take place at the moment. Other playwrights of the genre of Absurd Theatre such as Beckett, Kafka, Ionesco, Genet, Adamov and Brecht too represent the nature of human sufferings in their comprehensive styles. Wardle states it is difficult to figure out who influenced Pinter the most:

When Harold Pinter’s characters first appear in public in 1958, nobody knew who the father was—and [. . .] We all dug around and discovered Pinter liked Kafka, and Beckett, and American gangster films, . . . came up with the phrase “comedy of menace” which explained nothing but at least supplied a comforting label (37-38).

The play begins with the arrival of Teddy with his wife Ruth to his London house after a long duration of six years. The couple is not received with warm affection by any member of the family, rather they are scolded by Max, “Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?”; “We’ve had a smelly scrubber in my house all night”; “We’ve had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night” (Homecoming 41). Teddy ensures Ruth that his family will love her, “They’re very warm people, Very warm. They’re my family” (Homecoming 23), and he considers them as being less than beasts, “They’re not ogres” (Homecoming 23). It is due to complete absurdity and extreme misery that people do not realise the importance of the members of their own family. Warner points out:

. . . and unpredictable realities — wars , economic crises and dislocations, political upheavals among the masses. Moreover, man's feeling of homelessness, of alienation has been intensified in the midst of a bureaucratized, impersonal mass society. He has come to feel himself an outsider even within his human society. He is trebly alienated: a stranger to God, to nature, and to the gigantic social apparatus that supplies his material wants (342).

The absurdities of life compel some individuals to leave their homes and migrate to other parts of the world. Most individuals act adventurous and do not like to stay at their respective homes. Similarly, Teddy who had left home some six years ago marries Ruth and resides in America. He lives a better life in America than does his brothers in London and achieves a reasonable position as a professor. The couple have three boys; their life is going smoothly and they enjoy it according to their wishes and tastes. As soon as they arrive in London, they are received coldly by the family because they are not in a good condition to receive any guest visitor even if it is their own ‘blood’. Due to their severe wretchedness they do not pay any attention to Teddy. Instead, they get attracted towards Ruth because of the absence of woman-figure in their house since Jessie died. The family is in an awful state and one finds absurd suffering in all the characters.

The absence of a woman in the house leads the family to anguish and puts all its members in complete despair. It was the time after World War II, when families were unbalanced due to absence of woman in them. Both man and woman collectively represent the human ethnicity and are complementary to each other. They are considered two faces of the same coin. There exists no pleasure in man's life without the presence of woman and vice versa. It is a natural phenomenon that men and women are created for each other. Those who oppose this phenomenon are destined to eternal suffering. Pinter and other absurdist playwrights insist on the solution of problems that persist in the post-war life in which families suffer enormously. The suffering leads to instability and creates conflicts in most of the families. We observe such instability in the family of Max. There is no woman to look after the men, to maintain and fulfil their needs and requirements. They feel the desperate need for a woman in their house as well as in their respective lives, but at the same time certain phobia regarding life is driven into their minds which keeps them away from doing so. All the members of the family have put themselves in utter disorder.

The whole family suffers with every possible problem at the hands of its members. The presentations of events in the play are deceptive and deeply conventional and traditionally realistic. The traditional duties that are meant for woman are deeply associated with Max, "Who do you think I am, your mother?" (Homecoming 16); and is emotionally involved in childbirth, "don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth - I suffered the pain, I've still got the pangs" (Homecoming 47). And on various occasions, Max resents the behaviour of his inmates, "Honest. They walk in here every time of the day and night like bloody animals. Go and find yourself a mother" (Homecoming 16).

Ruth enters the male province, the house populated by four men who are eager to fulfil their desires. Initially, she encounters Lenny in the middle of the night shortly after their arrival; Lenny pretends a tick has been keeping him awake all night (Homecoming 25). The fact is he overhears the voice of Ruth and gets attracted. Since he is a bachelor, a man in his early thirties, he cannot

control his desires and makes certain attempts to convince Ruth and to win her favour, “Do you mind if I hold your hand? . . . Just a touch, Just a tickle” (Homecoming 30). Lenny could not organize his sentiments, offers some drink to Ruth, and induces in her an altered sense of excitement. He insists her to give the glass, but she refuses consistently (Homecoming 34). Lenny talks most of the time while Ruth remains passive and utters a few words. Lenny’s words threaten Ruth with sexual advances and violence, “Just give me the glass. . . . I’ll take it, then” (Homecoming 34). He is such a ridiculous character who consistently continues with his stupidity to quench his desires despite knowing that Ruth is his brother’s wife. Lenny misinterprets Ruth while speaking unnecessarily when she is totally out of her conscious state of mind primarily tempting him. Ruth is a woman full of wit and understanding, she knows better how to handle situations and defends herself from the attacks of Lenny and counter attacks him, “If you take the glass . . . I’ll take you” (Homecoming 34). Ruth abruptly shifts from passivity to aggressiveness and becomes the threat. “Independence or dependence and aggression or passivity are determined in the individual by social pressure, with independence and aggression permitted in the male and gradually proscribed in the female” (Hussain 72). The concept that women have been dependent and passive is reflected in the play clearly but Pinter moulds the situation in an artful manner in which Ruth is seen as passively aggressive.

The disappearance of mother-figure and the reincarnation of Jessie as Ruth are of concern to the play. Ruth is identified as Jessie by Max in their first interaction, so shouts at Teddy, “I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died” (Homecoming 42). Ruth is trapped in the same dualism as Jessie who was considered a whore at home. Ruth too is treated in the same way as Jessie, and is labelled as a prostitute. Except Sam, all the members of the family request Ruth to stay some more days and it is Teddy who meanly puts the proposal before her on behalf of the family. By putting forward the proposal, Teddy seems to be an egotistic husband, because by such an act he does not bother about losing his wife, rather he is concerned about keeping

his family together. Ruth is surrounded by four men revelling in her physical charms. Ruth is an object of lust, both mother and daughter-in-law for the members of the family. Kerr remarks: "Looked at existentially . . . no woman is essentially wife or essentially whore, she is potentially either or both at once. . . Personality is not something given; it is fluid" (Adler 382).

Pinter focused on gender and domestic relations of his time. The existing ideas exemplified in Pinter's plays are dominance and power. Max, the patriarchal figure, being the head of the family strives to dominate all members but his sons constantly argue and turn rivals to him; and he finds his dominating role reversing and endangering his position. His presence is not given any credit by his inmates and it does not make any difference in their lives whether he is alive or dead. He is almost ignored by all of them, "I'm here, too, you know", "I said I'm here, too. I'm sitting here" (Homecoming 12). It indicates that Max is no more the father and the head of the family at all. He appears as an unwanted man, like a weed in the garden. Certain characters like Lenny welcome Teddy and Ruth in the middle of the night, but necessarily do not update Max the next day morning. Lenny has disregard for Max's status as head of the family and fails to inform him regarding the arrival of Teddy. Lenny too has the same sense of domination, but as soon as Teddy arrives there he too feels a threat to his current supremacy, so at many episodes he checks, examines and challenges Teddy's professional life and in certain places tries to rebuke and humiliate him. The central source of conflict makes the characters to seek and find a situation in which they can be what they wish to be (Quigley 176). There lies no faith among the members of the family, they do not trust or believe in one another. It is common in the modern families to find members who are egocentric and completely disregard each other. They do not have faith and trust in God. Pinter has shown the absence of faith through his plays, particularly in *The Homecoming*. Hatred arises between the characters and lack of love for one another seems predominant. So the play explores the powerful nature of the struggle for love, questions about morality and examines the connection between

love, desire and human happiness. Pinter's own admission regarding the play is: "it is about love. And about lack of love" (Nelson 112).

In contemporary times, people do not care about their parents or family. With the technological advancement in the modern society, familial ties suffered as they do in the present time. The self-centeredness leads to a disregard for one's own family, which in turn leads to suffering. As family and home are closely interlinked, we find the 'Home' is such an important thing where a number of relationships can be built and broken. The play deals with the nature of homes, i.e. home making and home breaking or in other words, relationship making or breaking (Quigley 176).

In total disregard to familial ties, the individual characters show no care, concern or respect for the members of the family. It can be observed in the play *The Homecoming*, where Teddy is forced to leave and he does not care for his wife, Ruth; Ruth has no motherly passion in her heart for her three children; so she lets Teddy go alone and does not matter to her at all. Lenny and Joey treat their father Max merely as a domestic cook and servant and they all treat Sam simply as a 'chauffer' and not as a vital part of their family. This absurdism led characters like Lenny, Joey and Max to exploit their sister-in-law and daughter-in-law as the case may be. There is nowhere found any sense or logic in their absurd activities. These persons misinterpret Ruth and expect her to act as prostitute because of their financial wretchedness. They all have pessimistic feelings against one another. Thus, the family collectively as well as all its members seem to suffer from absurdity.

Pinter through this play reflects the life of modern youth who expend most of their time in idleness. Their lives are rounded up by illogical and mysterious circumstances and certainly make vigorous efforts to begin a new and fresh life; but could not execute and suffer more eventually. The characters are merely busy in their respective professions, and mostly remain idle, thus creating conflicts and clash with each other. They act as opponents to each other. It appears that Max did not guide them properly to live a responsible life. They are

mature enough, but lack will power to take any decision and to remain determined.

The relation between the characters gives the idea of their actual being which means that there are illegitimate relations between them throughout the play—Jessie has illegitimate relations with Mac. Therefore, we see Lenny questioning his father, Max, “That night . . . you know . . . the night you got me . . . that night with Mum, what was it like?” (Homecoming 36). In the same way, Ruth has affairs with many male partners before she marries Teddy, “I was . . . different . . . when I met Teddy . . . first” (Homecoming 50) and after marriage, she is seen in many episodes having illicit relations with Lenny and others, “Just one dance, with her brother-in-law . . . Lenny kisses Ruth. They stand, kissing” (Homecoming 58), with Joey, “He sits with Ruth on the sofa, embraces and kisses her . . . Joey lies heavily on Ruth . . . Joey and Ruth roll off the sofa on to the floor” (Homecoming 59-60) and in the scene at the end of the play, “[Joey] kneels at her chair. She touches his head lightly. He puts his head in her lap. . . . [Max] I’m not an old man. . . . He raises his face to her. Kiss me” (Homecoming 80-82). Through these scenes sexual urge is exposed in a cruel and an unromantic sense in the play. Thus, Ruth accidentally revives her lost thoughts and enjoys with Lenny and Joey (her brother-in-laws).

The play suggests Pinter’s mastery of the female psyche and his success at conceiving real living women. Pinter’s presentation of women is such that they lead oppressors to silence and dominate them, thereby gaining power, strength and supremacy. So his women characters achieve the role of authority through dominance to maintain long-lasting power and hegemony. Ruth is a “fractionized” image of a woman who is forced into completely contradictory roles: mother and whore, wife and sister, matriarch and handmaiden, guardian and hostage (Nelson 160).

Pinter and other absurdist playwrights made dynamic efforts to clarify the growing controversy over family, sexuality and gender roles. In patriarchal system women do not find any right to voice their views. Rubin points out:

. . . for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. . . . the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves (Sastre 7).

In the post-war period women and wives were swapped by their partners and considered as mere sex objects. It necessarily did not make any difference to their male partners. The relationship between Teddy and Ruth at their arrival in London is crooked and it rapidly deteriorates further in the play; and eventually both are separated from each other while Teddy leaves for America and Ruth decides to stay on in London.

Teddy's attitude towards his family is understood when he says: "You're just objects. You . . . just move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But You're lost in it. You won't get me being . . . I won't be lost in it" (Homecoming 62). He emerges as a selfish and egoistic person. He does not need anyone in his life, neither his family nor his wife Ruth. So he departs for America, leaving behind his family and Ruth. Ironically, he is the only person in the family with "intellectual equilibrium" and it is his duty as well as responsibility to put his disturbed family on the right track. He should have made some difference in their daily lives; after all he has travelled much, has the experience and talent to handle situations but could not execute them. He should have put his family out of its misery rather than escaping like a runaway criminal. The play ends after Teddy leaves for America without his wife Ruth.

The play is about human suffering as a result of dominance, sex and power of the human self in both men and women. All the characters jump into an encounter with one another for the purpose of dominance. Most of the characters have animal impulses. Pinter reinforced the conception of Jessie and Ruth as wife-mother-prostitute figures. Ruth is quite happy and willing to fill the roles,

both of wife and whore. At the end of the play, she agrees to become one of Lenny's whores at her price:

I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses. . . . All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract. . . . Well, it might prove a workable arrangement. (Homecoming 77)

The audience feel sympathy for certain characters like Sam, Teddy and Ruth but as the play progresses, certain characters indulge in activities which are unacceptable to the audience. For e.g. Ruth's encounter with her in-laws, the audience feels a lot of empathy for her, but as soon as she is seen having illicit relations with Lenny and Joey and accepting proposal of prostitution at the end, the audience is puzzled and feels no kindness for her any longer. The play portrays the corrupt bourgeois domestic values where the intended victim submits and become victorious (Schechner 183).

Sam confirms Teddy as his favourite, "You know, you were always my favourite, of the lads", and "You were always your mother's favourite" (Homecoming 63). Jessie likes her son Teddy most because he may be her only legitimate son. Max and Teddy confirm their father-son relationship and assert, "But you're my own flesh and blood" (Homecoming 49). Max is well aware of his wife's illicit relations and that is why he asks Teddy about the legitimacy of his sons, "All yours, Ted?" (Homecoming 59). Dutton writes:

In the nature of things, there is rarely any doubt about who is the mother of a particular child. But paternity is a far more open question, hardly susceptible to proof. In normal circumstances we assume that the woman's husband is the father, but we do so on faith rather than evidence – faith in the wife/mother's chastity in marriage (131).

The life after the World War II was full of distress in which the institution of marriage was threatened, and there was a rapid dramatic increase in divorce rate. In the words of Sinfield: “The boundaries of the male and female roles became uncertain and disputable, problematizing marriage . . . in all aspects. . . . The 1950s produced few feminists . . . but gender relations were by no means untroubled . . .” (Sastre 06). Very few people in the second half of the 20th century got married and several people remained single either willingly or under the pressure of their time. Marriage phobia was set in the minds of such people. It gave a gradual rise to anxiety and uncertainty filling their ontology (nature of being and existence) with affliction and the absurd. So there outdated existence gives way to unmannered cultural adaptation, and Kelly Morris calls, “The Homecoming a ‘comedy of manners’” (185).

Max recommends Sam, Lenny and Joey to get married and live a worthy responsible life and to look after their families but they are not keen about marriage. Pinter presents the problem that put the individuals in a permanently unconscious state. They have passed decades and approached old age without realising that they have grown too old and are of no use. In their old age, they consider themselves young and energetic, believe in their dreams and aspirations; but they are far away to perceive the reality that ‘time waits for none’. The present age is full of luxury and comfort but at the same time we do observe the dreadful signs of absurdism which has made the human life totally controversial. People in contemporary period feel the same as in Pinter’s times, it may be natural that the world is moving towards prosperity in terms of commerce, trade, finance, economy, power, and development, representing a revolution in every aspect, but there is reversal of peace of mind, cheerfulness, calmness, and even health gets affected.

Pinter intentionally disappoints his audience and confuses them so that they could get the real message from the plays. The external world is apparently reflected through Pinter’s plays. His plays have a natural beginning, develop aptly and while concluding brings into consideration human suffering, anxiety,

terror, hopelessness, selflessness, threat and expose the absurdity of life. One of the remarkable features of the play is that it is not confined to any single character, rather it belongs to all its characters. Offstage characters like MacGregor, Jessie and the three sons of Teddy and Ruth are equally significant as onstage characters such as Max, Sam, Lenny, Joey Teddy and Ruth. All the characters in the play are known to the audience. They all belong to the same family. The occupation of each character is significantly ambiguous and suspicious.

Pinter's dramatic world has the same unusual affinities with the Judaic tradition as it is in Kafka's world. Family lies at the centre in Pinter's dramatic world. In the words of Nelson: "Pinter's world is equally a world of commandments, laws, and rules which one breaks only at one's peril" (157).

The audience is shown strange and morally repugnant environment of the London family world essentially from both outside and inside. In Pinter's plays we come to know 'theatre doings'. His plays puzzle theatre goers, lovers, audience and often contain insoluble riddles. They are led to believe in the reality of both characters and situations (Schechner 183). One of the qualities of Pinter is that he keeps the audience out of the conversation with characters in the play. So the audience do not understand the characters' actions and words rather sense their destructive hostility. The characters do not have any deeper layers of background and experience, but only superficial thoughts, ideas and emotions.

Some absurd characters are in a good position, achieve goals and are successful in their lives, but lack ethics, and real importance of existing phenomena. It looked natural and is expected that even settled people lost mental balance and thinking power after the World War II. The identity crisis is one of the features of absurd characters; they do not locate their ultimate being and status in society. The lack of significance of one's life is common to them. Pinter realised and experienced anguish in the second half of the 20th century and portrays it through his plays, giving clear description; has clear ideas regarding absurd characters who were victims of such plague. Pinter investigates

not only the external status of humans in the society, but with his behaviouristic approach he acts as a psychiatrist and a psychologist and detects human mind, soul and behaviour, thus examines him internally too.

Thus, Pinter's play, *The Homecoming*, demonstrates the suffering undergone by the post-war generation. The sense of absurdity in life, the existential dilemma, the disharmony, the breakdown of communication and the identity crisis are crucial to an understanding of the plays of the Pinter. They also bring his plays close to the contemporary generation which finds itself in similar suffering. So ontological absurdism among post-war humans, exploitation of women, and their empowerment and emancipation are apt in the play.

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