

Exordium of Anxiety in Harold Pinter's *The Room*

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine the methods of presentation of anxiety in Harold Pinter's *The Room*, recognising the imagistic method to be his favoured method of presenting emotional states, and looking at the variety of images that abound in this play. The different types of anxiety manifested by the characters are categorised against the background of this analysis. The pervading influence of psychology and the subtle impact of political issues found to underlie the anxiety of the characters in the play are identified. A different variety of anxiety manifested by characters in Pinter's play is categorised. This study makes an endeavour to examine the play of Pinter taking the ideas that lie locked beneath the words and the gestures in them. Sometimes the words in this play do not seem to convey any idea. The images he creates, the ironies in him, automatic repetitions, monologues and all give particular shades of meaning to words in different contexts.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, *The Room*, Anxiety, Psychology, Existential, Security, Fear

Harold Pinter remains a prominent literary figure in the post-war British drama as he links the pre-war theatre with the modern one. He entered the scene at a moment when the theatre is dominated by more than one schools. He succeeded in remaining within the conventional picture - frame of the stage and he established a new style of theatrical idioms, tight plots and real human beings. Another important thing is that he has never kept the critics or the audience in his mind while writing the plays.

Pinter's plays are meant for intelligent readers and audiences, and for the proper understanding of his plays, we have to go to their sub-texts. The explanation of the subtext reveals several layers of meaning beneath. Pinter's dramas represents various serious issues like the individual's alienation in a threatening world, the corruption of officials, man's shameless power politics of different kinds, the complications of female mind, sex and its perverting clout, limitations of language, language and silence utilised as weapon, the illusions created by man to get-away from reality, and so on. Some of his plays show that the burning concern over contemporary politics is still alive in him. As for the style of Pinter's plays, he incurs a great deal with the writers of different times.

The subject matters of the plays of Pinter are predominantly human beings who exist in anxiety of one kind or another, and who are chronically bedevilled by a sense of fear. In the context of the individual play, these anxieties and fears whirl round the environs of strangers, the anxiety of the outside, the chaos about the environs, the absence of confidence in oneself, a craving to dominate and the strives for the same, all of which are mental states identified and examined by psychology. In this aspect, Pinter's plays are realistic in their responsibilities. Yet, in philosophical terms these can

be expressed to portray themes such as a human being's fear of death, his sense of mystery about the universe, his sense of mystery about his own identity, and his will to power.

In his play, *The Room*, Pinter presents the image of death which challenges man with the mystery as to why he born and why he dies. The instinctive impulse of Man to know who he is and what he is here for can be perceived to be a theme in this play. While on this analysis, he finds friendship with others and makes relationships in this world. But neither these relationships nor any of his materialistic assets is enough to provide him serenity in life as the intrusion of death annoys him by bereaving him of all these. An excruciating fear of death with its ramifications is a consistent obsession in the plays of Pinter.

In *The Room*, Riley comes to the house where Rose and her husband Bert live in comfort. The life of the couple is presented in such a way that any intervention is perceived as a threat to them. As John Pesta contends, in "Pinter's Usurpers," "The play calls for a symbolic interpretation. Riley, threatening the womb-like security of the room, serves as a death figure" (55). When Kidd tells her that Riley is going to meet her, she recedes away showing her displeasure to encounter him. "Mr. Kidd: (rising) I don't know what'll happen if you don't see him. Rose: I've told you I don't know this man" (27). This displeasure is a manifestation of existential anxiety.

Existentialists believe that the consciousness of death is the call of anxiety and survival then delivers itself its own legal call through the mediator of consciousness. Eventually, she bows to death and sends for Riley, the blind man. "Rose: Fetch him. Quick! Quick!" (28). Then Riley enters. Here the stage direction is worth regarding: "Enter a blind Negro. He closes the door behind him, walks further, and feels with a stick till he reaches the armchair" (28). Though Pinter refuses employing symbols and proclaims that he has never been aware of symbolic importance in his play, the blindness and the blackness of the character are indicial of death. In "Messages from Pinter," Augusta Walker remarks, "Figuratively the basement denizen must be death and his room the coffin" (4).

Death is inescapable, that is why he enters Rose's chamber without her consent, though he is an uninvited visitor. She does not want to be touched by him still he touches her in the teeth of her objection. He not only touches her but attempts to take her away. Pinter illustrates the way she responds to him: "she touches his eyes, the back of his eyes, the back of his head, and his temples with her hands" (31). She gladly receives it when she feels cornered. Thus man's reply to his inescapable death is portrayed here very poignantly, but with a philosophical nonchalance. Though Stephen H. Gale does not accept that Riley is a particular portrayal of death, he asserts that there are propositions to take him to be so.

Like the mystery of the universe, the mystery of life is also a problem in Pinter's plays. In *The Room*, we do not get a clear image of the real-owner of the house. There is a vague and gruesome description of the actual location of the room. Taking Mr. Kidd to be the caretaker or the landlord, Rose questions him how many floors they have got for the house. After some time, when Mr. and Mrs. Sands reach there, their conversation moves to Mr. Kidd, Rose speaks of him as the landlord, but Mr. and Mrs. Sands do not agree with her. Mrs. Sands is suspicious of Kidd's ownership of the house. "Rose: Well, that's his name. He is the landlord. Mrs. Sands: Who? Rose. Mr. Kidd. (Pause) MR. Sands: Is he? Mrs. Sands: Maybe there are two landlords" (19). The embarrassment concerning the landlord is in a way expressive of the mystery that covers the universe.

No one knows for certain what or who is behind this universe, some holding that God is the creator of all, others refusing the existence of such a power. Altogether there is no certainty considering the creator of this universe and the uncertainty about the holder of the room presents, on a miniature, the uncertainties and confusions about God. This and other concerns of existentialist thinking can be perceived in plays of Pinter. In "Messages from Pinter," Walter Kerr says, "Harold Pinter seems to be the only man working in the theatre today who writes existentialist plays existentially" (3).

This undeserved punishment is a prominent theme in European authors. This type of punishment is a recurrent theme in Pinter's plays too. In *The Room*, when Rose is overtaken by the appearance of a stranger called Riley and he himself is attacked by Rose's husband Bert, the dramatist does not give any reason for it. In all this play characters suffer from one or another problem which is fundamentally connected with their existence. This makes the characters anxious about their lives and makes them tense in all their interactions in life.

In *The Room* we can see psychological undercurrents of midlife crisis. Rose in this play is introduced as a woman in her sixties. She is a woman passing from her middle age to old age and in this transition stage, she exhibits signs of an emotional crisis which psychology calls 'midlife crisis.' She has menopausal frustration on the one hand, and sexual frustration on the other. Her husband appears to be inept and she understands that she can once rely on him, and this is one of the reasons for her anxiety.

A good number of Pinter's characters are middle-aged, individuals who show the psychic problems engendered by stress and frustration in their midlife. In a way, the anxieties expressed by Rose could be the psychological reaction to her menopause. Menopause is a decisive turning-point in women and with this they realise they have reached the peak of their developmental process.

In *The Room*, this loss of trust is evident in several characters. Bert loses his trust in Rose when he sees her with the blind Negro, Riley. Rose also loses her confidence that she is safe in her room with her husband in it. Her tension is obvious even from the opening of the play. She has a premonition about the impending loss of the room and of the sense of security she has pinned upon her husband. Rose's apprehension about the stranger in *The Room* comes true in the end. Stanley's apprehension is also proved real as he is taken away by McCann and Goldberg. Edward's approach to the Matchseller is also with some anxiety because of his unwarranted presence there. As he had suspected, the Matchseller becomes a threat to him and gradually takes possession of his wife.

Rose's anxiety in *The Room* arises from many things that happen around her, without her knowledge and control. She doesn't even know where her room is in the house. Somebody lets her room to somebody else. She remains helpless. Everything is manipulated according to the design of an unknown force or authority. That is the state of political affairs during the Second World War in Europe. Rose shelters herself from something that she fears outside. The anxiety that she shows reaches its climax when she hears that the messenger Riley has come to take her to her father. She asks Riley:

Rose: ...Who have you got a message from? Who?
Riley: Your father wants you to come home. (Pause)
Rose. Home?
Riley. Yes.
Rose. Home? (30)

Here the recurrence of the word “home” shows the embarrassment the word creates in her. She speaks as if she did not know the meaning of the word; but the fact is that she feels so because of her total ignorance of the outside, the mystery that remains outside, the mysterious operations on the house she resides in without her participation in it.

Majority of the characters in the plays of Pinter manifest existential anxiety. Psychologically, existential anxiety is the anxiety which emerges from an accountability which the individual takes to be that one takes up as something inflicted upon him. To such a man, life in itself is an imposition. Man’s existential panic is something acceptable, real, and ordinary as a day-to-day situation. The existential anxiety of Pinter’s characters is perceived in their shrinking away from taking-up responsibilities. To Rose, a room in *The Room*, as L. P. Gabbard says, in *The Dream Structure of Pinter’s Plays: A Psychoanalytical Approach*, is “the womb that nurtured her” (26). This applies to most of the characters of Pinter. What the poet in this playwright attempts to express by such an image is, eventually, the wholeness of his own existential anxiety. Generally, existentialists use the word angst instead of anxiety.

Walter Kerr argues,

The dictionary defines (angst) as ‘a feeling of dread, anxiety, or anguish’ ... ‘anxiety is the expectancy of evil or danger, without adequate ground’...a man in a state of anxiety is anxious about everything-his dread is not confined to responsibility for an act but is distributed throughout his environment and becomes his environment. (19)

This sort of existential fear plays a principal role in the plays of Pinter. A method generally adopted for portraying it is introducing characters who seem to be either symbols or agents of death, and whose presence creates a sense of fear in the characters.

Such living conditions in England during the formative period of Pinter must have been a constant source of anxiety in his life. And this anxiety finds expression in his plays. His plays deal with the individual at the mercy of authoritarian system. This authoritarian system makes an individual anxious in his existence, so the anxiety expressed in the plays is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the political atmosphere of the England of the times.

Even in his personal life, Pinter has been a man who stands for human rights and freedom. Thus, *The Room* presents the image of man in the grip of anxiety and insecurity of a variety of kinds - psychological, moral, social, philosophical and political. These concerns emerge all the more strikingly in the plays because of their being rooted in Pinter’s own life and times.

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