

## THE SEARCH FOR SELF AND IDENTITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS

### Introduction

The power struggle both within an individual, between individuals and a powerful system or exploitative person runs through Harold Pinter's major works, an idea which has great impact on the formation and sensation of man's attitude towards his self and identity. Pinter is considered as a multi-faceted playwright, at times a great figure of the theatre of Absurd to whom only the absurdity of modern man is of crucial concern. At other time, a great political, social, and human right activist reveals his obsessions in his works in which "there also lurk, after all, the basic political problems: the use and abuse of power, the fight of living space, cruelty, [and] terror"<sup>1</sup>. Thus, he can be approached and interpreted with regard to the criteria of the theatre of Absurd on the one layer or his own specific theatre of comedy of menace on the other. The commonality of his dramatic expression and absurdist has been their delineation of human existence as purposelessness, nothingness, and hovering sense of lack of meaning and his sense of self. Pinter, too, has tried to capture this theme in his theatre of absurd as this theatre "strives to express its sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, his early drama, we are dealing with, is famous for the expression of the feelings of fear, restlessness, purposelessness, menace, ambiguity, selflessness as well as the entailment of the elements of absurdity. The superficially comic subject matter turns sombre as "more often than not the speech only seems to be funny- the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life"<sup>3</sup>. This comic face of his subject matter "can be very funny up to the point when the absurdity of the characters' predicament becomes frightening, horrifying, pathetic, tragic"<sup>4</sup>. This predicament may be concerned with man's very prime need of his sense of self and identity which may have been violated, annihilated, or deprived of by lack of, misuse of, or suppression of power relations, man's social status or the like. This research has analysed man's search for self and identity as well as the underlying causes of the violation of his self and identity as the deriving forces behind this quest in two of Pinter's major plays. His first major play *The Birthday Party* (1958) encompasses the rudiments of mystery, terror, menace, and the quest for self. His second full-length play *The Caretaker* (1960), though exercising upon the elements of absurd, captures the theme of mystery and

menace but with a less intensity behind man's search for shelter, affection and above all for identity..

### Analysis

An atmosphere of mystery runs through the drama of Harold Pinter. Although the characters are involved in natural conversations, the way they behave resembles dream figures than people with whom one can easily identify, at least on superficial levels. Pinter's own statement in a sense is a revelation of his dramatic world." If you press me for a definition, I'd say what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism"<sup>5</sup>. These perennial clashes, in a part, form the foundation of Pinter's artistic identity. This identity, no doubt, has been affected by his personal one which has been a matter of constant conflict. By religion English and Jewish, by profession, he was an actor who became a poet who became a playwright and screenwriter who became a director and finally who became an outstanding political figure. Pinter's world, too, mirrors a loss of the sense of self. This is demonstrated in Pinter's characters who share with modern drama a loss of the redeeming sense of self which has permeated in the ancient drama. In almost all of Pinter's plays, a kind of ambiguity runs through the nature of the protagonist or antagonist implicating the ambiguity of their selves or identities. For example, to find answers for the very essence as well as the nature of identity Pinter, in *Dwarf*, has created an outrider to search the outer layers of the solitary life of the spirit, psyche, imagination, mind, and sense of self. In *Homecoming*, what other characters conceive as illusion, exterior role, etc. gives rise to the emersion of identity. *The Black and White* characters like that of *The Birthday Party* are afraid of being taken away to be assigned a new identity by a Monty-like figure or any other organization.

In his major work *The Birthday Party*, the very name is suggestive. Stanley's strong denial of attendance in his own birthday party climaxes the drama that his birth celebration eventually results in the reluctant celebrant's death, be it physical or spiritual. On the arrival of the two gentlemen visitors, we see that Stanley's flux state of sense of identity tests itself when he tries to terrify Meg with the possibility that she may be taken away by the visitors who carry a wheel barrow in their van for the purpose. In this way, Stanley tries to escape from the world that hovers upon him in the form of Goldberg and McCann. They try to annihilate the forged sense of identity this has-been-if-ever pianist has adopted. Stanley's being accused of every crime including racial, national and personal from picking his nose to killing his wife and his being bombarded by a host of questions by the intruders and his being unable to justify, decline or resist reminds the reader's mind of either he is absolutely the convict for the accusations or a sheer selfless person who does not have a minute tinge of awareness of his own self or identity.

McCann: You betrayed our land.

Goldberg: You betrayed our breed. [...]

Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't live. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (*The Birthday Party* p.155)

They even go further and pose him questions of diverse types to psychologically disillusion his sense of self. As Franzblau asserts "they hurl a barrage of questions at him, challenging every consolation—from the sublime (religion: Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you? ; or philosophy: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?) to the ridiculous ( why does the chicken cross the road?)- shattering any support"<sup>6</sup>. They try to shape Stanley's fate, but in a sense, on the contrary, they are involved in a process of self survey, self testing, and penetration into the innermost deepest feelings of their own being. Goldberg, in reality, is the one who as argued is terrified and is truly lonely victim of his own cliché's. He loses his own vigour and ability to control himself and wants McCann to breathe in his mouth to be reinvigorated. At the end of Act 3 before taking Stanley away, Goldberg admits his uneasiness and reveals his despair, criticises the way his own self has been formed by the established disciplines of the society and the world and calls into question his own status of being.

GOLDBERG (*interrupting*): I don't know why, but I feel knocked out. I feel a bit It's uncommon for me. You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born.

Nothing's changed. (*He gets up.*) That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game[...] And you'll find—that what I say is true. Because I believe that the world (Vacant.)... Because I believe that the world . . . (Desperate.). BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD (Lost). (*The Birthday Party*, Pp. 79-80)

This goes on in *The Caretaker* too, where the three characters are actively involved in the process of revising their condition and mind their identities. The room is cluttered with so many appliances of suburb bourgeois life style. But the majority are out of functions. The sink and gas stove are out of service. The electric toaster is broken; the roof leaks. This room is in need of redecorating which is indeed adopting the identity of a modern house. Its current condition is a reflection of the values and order symptomatic of a modern home. This dilapidated house which is on the way of achieving a new identity shelters characters who are in pursuit of their selves and identities, too. "The identity of each character is so protean that it prohibits bonding—what self can another bond with when both are shiftingly slippery? Here the answer to the question, Who am I? becomes even more elusive than in earlier plays"<sup>7</sup>. Aston rescues Davies, the vagrant that he has met at a bar, in a

fighting and takes him home. Davies who lives under an assumed name and claims to have left his certificates is Sidcup clings to this opportunity to make the best out of it. On the line of enjoying a secure identity, both Davies and Stanley turn to their past. Davies as mentioned time and again refers to and wishes to go to Sidcup to fetch his documents which he has left with somebody fifteen years ago.

Davies: (with great feeling). If only the weather would break! Then I'd be able to get down to Sidcup! [...]

Davies: I got my papers there. (*The Caretaker*, p. 17)

He has changed his name to forge a temporary identity for himself. This new identity in a sense exposes him more to danger as may one day person on behalf of an organization like the case of Stanley may come and catch him.

Davies: You see, what it is, you see, I changed my name! Years ago. I been going around under an assumed name! That's not my real name. Aston: What name you been going under? Davies: Jenkins. Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name I'm known, anyway. But it's no good going on with that name. I got no rights. (*The Caretaker*, p. 18)

His assumed name, his identity should be verified by who! But just like Stanley Webber is stuck in his past identity. They are both attempting to find a way of getting rid of present distracted and dispossessed sense of self. Stanley turns to his past identity, his having a job as a great pianist to soothe himself:

"I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country"<sup>8</sup>. An insurance company confirms Davies Card to stabilize his assumed identity. Stanley's lost social status as a respected pianist should be revised in order to gain his previous identity. "The way people look at me you'd think I was a different person. I suppose I've changed, but I'm still the same man that I always was"<sup>9</sup>.

Davies' assertions about his past, his own comparison with those who are inferior to him like the Blacks, Greeks, Poles, and other aliens like the scotch git and the Irish holigan are endeavours on the way of attracting Aston's attention, gaining his favour, and defining his shattered, baseless identity on that relationship. This highlights the fact that "the figures rely more and more on their capacity to play word-games to gain territory over the other and to guarantee a safe condition. This also happens because their selves have gained so much elasticity that they are not a comprehensible unit any more."<sup>10</sup>

Davies: [...]I've eaten dinner off the best of plates. But I'm not young anymore. I remember the days I was as handy as any of them.<sup>11</sup> He craves for acceptance as a respected individual just like Stanley in The Birthday Party. Both, deeply obsessed by the anguish of their selves, are in pursuit of legislating and asserting their identities. The susceptibility of his identity has deprived him of inner self-esteem, so he is left with nothing at hand to set against his miseries, the insults, and his inner feelings of self disillusion. He has been afflicted with the modern age absurdist characteristics:" the sense of

an ominous yet uncertain fate;[and] the implication a senseless, random universe"<sup>12</sup>. That is why Stanley, too, asks Meg, "tell me, Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to?"<sup>13</sup>

Davies does not even have a minute tinge of familiarity even with his birth place and his nationality which makes his past as his present blurred.

Aston: What did you say your name was?

Davies: Bernard Jenkins is my assumed one.

Aston: No, your other one? [...]

Davies: I was....uh....oh, it's a bit hard, like, to see your mind back....see what I mean....going back ...a good way....lose a bit of track, like...you know...(*The Caretaker*, p.23)

Being deprived of the very beginning needs of human being like shelter, affection, and respect, he is even rejected by the Monk for getting a pair of shoes and is treated like an animal. That is why when he "turns, shambles across the room, come face to face with a statue of Buddha standing on the gas stove, looks at it and turns"<sup>14</sup>. Having been turned down by so many people on so many occasions from his personal life and his problems with his wife to his rejection by the Monk, he comes up with his doomed sense of his self and his futile attempts to gain a respectable identity. Getting belittled, alienated, and secluded, Davies sees the image of his doomed self. Thus, the system, the world, the other individuals attitudes and looks as faced and envisaged by Davies, in *The Birthday Party*, too, have become "a mirror in which Stanley sees reflected his "essence"<sup>15</sup>. As introduced and seen in the protagonists' attempts In *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party*, and much of Pinter's other works identity" grounded in outward position, remains relative to other people who grant or withdraw approval"<sup>16</sup>.

Stanley, in his relationship with Lulu, lies to her about the day that instead of sitting at home all day long, he has been busy at the beach. On this, Lulu reproaches him and offers him a mirror to get a better idea and understanding of himself." Do you want to have a look at your face?[...] I mean, what you do, just sit around the house like this all day long? (Pause.) Hasn't Mrs Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long?"<sup>17</sup> Lulu's suggestion revitalizes his awareness of his identity. He rushes to the mirror, washes his face, looks again to see his new image. His previous view of himself as a pianist shatters and gets deeply disillusioned in himself. This is accompanied by what happens in the course of play when McCann "snatches his glasses and as Stanley rises, reaching for them, takes his chair downstage centre, below the table, Stanley stumbling as he follows. Stanley clutches the chair and stays bent over it."<sup>18</sup> This time again looks at the reality of his self and identity through the real view of the world not that of his assumed one.

Aston's efforts to bring back identity and self respect to Davies through offering him a job as a caretaker also culminate in no practical fruits. As Davies realizes that through having a job he can win the expected relationship with Aston or Mick, he ruins this chance by lying to be a decorator too.

This drives Mick mad and gets at him fiercely." What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you came into this house there's Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies"<sup>19</sup>. Mick as the house owner suffers from its ownership. He is obsessed with the idea of turning it into a penthouse which has originated from the glossy magazines, modernity consumption and the new views of the post modern world. "I could turn this place into a penthouse. For instance...this room. This room you could have as the kitchen. Right size, nice window, sun comes in. I'd have....I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares..."<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, he is always on the move as he has his own van. His scope of his journey is confined by London transport routes. Thus, he is looking for his identity within a limited area. His identity is under question. He lacks creativity and integrity, is mainly obsessed with sadism and violence whose manifestations could be detected in bullying Davies, the old vagrant, and smashing Aston's Buddha a symbol of serenity and sacredness. As the youngest character, his self has been more afflicted with the devastating characteristics of modern age crystallizing the idea of a consumer figure, exploit or be exploited, and susceptibility to or readiness for succumbing to whatever values or moral principles offered by the circumstances of time and place because "the individual is created through discourse, and so therefore is a social construction, enabling a multiplicity of identities rather than one 'true' self"<sup>21</sup>. He is at the mercy of these alluring features of modern life and is lagging far behind the social, economical, and psychological demands of his present status.

### Conclusion

Harold Pinter in his idiosyncratic theatre, comedy of menace, and via the characteristics of the theatre of Absurd has handled and illuminated the existential problems of modern man at the post modernism era delicately. His characterization and his tactful utilization of language for the intended purpose have made him able to capture the most delicate psychological obsessions of man. In his major plays *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* he has illustrated the theme of search for self and identity, one of the great obsession of modern man, via creating characters who are psychologically obsessed, socially outraged, and personally disillusioned and displaced. This has been portrayed by seemingly comic but menacing use of language and characters whose relationship to each other can leave mutual impression of different types on them. His characters are afflicted with blurred vision of



their sense of their selves and identities and are either secluded or doomed. His deployment of language, setting, and the characters' relationships with each other well manifest the deriving forces behind their disillusionment of their selves and identities.

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### Սեփական եսի և ինքնության որոնումը Հարոլդ Փինթերի պիեսներում

Մեծ քրիստանացի դրամատուրգ Հարոլդ Փինթերը բարձր գնահատականի է արժանացել ինքնատիպ դրամատիկ ոճով և թատրոնում մարդու դժվար վիճակի բացահայտման հանդեպ ունեցած զգայուն վերաբերմունքի համար: Նրա պիեսները ներդրված են անհամագոտության, անհամբերության, կեղծավորության, փլուզման, անկայունության և իշխանության զգացմունքներով, որոնք արտահայտված են ինչպես նրա լեզվի, այնպես էլ թեմաների ընտրության մեջ: Գոյության հարցը, որին հաճախ դատապարտված է մարդը, դարձել է ներքին խառնաշփոթ՝ հասնելով սեփական եսի զգացումի կորստի կուլմինացիոն կետին: Սույն հետազոտությունը կապված է Հ. Փինթերի պիեսներում մարդու արդիական խնդիրներից մեկի՝ ժամանակակից անհեթեթ և սպառնացող աշխարհում մարդու խանգարված եսի և ինքնության որոնումների արտահայտման հետ: