

# Study of Cultural Alienation in the Plays of Harold Pinter with special reference to *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*

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## ABSTRACT

Literature shapes to the feelings, experiences and imagination of the human mind. It has a deep and direct link with human life and its realities. Literature is understood in a multiplicity of ways. It is a body of written or oral works, such as novels, poetry, or drama that use words to stimulate the imagination and confront the reader with a unique vision of life. Culture consists of shared values, beliefs, knowledge, skills and practices that underpin behaviour by members of a social group at a particular point in time. Alienation has long been a popular theme in literature. Cultural alienation refers to the process of disrespecting and lack of interest towards the culture to which one belongs and aspiring to be part of or inculcate the practices of the dominant culture. Harold Pinter is widely known for manifold themes in modern drama. This article is an attempt to study the cultural alienation in the plays of Harold Pinter with special reference to *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature is a unique phenomenon and has great importance as it provides the ability to connect human relationships and differentiates right and wrong. It has provided a gateway to teach the reader about life experiences from even the saddest stories to the most joyful ones that will touch their hearts. A creative literature grows out of the real situations and events of life and life without a creative and constructive literature, has no inner significance. Literature is one of the trails blazed by human through, alone. The passion for knowledge, the desire to understand life and make oneself at home in the universe has perennial spring in human nature. Culture is transmitted to new generations, through education, but is known and learned by other cultures.

Literature reflects the various experiences, ideas, passions of human beings in their daily life that express on several forms and styles of literary works. Since literature directly derives from human life, it can increase our knowledge and experience about human problems includes values, morals, cultures and human interests. The underlying assumption here is that a work of literature is a creative, universal form of expression that addresses the emotional, spiritual, or intellectual concerns of humanity. Literature is an expression of culture because it documents human knowledge, belief and behaviour.

Like literature, culture is a contested phenomenon which is understood to mean different things by different groups. Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour. Culture embodies languages, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals and so on. It is creative expression, skills, traditional knowledge and resources. These include, craft and design, oral and written history and literature, music, drama, dance, visual arts, celebrations, indigenous knowledge of botanical properties and medicinal applications, architectural forms, historic sites, and traditional technologies, traditional healing methods, traditional natural resource management, celebrations, and patterns of social interaction that contribute to group and individual welfare and identity. It is generally accepted that culture embodies the way humans live with and treat others and how they develop or react to changes in their environments.

The term alienation has been used over the ages with varied and sometimes contradictory meanings. Alienation has long been a popular theme in literature, but its rise to prominence came most sharply during the 20th century, as humans moved farther away from the world of nature and closer to that of machine. This concept of alienation, although commonplace by today's standards, is not general, as it can take on very different meanings and tonalities depending upon whether it is a person from society, a person from oneself, or a marginalized group of people. But both

in its form and in its extent the modern alienation differs from that of preceding time. It has now become much more intensified and broader, and has actually turned into a prevalent trend.

The English word 'Alienation' is derived from the Latin word 'Alienato'. Alienato is a noun which receives meaning from the verb 'alienare' which means to make a thing for others, to snatch, to avoid, to remove, etc. Alienation is a means for man to protect himself against those forces which bring about his annihilation in the world of nothingness, which is rooted in the absurd situation. Alienation emerges as natural consequence of existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms. The theme of alienation has been variously dealt with persistently and unflinchingly in modern literature. The alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century American and European fiction.

Cultural alienation refers to the process of devaluing or abandoning one's own culture or cultural background. A person who is culturally alienated places little value on their own or host culture and instead hungers for that of imposed colonizing nation. Culturally alienated societies often exhibit a weak sense of cultural self-identity and place little worth on themselves. It has been argued that the most common manifestation of this alienation among people from post-colonial nations at present is an appetite for all things, from television and music, to clothing, slang, even names. Culturally alienated individuals will also exhibit little knowledge or interest in the history of their host society, placing no real value on such matters.

Dislocation/ displacement/ immigration are the probable reason for cultural alienation as such people look for values in a different culture or nation. Cultural alienation is one of the factors for most of the societal problems ranging from prostitution, unemployment, low standard of living, poverty, value degeneration. The deterioration of family structure has also led to sexual abuse of minors and child prostitution. People suffer from feelings of cultural alienation, social isolation, segregation and backlash racism and discrimination were seen as contributing factors. The rise of anti-immigrant parties and platforms in parts of Europe increased political focus on socio-cultural issues. The Slaves resistance is primarily due to their linguistic and cultural alienation.

Modern Drama is a particular type of drama which depicts modern attributes and shows all the changes that happened on the political, social, economic, religious, and psychological level. Some of the most prominent modern British dramatists are Tom Stoppard, David Hare, Sarah Kane, Camilla Whitehall and Harold Pinter. Per Wastberg, member of the Swedish Academy and Chairman of the Nobel Committee observes in his presentation speech:

*"Harold Pinter is a renewer of English drama in the 20th century. Like Kafka, Proust and Graham Greene, he has charted a territory, a Pinterland with a distinct topography."*

(ATP 4)

Harold Pinter was a notable playwright, screenwriter, director, actor and the most influential modern British dramatist. He is sometimes associated with the generation of British playwrights who emerged in the 1950's and are known as the Angry Young Men. His first plays, with their dingy, working-class settings and surface naturalism, seemed to link Pinter with this group, but only the surface of his plays is naturalistic; most of a Pinter play takes place beneath the surface.

Pinter has achieved the status of a major force in the contemporary theatre. Harold Pinter, who was twenty four years younger than Beckett, abandoned the traditional devices of drama like logical plot development, sensible and meaningful dialogue and intelligible characters. Martin Esslin rightly observes:

*"Pinter's people are in a room, and they are frightened, scared. What are they scared of? Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening ... we are all in this, all in a room, and outside is a world ... which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming."*

(PW 35)

Martin Esslin attributes this fear of Pinter to his Jewish roots while living in the Europe of Hitler. The plays of Harold Pinter pose many questions as well as problems. The arbitrariness and unpredictability of events, the incomprehensibility of a character's past and his motives, utter uncertainty about the next happening, the disgusting and inhuman plight of human beings, the ambiguous dialogues and pertinent hidden meaning, make his plays difficult to comprehend. Martin Esslin rightly observes:

*"Pinter is not a naturalistic dramatist. This is the paradox of his artistic personality. The dialogue and the characters are real, but the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity."*

(PW 37)

Harold Pinter is widely known among other modern dramatists for manifold themes. Among them, loneliness and isolation, lack of communication, violence and menace, personal identity, love of power, primitive instincts, human

nature, dreams and illusions, and many more. His dramas illustrated the picture of the post-WWII society that how the people were alienated from one another. He also showed the dehumanizing effects of modernity among people. His dramas are also associated with the trend of modernism such as the stream of consciousness, surrealism, cubism, dadaism, futurism, expressionism, imagination, and symbolism.

All his themes make Pinter a playwright of great relevance even today, almost a decade after his death. His mingling of the tragic and the comic makes the lives of his characters appear even more tragic. It was declared to be a failure and was greeted with lot of hysteria. All these barbaric incidents and bloodshed will never let Pinter recede into oblivion. His plays also explore the ambiguity and uncertainty. World War II and its horrors produced a widespread sense of the sheer meaninglessness of human existence. A lot of people still continue to suffer because of perennial wars. Existential questions and search for meaning in life are still very pertinent problems.

### **The Room**

Pinter's first play, *The Room*, contained a number of features that were to become his hallmarks. The play is set in a single small room, the characters warm and secure within but threatened by cold and death from without. *The Room* is overtly symbolic, more so than Pinter's later work, but the setting and characters are, for the most part, realistic. Rose sits in the cheap flat making endless cups of tea, wrapping a muffler around her man before she lets him go out into the cold; her husband, Bert, drives a van. Under the naturalistic veneer, however, the play has a murky, almost expressionistic atmosphere. The room is Rose's living space on earth. If she stays within, she is warm and safe. Outside, it is so cold it is "murder," she says. She opens the door, and there, waiting to come in, is the new generation, a young couple named Mr. and Mrs. Sands (the sands of time? Mr. Sands's name is Tod, which in German means "death"). They are looking for an apartment and have heard that Rose's apartment is empty. "This room is occupied," she insists, obviously upset at this premonition of her departure. A man has been staying in the basement. She imagines it to be wet and cold there, a place where no one would stand much of a chance. The man wants to see her.

### **The Birthday Party**

*The Birthday Party* was Pinter's first full-length play; in effect, it is a much fuller and more skillful working out of the elements already present in *The Room*. The scene once more is restricted to a single room, the dining room of a seedy seaside guesthouse. Meg, the landlady, and Petey, her husband, who has a menial job outside the hotel, resemble Rose and her husband of *The Room*. Meg is especially like Rose in her suffocating motherliness. In this play, however, she is no longer the main character. That role has been taken by Stanley, the only boarder of the house, who has been there for a year. He is pinned to the house, afraid to go out, feeling that intruders from outside are menacing bringers of death. Although he is in his late thirties, he is being kept by Meg as a spoiled little boy. He sleeps late in the morning, and when he comes down to breakfast, he complains querulously about everything she fixes for him. He is unshaven and unwashed, still wearing his pajamas.

## **CONCLUSION**

Harold Pinter is one of the few dramatists of the second half of the twentieth century who has been the most and foremost influential English playwright since Bernard Shaw on English stage. Harold Pinter's plays are relevant even today as the basic problems of humankind have not changed. His plays express the problems of the existence and predicament of modern man. Pinter has exposed the alienation and dualism present in the mind and experiences of the modern man. He has also taken the intrusion, dispossession and displacement as one of his major themes in his major works. His protagonists have tried to find out their self-identity and existence in modern world. He has shown great concern to cultural and related issues.

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