Question Of Identity In Harold Pinter's *The Room*

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Abstract: The quest for identity has always been a recurring theme in literature since times immemorial, but in recent times the endeavor has become more complex. The so-called Theatre of the Absurd, hailed in the 20th century which has Harold Pinter as one of the canonical writers, produced some intriguing works focusing on the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence, offering us vague glimpses of a person's identity. Pinter's introduction of the "menace" and his pinteresque style further complicate the quest for the identity of his characters. Lack of adequate background information and antecedents about the characters and the resultant ambiguity shrouding their identities in all his plays is a strategy he has employed to make the plays open-ended. The present article thus aims to answer the question of identity of the characters of Pinter's maiden play *The Room* (1957) by looking at both the historical and cultural perspectives of the time when the play was written. Since the characters in the play are highly ambiguous and obscure with almost no past and no future, it is only possible to trace and explore their present identities based on the history and the culture of the current society where the play was written.

Index Terms -Identity, The Room, Harold Pinter.

I. INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter was clubbed in the umbrella of the Theatre of the Absurd partly because of his acknowledged influence from Samuel Beckett as seen in his early plays, which had led to their friendship. Martin Esslin points out that "Pinter shared with the absurdist the same interest in the presentation of the essential problems of existence, death and alienation" (Ienas Talib Naseef, p.188). Pinter's plays, however, go beyond such categorization because of his idiosyncratic style. Irwing Wardle called his early plays as the "comedy of menace" and such plays begin with an apparently innocent situation that becomes both threatening and "absurd" as Pinter's characters behave in ways often perceived as inexplicable by his audiences and one another. *The Room*, published in 1957 is the first typical example of this type of comedy. Set in a nondescript boarding house room, the play revolves around seemingly ordinary characters whose interactions gradually reveal a sense of menace and absurdity beneath the surface of their mundane lives. The play is characterized by its use of sparse language, enigmatic characters and unsettling atmosphere. Since the characters in the play are enigmatic in nature, a question is posing in our minds as to who they are and what is their real identity. Martin Esslin writes,

> 'My characters', Pinter has said, 'tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say, there lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore' (p.48).

Identity is a flexible term which makes it difficult to precisely define it, but we can simply understand it as something that defines who we are, the way we think about ourselves, the way we are viewed by the world and the characteristics that define us. Often, the identity of Pinter's characters is presented as flexible, fragile, and ambiguous throughout his oeuvre. They lack identity, they contain false identity and the breakdown of one's identity often leads to metamorphosis. On the whole, the identity of Pinter's characters can be described as fractured. In his early comedies of menace, an antagonistic force from outside regularly attacks a character who seems to be contentedly living in a safe little world of his own. The unifying threat in all the plays is the protagonist's first sense of self. One cannot boldly proclaim who he is in the universe that Pinter portrays. His early plays all began with the premise that no one can have a firm idea of who they are or where they fit into the bigger picture. Instead, they demonstrate how essential ambiguity governs their lives. His characters are frequently hiding and disguising to evade the supposedly menacing threat. This leads us to the question- Who are they? And What is haunting and hunting them? This article will explore different layers to try and arrive at the conclusion of the above-mentioned questions by relying on the historical and cultural perspectives of the Post-World War II period through eminent critics, contemporary research articles, etc, in an effort to give the readers clear insight of knowing who the characters in the play are.

II. History and Identity

There have been several critical works that have sought to provide explanations for the identity crisis of Pinter's characters, ranging from "personal crisis as representative of the larger social crises prevalent in post-war Britain, to the fractured identity of the characters as representative of the fragmented identity of Harold Pinter as a London-born Jewish playwright growing up after World War II". The identity of Pinter's characters is seen as flexible because they have different and multiple names and fragile because they have false and inauthentic names. A notable example is found in *The Room* where the name of the protagonist "Rose" seems to be a substitute for the original name "Sal". In fact, no name in the play appears to be original as characters seem to take comfort in disguise. Locating the identity of these characters from the historical perspective of post-holocaust might seem logical. This is the route that most critics have delved into and have arrived as close as possible to unearthing the elusive identity of the characters in the play.

Often referred to as a post-holocaust play, *The Room* demonstrates clearly the angst and trauma of the post-war period. The characters are constantly hiding from the unknown menace in the room and looking for a substitute identity. According to Dr. Franz Ruppert's theory of *Identity- oriented Psychotrauma Theory and Therapy* (IoPT), the trauma of identity produces the need and the habit of "looking for substitute identities, inappropriately clinging to another person, and identifying with the behavior of the perpetrators". Applying this theory, it is visible that almost all the characters in the play are victims of the holocaust, traumatized by their past. The word "holocaust" reminds us of the Jews but it is doubtful whether the characters in the play are Jews or not. The word "Jewess" interestingly finds a mention in the play and this paves the way for critics to link the characters with the Jews, providing the author's background and the time the play was written. Since Pinter was from Britain, the Blitz is worth mentioning here. The Blitz was an intense bombing campaign undertaken by Nazi Germany against the United Kingdom during World War II. The attacks were authorized by Germany's chancellor, Adolf Hitler after the British carried out a nighttime air raid on Berlin. During this time people were scattered, looking for a safe location and substituting their identities for safety and security.

Rose Hudd, in *The Room*, begins the play with an identity so strong that she has established for herself in her cozy room. Still, there is always this underlying fear that something from the outside will come and threaten her identity when she says, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (The Room, p.91). She seems to be clinging desperately to Bert and "when she is unable to keep him from going out, she attempts to extend her influence by filling him with hot food and light tea, and bundling him up in several layers of clothes" (Dr. Ibrahim Shalabi, p. 164). Rose clearly cannot be normal as she keeps bragging about her "cozy room" and slandering about the "damp" basement. She is like a psycho-patient speaking abnormally and we can also notice that Bert pays almost no attention to her speech maybe because he has understood her condition. Rose is someone who is displaced and is traumatized by her past and we can also say the same about Bert, but since he is a man, he has more capacity to restrain his inner fear. Bert's silence however could be a hint of something unpleasant in the past that he has had to face. Siamak Babaee et al. note,

> In Pinter's world, when the characters are menaced, they cannot communicate. The inability to communicate, and to communicate in the correct terms can be regarded as an expression of the mood, the unhappiness of life, and the tragedy of the human condition. (p.43)

The Sands are also one of those people looking for a safe location with their ambiguous identity. Their presence is a threat to Rose and it is even more threatening when the man from the basement, whose face they cannot see because of the absence of light, tells them that room seven, the room that Rose is currently staying is vacant. The Sands could be those displaced people who wander across London looking for a room to stay in post-war Britain. Mr. Kidd could be one of those mini landlords providing shelter for scattered people like the Hudds and the Sands. However, this assumption is questioned because Mr. Kidd cannot remember the number of rooms in his own building. As a matter of fact, Mr. Kidd himself is being threatened and pestered by Riley whom most critics have identified with the Gestapo – a secret police, probably spying on the location of the Jews. In the play, both the Sands and Mr. Kidd have been manipulated by Riley into extracting information about Rose and her room. Mr. Kidd tells Rose "But the man doesn't come from the district. Perhaps you knew him in another district" (The Room, p. 111). When Riley finally appears in her room, it seems as if he has finally discovered her. The aggressiveness, harshness and madness that Rose displays to Riley is however shocking. It makes clear sense that Rose knew Riley in the past (because unless and until she knew him, she could not be rude to him) but their encounter was an unpleasant one. Rose might have suffered so much in the past that she finds herself unbearable in the presence of someone who directly confronts her past. With her aggressive behavior, she has unconsciously had her personality identified with the behavior of her past perpetrator who has made her life disjointed. Her rude expression to Riley explicates this, "I don't know who you are. And the sooner you get out the better" (The Room, p.112). Bert also behaves similarly when he comes back, he notices Riley as a "lice" - a parasite who has perhaps fed on them in the past. He "strikes" and "kicks" Riley repeatedly until he is motionless. Riley appears to be a threat from the past, haunting and hunting them and Bert does his best to eliminate him before Riley eliminates them. Rose's reaction however makes us believe that their identities have been discovered and she immediately becomes blind. When Riley utters "Come home, Sal" (The Room, p.114), Rose's past is unfolding right in front of her and the trauma of her past is grinding her slowly, shattering her new substitute identity and succumbs her to inevitable death. Blind is a symbol of death, but for Rose death seems to be more welcome than revisiting her traumatic past. Viewing from the historical perspective, it can be assumed that the characters in the play are those people surviving during the post-holocaust period characterized by fear, anxiety and insecurity. This echoes clearly the playwright's own personal experience of living in post-war Britain and his identity as a Jew. Concerning Pinter's plays, Akdoğan states,

> The ambiguous settings of the plays do not refer to a particular period; however, considering the relevance of the subject matter of these plays to their context, it is evident that they actually derive their material from their socio-historical background. Criticism of the relevant historical contexts in these works is only implied through representative victimised characters in oppressive settings (p. 331)

III. Culture and Identity

It is impossible to separate history from culture for the two are deeply connected, but it must be understood here that history mainly implies the events that have shaped the behavior of the people while culture refers to the norms that have molded the consciousness of the people to behave in a particular manner. We understood how the two World Wars have shaped people's behavior and have rendered them incompetent in identifying themselves. People who survived the onslaught of the World Wars seem to have cut ties with their past identity, especially the scattering minority groups who were fiercely persecuted during the Wars. Such people tend to hide in isolation for fear of further damage being done by trying to ascribe to themselves a new identity in their small cozy world. But the danger remains that when people have lost touch with their origins, they are easily exploited and are left vulnerable to be superimposed with a new identity by the power system of the cultural politics in the industrial world. Identity involves recognition and validation from the outside world and within the larger political system. Identity formation is associated with power structure. Scattered minorities will never get the comfort of enjoying their fanciful identity in their cozy room unless and until it is accepted and supported by the outside world. This is the fate of Pinter's characters in *The Room*, they have a weak identity and therefore are left vulnerable and marginalized by the power system, making their identity pluralistic and fragile.

The fate of Pinter's characters does not hint at a classless society, in fact, no society is believed to exist without class formation and when there is class there is a contest for power. Pinter who came from a working-class background, often highlighted class differences and social issues in his plays. Most critics believed that whereas Pinter's earlier plays presented metaphors for power and powerlessness, the later ones presented literal realities

of power and its abuse. Identity is a power-contested field, for example, Meghalaya is fighting to promote its indigenous language as the state's official language to cement and strengthen the identity of its people in India because if the Central Government does not recognize the "Khasi" language per se, the people will be left vulnerable and easily manipulated by the central cultural power of India. One's identity is deeply embedded in one's culture. In *The Room*, Pinter's characters are disconnected from their culture, forcing them to forge a new cultural identity within the limited space of their room, "If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am….. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us" (The Room, p.93). The characters in the play are without a doubt, vulnerable minorities because they have no background, no home and no real identity. The room that the Hudds are staying in is a rented room and the Sands are also looking for a similar room, this reflects their unpleasant past and their present state of poverty. Benedict Nightingale believes that the setting of the play reflects poor accommodation, he remarks,

> A seedy and dilapidated London, a place where lonely people slump in milk bars or stand at coffee stalls or sit in gaunt terrace houses watching the all-night buses trundle from the unfashionable south or east to the desolate north or west. …Rose and Bert in The Room …seem inseparable from this world. They belong to it as much as cockroaches to a decaying tenement (142-143).

It appears that Rose is comfortable with her new identity inside the room, but this new identity that she has weaved for herself lacks validation and legitimacy and therefore it is applicable only inside the room but becomes invalid outside. Pinter's characters do not have the power to legitimize their identity and this leaves them unprotected and they become victims of the power system. Identity thus becomes a politics of power and powerlessness. Terry Eagleton, in his essay "Culture and Identity" (2008) remarks,

> The irony of identity politics, however, is that in order to create the conditions in which you can discover what you want to be, you must already have a fairly strong identity in the first place. The danger is then that this existing identity will prevent you from being open to future possibilities. Yet if you do not already have an affirmative enough sense of selfhood, it is unlikely that you will be able to defeat the power which is preventing you from exploring what you may like to be (p.39-40).

The power system that is threatening their identity is presented in the play by the "menace". Riley who serves as the menacing force in the play is constantly pestering Mr. Kidd for allowing the non-acceptable self-identified people in his building because the Hudds' identity is viewed as invalid by the system and therefore they have no place where they can insert themselves. Rose's insecurity about their fragile identity is self-expressed, "Oh, these customers. They come in here and stink the place out"(The Room,p.113). When Riley finally appears in the room, both Rose and Bert display strength and courage to defend their new identity, but eventually Rose becomes blind and this hints at the fact that they have been clouded to see their self-made identity and have been forcefully imposed with a new identity by the power system. The characters in the play do not have a strong background and a strong sense of self, therefore they are powerless and are easily exposed by the system, splitting their identity according to its interest and preventing them from becoming what they like.

Postmodernism believes in the collapse of the subject under the dominant influence of the capitalist ideology. The subject in postmodernism lives in the present and has no meaningful linkage to his past or future. Frederic Jameson, one of the postmodern thinkers, in his work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), has offered us a particularly influential analysis of our postmodern condition when he talks of our lost connection to history.

> It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place (p. ix)

According to Frederick Jameson, postmodernity has transformed the historical series into a series of emptied-out stylizations (what he terms "pastiche") that can be commoditized and consumed. Capitalist thinking becomes a power discourse in the representation of all forms, including identity. With the loss of historicity, the present is experienced by the schizophrenic subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect which can be described in terms of anxiety and loss of reality. Jameson suggests that this schizophrenic fragmentation in personal identity strongly influences postmodern narratives in which characters often experience fragmented, plural and discontinuous identities.

Pastiche leaves the people in a state of aporia. In the play, Mr. Sands' question "Who did bring me into this world?" (The Room, p.106) is absurd but contains deeper meanings. The people in the play appear inauthentic and are distanced from history, beguiled by the present capitalist ideology. The characters in *The Room* are dislodged from their own culture, shaped, controlled and manipulated by the bigger culture which prevents them from claiming "I am who I am". Marginalized people like the Hudds and the Sands in *The Room* are easy victims of the capitalist power which is ready to orchestrate everything for them for its own profit. The power system makes their identity plural, fragmented and discontinuous.

IV. Conclusion

In answering the question of who the characters in *The Room* are, one can bring in so many critical views that will invite endless discussion. Since Pinter himself left his characters undefined, it is widely open for critics and scholars to interpret them from their viewpoints. Pinter's characters are obscure with no beginning and no end, they exist only in the present. In *The Room*, the characters behave absurdly, hide from an unknown threat, search for a place to stay and so on. At first glance, everything seems ridiculous because why these people behave the way they do is unknown, but by tracing their behavior through the vast ocean of theoretical perspectives, we can arrive at certain conclusions. Pinter's world does not promise much hope and his people are characterized by anxiety, perhaps from their past trauma. Even though Pinter never talked openly about the atrocities of the holocaust, we can link his characters in this category based on the psychological symptoms that they display through fear, anxiety, desperation and depression. Pinter's comedies of menace reveal the psychological warfare of the characters' everyday lives. It is a daunting task to ensure the identity of these people, but as seen in the play, these characters could be the marginalized minorities living in post-war Britain with their displeasing past, an uncertain present and a bleak future. We can thus interpret Pinter's characters as having multiple identities to having no identity at all. But one obvious thing we see is that, at least, in his early menace plays there is a constant attempt at the annihilation of the main characters' identity. Rose's identity is exposed in *The Room*, Gus' identity is confronted when he is trying to claim his self-made identity in *The Dumb Waiter,* and Stanley's identity is totally uprooted in *The Birthday Party*. Pinter has taken as his special domain the basic insecurity of the mid-twentieth century, the uncertainty about who one is and where one belongs.

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