

Review

Unveiling the Uncanny: A Quest for the Kafkaesque Mode in Harold Pinter's early Plays

Mithun Dutta

Research Scholar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. E-mail: mithunduttabhu@gmail.com

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Although Kafka and Pinter has worked in different genres of literature, Pinter the playwright has become an admirer as well as the adapter of the German novelist Franz Kafka who has left a tremendous influence upon the dramatic world of Pinter by his style of writing fiction known as Kafkaesque. A thoughtful analysis brings into light how the vast spectrum Pinter has presented in his drama may be associated with the themes and motifs recurrent in the fictional world of Kafka, particularly in his novel *The Trial*. Pinter's preoccupation, as a playwright, is to give the portrayal of man's universal predicament in a world full of uncanny and menace that can be identified with the feelings of Kafka's protagonist who has undergone a nightmarish experience after his imprisonment and the following trial.

Keywords: Kafkaesque, man's universal predicament, uncanny, menace, imprisonment

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INTRODUCTION

The plays of Harold Pinter, particularly his early plays, have received a multiple analysis and interpretations to decipher and reach to the core of his drama. But a thoughtful reading of his early plays provides a clue how Pinter was greatly influenced and deeply intrigued by Franz Kafka's writings, especially the style and mode Kafka adopts in writing his fictions what is known as Kafkaesque. Pinter's plays though attempted several times cannot be put under any category due to their idiosyncratic nature. But a systematic parallelism can be drawn between the dramatic world of Pinter and the fictional arena of Kafka as both of them are predominantly preoccupied with the representation of situations seemingly baffling and bizarre with acute feelings of disintegration, evasiveness, depersonalization,

domination manifested in both theme and language. What is more interesting that both of them share a common Jewish background which they struggle throughout. The works of both writers are obsessed with anxieties and inner turmoil of human predicament in a world full of menace and violence, operated through a powerful mechanism in which an individual is caught up and doomed to be destroyed. Pinter the dramatist has gone through and interested in everything related to Franz Kafka and when Pinter officially took the responsibility to write a screenplay of Kafka's novel, *The Trial* commissioned by BBC in 1989, the influence of Kafka in the world of Pinter's drama is overtly recognised that lead to several comparative analysis between the two great writers.

Most of Pinter's early plays are imbued with menace, mystery, evasiveness, memory, role-playing in realistic setting with naturalistic dialogue though his plays are never concerned with realism "What goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I am doing is not realism" (Plays Two: ix). His dramatic expression of domestic banality and abandonment of rational devices lead to inherent contradictions and senselessness that bring his plays under the light of Theatre of the Absurd. His early drama embodies the elements of absurdity, ambiguity, restlessness often spiced with humour that culminates in sombre situations. Most of his early plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, are often enclosed in a room or household that is constantly intruded by mysterious and hostile forces that demand a total surrender of its inhabitants. The setting of these plays in which a menacing terror looms large and the lack of harmony, often reminds us the writings of Franz Kafka, particularly his novel *The Trial*. Pinter is intrigued by Kafka in certain aspects like characterisation, themes, styles and the recurrent use of certain images to delineate the universal human predicament in its day to day reality.

Their affinities can also be realized by their identical background as pariahs of the community they lived in. Kafka's background as a Jew and German leads to a state of isolation as he belongs to nowhere. Similarly Pinter, brought up in the hostile atmosphere of the Second World War, is obliged to struggle for securing his private space and his survival that got reflected in the plays as his first hand experience to encounter with violence. The preoccupation of both the writers is to give a public form to their private dreams. Their identical background as Jewish outcasts fundamentally incorporated to their writings as the alienation of man from the society he lives in, from the other characters he meets and interacts and ultimately alienating from his own self. Pinter's frequent use of Jewish names as characters in his plays like Stanley Webber and Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, Mac Davies in *The Caretaker* along with several Irish names (Riley, McCann etc) shows how a writer achieves a mastery over his portrayal of characters with a particular cultural origin that transcends into a universal preoccupation. When Arnold Wesker in 1960 commenting upon *The Birthday Party* in the *Jewish Chronicle* claimed that "The real weakness is that Pinter has used the right character in the wrong setting. It should all have taken place in a Jewish setting . . . It is not enough to say Goldberg is universal – people are only universal in their own setting" Pinter reacted strongly saying that his characters and plays were not for an exclusive Jewish concern and later in an interview he affirmed "I do not at any point, in any way whatsoever, think of myself as a Jewish writer, except that I happen to be a Jew who writes."

Pinter has acknowledged the fusion of humour and the

tragic in his dramatic world but strongly claims that his plays never intend to be mere 'laughable farce'. In his early plays the sense of menace lies in the uncanny setting or the inherent bitterness behind the laughter. In his first one-act play *The Room* the intimidating menace is the outcome of the mysterious setting outside the room that Mrs. Sands narrates the story to Rose in her long speech about her encounter with a man behind the partition in the basement. The entire episode is reminiscent of a Kafkaesque ambience of dislocation and disorientation and his vivid experience in dealing with the uncanny. Apart from the identical background, the recurrent theme of torture and punishment, betrayal and nonconformity, the presence of a strong father figure sustaining a paradoxical relationship with his sons and the failure of the protagonists to establish a healthy relationship with the opposite sex are certain common aspects traceable in Pinter's early plays connecting them to the life of the protagonist Josef K with his inescapable sufferings and ultimate execution in *The Trial*.

The term Kafkaesque denotes a sense of absurd, horrifying or menacing state as well as man's imprisonment and helplessness to combat with hostile bureaucratic forces. Kafka's short stories and unfinished novels are essentially concerned with nightmarish obsessions in which a sensitive human being struggles and finally succumbs to a world of conventions and habitual norms. The concept of menace which is most important in understanding the works of both Pinter and Kafka, may appear as physical through the agents and organisation as well as psychological in his interpersonal relationship or in the inner feelings of an individual. In Pinter, like Kafka, the idea of menace is closely linked with the image of the room that represents a confinement, a cell, a refuge, or a trap. For Pinter, the outside world is frightening and hence menacing and alarming to its inhabitants. In *The Birthday Party* when Meg announces the anticipated arrival of 'two gentlemen', Stanley's fear comes out when he annoyingly declares "They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. Where is my tea?" (Plays One: 15)

What both the writers have common is the elements of uncertainty, ambiguity, anonymity and mystery that pervade all banal domestic occurrences. Though initiated on a very recognizable and realistic plane their writing becomes less realistic and rational as it proceeds and reaches deeper. The action or the narrative begins to entail the uncanny and the fantastic so that a sense of menace is further increased and accentuated. The intangible nature of menace is intensified after the arrest of Josef K, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, for an unexplained crime that he is accused of and the subsequent proceedings in a mysterious court in which the identity and nature of authority remains ambivalent and unrevealed. The imprisonment and its unexplained

consequences prevail in order to expose the oppressiveness of an ominous mechanism as the protagonist gets closer to the court and its corrupt practices inside. The menace of the inimical organization seems to emerge from everywhere and because of the all pervasiveness of menace it becomes impossible to escape the threatening system. So the protagonist in *The Trial* can never escape or refute the court and its proceedings, rather he has to face and encounter in the Interrogation Room to defend himself against the allegations raised towards him. In this process he has realized the ubiquitous nature of the menacing power that seems to be present everywhere surrounding him. The ambiguous guilt inflicted upon him or his ignorance of the way he is found guilty is the source of menace as he is deprived of his rationality against the insensible Law. His struggle with the bureaucratic forces and the respective officials is a potential entrapment in many of Kafka's works. So he must admit the consequences of the verdict that brings his final catastrophic end.

In Pinter, like Kafka, the theme of menace is embodied in certain recurrent images like the room, prison, cell, freedom and confinement that portray the human condition. The room depicts a spatial metaphor and transcends its literal sense of isolation to a more general feeling of alienation. The room functions as a refuge, is shattered by intruding outsiders who serve as agents of a more powerful but anonymous institution. Pinter in his earlier play *The Room* depicts the room as a safe, enclosed place that soon turns out to be unsafe and a shocking experience when a frightening stranger enters the room and breaks into all security. In *The Birthday Party* The protagonist Stanley Webber, has taken refuge inside a boarding house outside which he imagines full of horror and menace. His sense of security is soon broken into with the arrival of two unknown intruders. But the element of uncertainty prevails in Stanley's background and his real identity, the cause of his escape and his career as a pianist. However, the identity of the two intruders also remains vague and unverifiable. Stanley constantly suffers and gets victimized after the arrival of two emissaries who appear as agents of a mysterious and brute organization. In this respect, Stanley's condition goes parallel to that of Joseph K, who lacks the capacity to unravel the mystery of his arrest. Stanley, to certain extent, resembles the fate of Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial* as a helpless victim of a mysterious organisation and Goldberg and McCann, like the Inspectors who arrested Joseph K, represent as agents of that organisation. Besides the revelations made about the weird and uncanny nature of the court are similar to Stanley's apprehension of coming a van with wheelbarrow looking for someone and later Stanley's perception about the two unknown persons to create a sense of tension and fear.

The ambiguity about the motives of Goldberg and

McCann and the nature of their job remains vague throughout the play. They act as representative of some higher authority that is always behind the curtain only appears offstage as Monty towards the end when Goldberg and McCann are taking away Stanley for "special treatment". When McCann asks Goldberg about the nature of their job Goldberg assures him "that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself" (Plays One: 24). Now the question arises - What do the 'assignment' and the 'mission' refer to? But the question remains unanswered. Like the court proceedings through which Joseph K has undergone, Stanley is treated in a weird and torturous way during cross-interrogation and is finally doomed at the hands of powerful agents who never specify the offence he has committed rather accusing him of a number of crimes that ranges from betraying himself, near and dear ones to the betrayal with the nation and the religious faith. However none of such allegations is accountable or verified. A feeling of guilty conscience is aroused in the accused through a linguistic verbosity. Both Pinter and Kafka are concerned with the sense of guilt and punishment. There is also a constant attempt in changing names on the part of mysterious agents Goldberg and McCann to use several names so that they cannot be truly identified. Goldberg is called Nat by his friends, Simey by his family and his father called him Benny. Goldberg calls McCann Dermot and so also by Meg and Petey. The desire for verification to arouse our curiosity is understandable but it can never be satisfied. The play *The Birthday Party* shows apparent affinities with Kafka's *The Trial* as an existential metaphor of universal human's lot where the protagonist constantly suffers from unspecified guilt feelings and a sense of imprisonment.

Like Kafka's works, the early drama of Pinter also deals with a prevailing system that punishes and tortures the petty individual who dares to question its authority. The mechanism that exercises its power upon the inmates is unquestionable and demands absolute compliance. The individuals who attempt to defy its authority are either disciplined with a ruthless treatment of torture or hinted to be executed if they remain defiant. In the context, the concept of authority and violence both physical and mental in the plays of Pinter, draws parallel to the notion of power by another great modern thinker and philosopher Michel Foucault. Rather the works of both Pinter and Kafka can be associated with Foucauldian all pervasive nature of power in the system of society and the concept of punishment that Foucault has elaborately discussed in his book *Discipline and Punishment*. The notion panopticism popularised by Michel Foucault that denotes a specific structure in which the individuals are in constant surveillance to discipline them. In Pinter's *The Birthday Party* the characters are undergoing always by a sense of being watched or apprehending that some

mysterious forces are looking for them and will hunt them down wherever they try to escape and take shelter. The unreasonable treatment of the individual who tries to resist, remains as outcast by a larger system is hinted from his early plays and more manifested in his later works that are explicitly political. The struggle for power when overwhelmed by a ruthless system is thus reflected in similar manner in the works of both Kafka and Pinter. The characters are inevitably involved in a battle for power to secure their identity and chances of living.

Like Kafka, Pinter's plays are also concerned with the psychological menace emerging from the failure of interpersonal relationships that ignites and fuels the struggle for dominance. Pinter's early plays in which the characters basically struggle against a physical ominous system, also reflect the desire of the characters to dominate each other in order to gratify their emotional needs. This urge for emotional gratification turns into a weapon that destroys the relationships and inflicts the emotional imbalance within the individual. The lack of emotional support and the fear of loneliness have several resemblances to the psychological aspect of Kafkaesque menace. In Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* the sense of menace is projected through the increasing suspense of a 'room-door syndrome' in which the two hired killers, Ben and Gus, chat and wait for the orders from the mysterious authority they work for. They feel imprisoned as their range of acts and chances of living are circumscribed into a single room by the organization from which they receive orders. The play exploiting the techniques of a gangster film, depicts the banal routine of the two hired assassins and the anxiety generated by their total surrender to wait in unfamiliar surroundings for the signal to execute their task. The surreal effects of the verbal and visual comedy at particular moments are expressions and manifestations of the characters' subconscious feelings that are drawn with extreme realism through the nonsensical bickers of these two. Ben is the senior partner who appears to be more dominant over his junior partner Gus who always questions and resists the absolute authority of Ben as well as their organisation. Both of them are victims of an authoritarian setting that provides a glimpse of helpless human situation and his relationships that are on the verge of disintegration. Amidst the bizarre detail about the occupation Ben and Gus pursue, the play depicts man's alienation and subjection in a highly organised society that deprives of denies of the individuality of its members. Everything in the play contributes to a necessary end and the title "the dumb waiter" contains layers of meaning. Gus, as ignorant victim, fails to recognise himself as the dumb waiter who is fearfully curious to know the minute detail of the job he is assigned, and the system has doomed him to death for his own complicity. The Kafkaesque theme of imprisonment and hostility are also very much prominent

in the play that embodies the notion of menace in the lives of the characters. Both Kafka and Pinter employ the images of the enclosed room and mysterious duos that articulate a sense of fear and terror.

The struggle for dominance and authority is also a prominent issue in Pinter's play *The Caretaker* that portrays the battle of two brothers for a union that has been floating since the arrival of an old tramp called Davies. Davies is grateful when the elder brother Aston rescues him from the brawl at the café and gives him shelter and bed to his brother's household in which he works as a caretaker. But there is a constant change of equilibrium in the relationships among the characters in the play when Davies comes to know that it is not Aston but his brother Mick who is the actual owner of the house. Davies tries to show his attachment and favour for Mick who has made a trap in which Davies is easily caught and victimized. Mick uses a lot of strategies to overpower the old tramp by putting him always in inferior positions or making him helpless. Mick plays the role of dominant to deprive the subservient Davies of the chance to search for a secure place and the chance of fulfilling his emotional desires. The struggle for identity also serves an important role for the old tramp who fails to produce the documents for self-definition that he claims has left in Sidcup. The battle waged for love and power between the characters, culminates in the expulsion of the old tramp from the household. Despite his several protests Davies becomes an outsider and is rejected by both of the brothers. It is a mutual failure of human contact in which brothers are hostile and jealous not only to each other but to an old tramp who is compelled to retreat the menacing world outside from which he thinks that he has managed to escape.

What is akin to both Kafka and Pinter's style is a "binary pattern of Beckettian pseudocouple" apparent in Joseph K's executioners in *The Trial* as well as in the Goldberg-McCann relationship in *The Birthday Party*, Ben-Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* and the two brothers Aston and Mick in *The Caretaker*. Besides in both of them, language is a powerful means skilfully used to bring the ambiguous perception of meaning and the several aspects of human communication. Both Kafka and Pinter have exploited the potential in language to emphasize the aura of the mysterious and the uncanny around the things emerging from their strange inner world. Their deliberate omission in language for mystification, is capable of creating the menacing atmosphere in both the writers' fictional world. In Pinter's "comedies of menace" the solemn and sombre matters are spiced with humour amidst banal situations and culminate in catastrophe of Kafka's work. His distinguished dramatic style paves the way to introduce his plays known as 'Pinteresque' or 'Pinterest' just as 'Kafkaesque' has become emblematic for Kafka's fictions.

The notion of menace in Kafka as well as in early plays

of Pinter, implies a sense of imprisonment or entrapment of the individuals in prison-like enclosed area, often a room that serves to epitomize the imprisonment. Menace emanates from the uncanny and mysterious setting outside with the invasion of unknown powers. Man's failure to comprehend the horrors of his outside as well as his inner world tends to undermine his chances of survival against all the odds that he can neither escape nor defer. He must confront the world he lives in and admit unquestioningly the role he is assigned to play. If he tries to defy the norms and rules of the system he will be either disciplined and reintegrated by undergoing a violent torture or doomed to die through execution. What makes more vulnerable in both Kafka and Pinter is the desire for life in the characters who struggle but challenge the menacing system that have exploited all of their vitality literally as well as metaphorically. The unjust system, the imprisonment, violence, loneliness, fractured identities, complex relationships, inscrutable sufferings, all originated from an unidentifiable menace for which the individuals continuously struggle to survive but failing at the hostile forces, bring both Kafka and Pinter close in their approach in understanding man's existential crisis and anxiety that give an insight to the works of both to be associated with the Theatre of the Absurd.

It cannot be mere an exaggeration to assume Franz Kafka as the literary predecessor of Pinter, the dramatist who was greatly influenced by Kafka's writings specially his themes as well as technique known as Kafkaesque. A comparative analysis can be established as both the writers are concerned with the human predicament in the present world in which the individual is imprisoned, entrapped, tormented and victimized by some mysterious and anonymous power that either executes him at the end without explaining the nature of the guilt he is accused of or takes him away to the head of the

organization to rehabilitate him into social conformity by giving him a 'special treatment'. Pinter's plays particularly his early plays reflect parallel situations with the fictional works of Kafka that not only give certain hints in understanding Kafka's influence on Pinter, but establish their differences and peculiarity depicting the various modes of human confrontation with the contemporary world full of menace and anxiety.

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