

# Post-War Absurdity and Deprivation of Women: A Feministic Analysis of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*

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**Abstract:** Apart from destruction, World War II has given rise to a new phase to the traditional English drama entitled by Martin Esslin as the theatre of the absurd. It represents the post-war period in which every kind of suffering haunted the humans. The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period has been an awful stage copious in predicament and misery. In the post-war period, humans faced excessive troubles at each step of their inhabitation. The play *The Caretaker* reflects on the dilemma among mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century individuals in England. It is observed that men suffered due to the patriarchal attitude and deprivation of women in their life, which has been the effort of the paper. The predicament among men presents a distorted shape of the then livelihood. Though they strived to get out of their problem but could not overcome and dragged their life toward meaninglessness. However, women too suffered equally due to the irresponsible behaviours of post-war homosocial beings.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, Communication, Existence, Homosociality, Woman.

## INTRODUCTION

The play *The Caretaker* is one of the masterpieces of Harold Pinter that represents the post-war life abundant of suffering and predicament. Its narrative portrays the grief, misery and dilemma among people in England in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pinter reflects on the life of post-war humans who have faced several problems at every phase of life. The life of these individuals is seen in utter chaos metaphorically depicted in the play *The Caretaker* as well as in many other writings of the absurdist playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The play portrays the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century human condition, the crisis of identity, the breakdown of communication, terror, threat, anguish, hegemony, phobia etc. The absence of a woman in a man's life has been central to the play due to the chaotic and miserable life reflected by the characters throughout the acts of the play. It describes the individual existence and predicament in the modern period. Martin Esslin, one of the critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century referred Harold Pinter's plays as contributing to the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The Theatre of the Absurd depicts the post-war circumstances and the quandary that has challenged the human existence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## METHODS

The research methodology is a primary fact employed to facilitate any research. So, the methodology employed for the study of the article is the in-depth textual analysis of the play *The Caretaker*. The centre of the analysis is based on feministic perspective in which masculinity has overtaken in the post-war families to lead human circumstances into absurd mess. Moreover, the nature of the study employs explanatory and descriptive methods. The study of the research paper is done through thematic analysis. The analysis of the selected play leads to an exploration of the means by which race and gender intersect to shape the being and existential ideology in which all age groups whether men or women have suffered equally in the post-war London society. Absurdism is an off-shoot of existentialism, and synonym to modernism. Absurdism is the human struggle to seek inherent value and meaning in life. It refers to the human inability and eventual failure of efforts to find either value or meaning. It implies a tragic tone and

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frustrated feelings that arise by the contradictory nature between the universe and the human mind seeking the meaning of life.

## RESULTS

### Post-War Absurdity

Pinter and other absurdist writers have examined the human condition through their individual ways from time to time. In the play *The Caretaker*, Pinter reflects the trivial dwelling of 20<sup>th</sup>-century humans by portraying conflicts on pointless issues leading miseries and calamities in their lives. The play is based on three male characters who have their respective stories to present before the audience. Each of the trios struggles to live his life in a smooth way. In most events of the play there have been constant conflicts mostly duels among trio-characters—Aston, Mick and Davies on trivial issues resulting in the deprivation of peace and comfort in their lives. The drift of their thinking seemed cheap that lacked the meaning, understanding vis-à-vis patience and tolerance. From the outset of the play to the point where play concludes, it is observed that they all have been suffering from predicaments as mentioned earlier such as the crisis of identity, the breakdown of communication, terror, threat, anguish, hegemony, and phobia. “When a fellow has settled himself cosily and comfortably in his quarters, when he has a fixed point like this from which he can rush out, a safe hiding place to which he can retreat and devour his booty in solitude— something I especially appreciate, since, like certain beasts of prey, I cannot eat when anyone is looking on - then he familiarizes himself with whatever notable sights there may be in the city” (Kierkegaard 153). As the events of the play proceed the struggle for existence is seen swelling rapidly. All the trio have been seeking serenity, but it was hard to find that through absurd means. As saying goes ‘actions speak louder than words’, but Pinter’s characters’ all activities actions, words, silence, pause etc have a notable effect to represent their sense of grief and melancholy. Pinter has written plays about the condition of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century humans that absurdly lead violence in families. All the characters are baffled and have their idiosyncratic narratives to present their sense of being and existence. “Davies’s anxieties might have their roots in the hidden aspects of his past, but his loneliness and fear of isolation is something we can all recognise” (Haydon 03). The existential dilemma is found among the humans in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century after World War II. The crisis of identity reflected in the play has been a colossal factor to interrupt the post-war mankind. The trio are seen in contesting whirlpool to trace one’s personal identity and social character. “There is no degree of transparency in the transcendental subjectivity that would guarantee the risk-free choice of ones own identity. [. . .] Although it initially seems as though [Pinter’s] individual is irreparably decisionistic and monological, since he can neither justify nor communicate his faith to other individuals, [. . .]” (Blagojević15). Pinter and other absurdist playwrights have examined the human condition and depicted the virtual sense of their dwelling and inhabitation. Pinter creates extreme violence in his theatrical world (Dukore, 1985). The play *The Caretaker* represents that absurd characters are fearful of darkness, obscurity, loneliness, strangeness and usually suffer from excessive phobia—hydrophobia, nyctophobia, claustrophobia, paranoia, kleptomania, insomnia, and other similar apprehensions. In an interview with Tynan, Pinter declares: “I think that in this play . . . I have developed, that I have no need to use cabaret turns and blackouts and screams in the dark. . . . I do see this play as merely . . . a particular human situation, concerning three particular people” (Gale, 2003). Pinter’s mastery as an absurdist playwright is imminent with regard to his depiction of family life, fraternal and filial relationship, a friendship so on and so forth.

### Woman: Bond of Relations

The communication gap that exists between trio Aston, Mick and Davies seems illogical. It is noticed that they remain stuck in their thoughts and do not share their life experiences with each other. Even two brothers Aston and Mick are not seen in any conversation throughout the play till the last incident takes place where they got old Davies’ conspiracy to break the bond between two brothers. So, the breakdown of communication has been the major problem with the post-war humans. Also, communication failure is caused due to the absence of woman figure among homosocial beings. Since there is no woman character, it results in the breakdown of relations among the post-war individuals. Out of Pinter’s twenty-nine plays, seven of his following plays *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), *The Dwarfs* (1960), *Monologue* (1972), *No Man’s Land* (1974), *Victoria Station* (1982) and *The New World Order* (1991) lack a woman character in them. In the early second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the woman was given least significance in post-war families by homosocial. So, there is this scarce of women-figure in the post-war period, resulting in the deprivation of peace and harmony among the homosocial men. Also, the growth of relationships among these humans has been deficient of love, care, harmony, respect, etc. The two brothers Aston and Mick do not build any fraternal relation throughout the play. They play the game of

entering and exit in most events until the end and discreetly illustrate the crash in relations. Love is the bond that keeps relations intact which does not exist at all between the duo Aston and Mick. Love maintains the psychological and emotional balance among individuals but love in a Pinter play differs from the conventional definition of love (Gale, 2003). Similarly, Mick represents collapsed relationship through his strange attitude, and shows absolute unfamiliarity to intimate relatives (uncle), "To be honest, I've never made out how he came to be my uncle's brother" (Pinter, 1978).

Pinter has reflected upon the rare nuptials and marriage phobia in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period. The phobia among post-war humans is that they fear a woman and do not wish to get married at any stage of their life. They have the phobia that people suffer more as soon as they get married and as soon as they give birth to children. It has been experienced through the people who once got married and fell sick and absurd, so deserted their wives shortly. Pinter has shown this impasse through Davies' image who abandons his wife shortly after the wedding, "I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week" (Pinter, 1978). The miserable conditions erupted after World War II dragged individuals toward chaos and compelled to break everything—bonds and relations. "Most of the people left homes due to their inability to feed other members in their families. They were in a bad condition; and extreme misery and poverty led them to abandon their newly-wedded brides shortly after marriage" (Mir and Mohindra, 2015). So, it is analysed that post-war humans felt repugnant toward wedding and so their status quo is seen dejected. There was an upsurge of misogyny going on among men during the disarray in the post-war period. Davies is an unsettled example of a misogynist, who strongly feels a sense of repulsion towards women, as in case of his wife for putting her dirty underclothing in a saucepan. Similarly, Aston is a confused misogynist who relates women as prostitutes and scornfully expresses, "Women? There's many a time they've come up to me and asked me more or less the same question." (44). It can be said that these characters are disdained of women-folk. However, there is no such genuine reason of their absurd hatred exhibited in the play. Sakellaridou states, "Wherever the subject [of female] is raised it is mainly latent [. . .] expressed through the men's belief that male company is more interesting, rewarding and fulfilling than a female one" (p. 123). Aston in *The Caretaker* (1960) has been a portrayal of a victimized person, whom society has crushed by enforcing brain operation upon him. Burkman presents Aston: "A victim of society, and of his own mother, whose permission was needed for the operation. Aston failed to make his escape" (Burkman, 1971, p. 80). Aston tells us how his mother along with the wicked authorities of the society and hospital plotted against him to destroy his subjective vision. So the sense of discourteousness and impoliteness toward female is realised through characters' verbal counters.

"The absence of a woman leads the life of characters towards tension, anxiety and absurdity. A house bereft of woman drags its members towards suffering and predicament. A woman is a channel to hold relations and communication is facilitated by the presence of a woman in a house. One feels comfort and joy in the company of women, but their absence brings misery" (Mir, 2015). Since man put foot on earth woman has been with him at each step throughout his life. The presence of a woman in man's existence plays a vital role in their joyous life. Her presence in any family builds cheerfulness in a home atmosphere and leads toward prosperity. So the root of almost every suffering depriving the terms of peace, happiness, calmness, and prosperity in a home and among family members is nothing but the absence of woman and masculine domination in that home.

### Post-War Hegemony

In post-war families, each member strives to dominate other members to achieve supremacy. With this attitude, they destruct their family environment and lead the life of other individuals toward anguish and absurdity. The concept of hegemony remains glued to their memory and their conversations reflect the tone of domination. So, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the life of family members in a home is seen in quandary, plight and gloom. There is no harmony between individuals not even among intimates. This bondless structure of a family looks destined to suffering and they invite predicament to haunt them in every aspect. However, these post-war individuals are seen struggling to acquire peace and comfort and aspire to live their life happily, which echoes fantasy to them when they approach reality.

In the patriarchal society, women are the victims, whose social and individual existence is controlled and reduced by the whims and fancies of the homosociality. So, this deprivation of a woman-figure discreetly affects the being of homosocial men. The life of an individual in the absence of a woman is undisciplined, miserable, chaotic, psychotic etc. It is analysed that almost everything remains disordered—life, mood, happiness, peace etc are things far to get in absence of a woman. Every stuff remains in a haphazard manner as reflected in the play. The stage is set with absolute disordered objects and its surroundings appear in utter chaos that represents disparity of post-war life. The depiction is transparent to the

audience and they can apparently feel the littered and random objects: boxes, vases, paint buckets, a stepladder, a lawn mower, a shopping trolley, a coal bucket, the statue of Buddha, kitchen sink and gas-stove (Quigley, 1975). "At the beginning of the play, it is clearly described that the things in the room are put in an unsystematic and random way indicating the disorganised life and distorted dwelling of modern individuals." (Mir and Mohindra, 2015).

### CONCLUSION

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period, life is seen dejected with predicament in battalion haunting the post-war humans. The human psyche seems wounded and rendered dormant to deprive its normal performance. There has been a chain of vicious suffering experienced by all the age groups in the society. Most individuals fall prey to anguish in juxtaposition to each other, also men suffered due to their patriarchal nature that resorted them to live in absence of women. The play illustrates that women were considered insignificant by homosocial beings in this era. So, these homosocial men deprived themselves of women in their life and so spontaneously got deprived of life amenities required to live with peace and harmony. All this absurdity got erupted due to the World War II, which has gravely altered the humans of the time and interrupted the sense of being and existence. Pinter as a proponent of the theatre of the absurd reflected upon the post-war individual as misogynist whose sense of being seems futile without his female partner. There is a lack of trust and fidelity among the trio—Aston, Mick and Davies to live with peace and comfort. The communication breach is depicted with regard to strangers as well as intimates who are involved in their absurd thoughts, and so complicated the relations, such as nuptial in the case of Davies who deserts his wife shortly after wedding, filial in the case of Aston who curses his mother, and fraternal in the case of two brothers Aston and Mick who are physically close but poles apart in emotional terms of love, tender, care, respect, trust, etc.

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