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Pinter's Enigmatic World: Portrayal of Trapped Souls in his Selected Plays

By Zeenat Sharmin
Begum Rokeya University

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Keywords: *uncertainty, trapped, existential crisis, violence, dilemma.*

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Abstract- The world of Harold Pinter is a world of menace, confusion, uncertainty, and mystery. He has examined complex human relationships, communication breakdowns and post war frustrations as a playwright of 20th century. In his plays *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Caretaker* he has explored the concept of trapped souls. These plays reflect the existential crisis of the characters, who are imprisoned in different types of physical, social, and psychological conditions. The character Rose is portrayed as a dedicated wife in the play *The Room*. Her life signifies her confinement as a partner of Bert in that shabby place. She is trapped in her existential condition. She treats the outside world as a threat and is satisfied with her situation. But finally, the room becomes a violent, brutal place for her. *The Dumb Waiter* delves into the psychological captivity of its protagonists, Ben and Gus, who operate as hit-men in a basement. In addition to being physically imprisoned, they are also existentially constrained as they struggle with the ridiculousness of their assignments and the enigmatic messages that the dumbwaiter delivers. The play, *The Dumb Waiter* examines how powerless they feel and how they are trapped in an unending cycle of violence. The concept of confinement is deeply felt in the relationships among the characters in *The Caretaker*. In their shabby home, Mick, Aston, and Davies' interactions show the emotional isolation, manipulation, and power conflicts that dictate their lives. The idea of home as a place of both safety and captivity is explored in *The Caretaker*. Pinter has shown the real picture of human dilemma through his works and how this can captivate our lives. The characters of these plays are forced by their existence to face the situations.

Keywords: uncertainty, trapped, existential crisis, violence, dilemma.

Introduction

Harold Pinter, one of the most mysterious and significant playwrights of the 20th century, is recognised for his brilliant exploration of the human condition, frequently within the constraints of apparently regular and everyday settings. His plays examine the complex human relationships and disturbing situations of individuals who are trapped in the labyrinths of their own existence. This paper discusses the mystery of trapped souls presented in his plays: *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*. The characters of these plays are caught in their own situations and fight with the oppressive systems. Their psychological pressure, existential crisis, search for identities, power struggles, and alienation are the subject matters of these plays. The characters are, in one way or another, imprisoned within the boundaries of their own minds, their surroundings, or even by the mysterious forces that surround them, as Pinter skilfully creates an atmosphere of existential dread and solitude. This paper will analyse these outstanding pieces and see how Pinter subtly and impressively captures the depths of human alienation and the frightening feeling of being "trapped" inside one's own reality. It explores the causes of their predicaments. Why are they confined? What are the reasons of their sufferings? Are they trapped only physically or metaphorically? Do post-war situations make their conditions worse? The answers of these questions will be discussed in this article. This paper also discusses Pinter's frightening and cramped environments, allowing readers to descend into the psychological abyss that characterizes his distinct and alluring theatrical universe.

Post-war issues are very common in Pinter's plays. His characters suffer from traumatic experiences of world wars, especially the Second World War. They find themselves in a place where their words are incapable of expressing their hearts' intentions. So, silence is celebrated by Pinter's characters. Through the use of language and silence Pinter has shown how the communication is shattered in post-war world. The characters fight with their existence, and they find the existence absurd. Pinter is influenced by the concept of "theatre of absurd". We see the plays explore the uncertainty and meaninglessness of human existence through the lens of "theatre of absurd". Human relationships are fragmented in post-war society, and family values are lost. People want to execute power, so there is always a presence of threat and distrust. This struggle for power makes people separate from each other. As a result, they become the victims of alienation and depression. The selected plays explore these issues. The setting of these plays is "room". This "room" is a dominating concept in Pinter's plays. The characters of these plays live in a "room" and the claustrophobic situation gives them the sense of confinement. They are trapped in their situations and cannot go beyond these boundaries. Pinter's use of language patterns in his plays is also a determining factor for the characters to feel the confinement. The physical confinement, the presence of threat, power struggle, psychological trauma, circular and repetitive pattern of language all these factors define the trapped situation of Pinter's characters. This paper will analyse these issues in detail.

Author: Assistant Professor, Department of English, Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh. e-mail: zeenat.eng@brur.ac.bd

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Harold Pinter's first play, *The Room*, depicts the wretched circumstances of trapped souls. In this play, Rose and Bert are seen in the opening living together as couple. Rose who is sixty years old is devoted to Bert, and Bert is a strong fifty-year-old man. The play opens in a scene that immediately makes us feel like we are in a family. However, we observe that Bert is reticent to speak with Rose. Bert quietly listens while Rose speaks. Bert's quietness adds to the atmosphere of mystery. We pose the queries to ourselves about their relationship. Rose is quite devoted to him so she wants to feed him and speaks to him in a loving and caring manner. However, Bert just lets her be treated fairly by him while reading the newspaper and being silent. The concept of Room is chosen here by Pinter as a setting like his most of the plays.

Rose says, "the room keeps warm." (Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 85) So we see Rose does not feel trapped physically in this room, rather she feels safe and comfortable. She also says that the basement is not good for living and the outside world is cold. The use of these words 'warm' and 'cold' signify the psychology of Rose. The warm condition of the room suggests the 'warmth' of relationships between Rose and Bert. But if we think deeply, we never find the warmth in their conversation. We see a partner who wants to maintain silence. Though he is not harsh to his wife but we also do not see the love in his attitude. Rose is a dedicated partner, who is trapped in the frame of her womanhood. As a woman, she thinks she has to cook for her husband so she cooks and feeds Bert. She has learnt the concept of true feminine nature. She cares for Bert, she is worried about the weather that is why she tells him to wear warm clothes. Rose is imprisoned in this relationship, but she does not understand that. She says, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder."(Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 85) She believes her room is safe and feels safe in this place. The outer world seems dangerous to her. Her constant praise of the cosy space and her concern that she might not get to stay here are reflections of her worry. Rose acknowledges that she is lucky to live in this place given the harsh outside environment. Rose's insecurity is evidence of her fear, confusion, and frustration. The outside world terrifies her. Martin Esslin has noted in his book *Pinter: The Playwright* that Pinter, in his interview with a critic, has said, "Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening." (27) The room acts as an image of an area which provides her the hope and gives her the sense of comfort. She is confined, but she is satisfied. Martin Esslin in this book *The Theatre of Absurd* has also shown that in his interview with Hallam Tennyson in 1960 Pinter has said, "Two people in a room-I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?"(235) So there is always a sense of uncertainty and mystery.

Rose seems to be in desperate need of deep connections with Bert. She makes an effort to talk to him, but her attempts are frequently greeted with rejection or apathy, which exacerbates her feelings of uncertainty and loneliness. A prevailing sense of tension and anxiety is reinforced by the use of silence. While the audience is frequently kept waiting for him to talk or for the next dramatic development, it fosters a sense of unease and expectation. One of the main characteristics of Pinter's "Theatre of the Absurd" is this tension. Pinter has said in his speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962 that most of the time we are inexpressive and so a language arises. "A language …where , under what is said , another thing is being said."(Esslin, *Pinter: The Playwright* 36) Pinter's characters frequently express their innermost feelings and thoughts through silence. Just as much meaning can be conveyed by silence as by speech. The nonverbal clues and gestures used by the characters in *The Room* frequently help the audience decipher the implied subtext. Bert's silence suggests his reluctance to communicate with Rose. The readers are left with a doubt about their relationship. Does Rose find it difficult to keep the relationship going? We see Bert's enthusiastic behaviour when he talks about the van. We can see that he enjoys his voyage with "her" and treats the vehicle as a member of the feminine gender. Bert wants to talk to his wife Rose only about his van. Rose is trapped in this relationship, ignores the negligence shown by Bert. Bert's obsession with the van and his wish to take a ride in it serve as a reminder of his dreams and goals for a better life. His dreams and a means of escaping the drab and dreary life inside the room are symbolised by the vehicle.

Rose's fear of losing the room is the source of her ongoing anxiety. Two strangers show up after Bert drives off in the van. Rose feels frightened upon seeing two unfamiliar people in front of her. They have informed her that they are looking for a room, and a man living in the basement has told them that Rose's room will be vacant. The sense of mystery runs in the play. Rose becomes restless and she denies that this room will be vacant. This information creates tension and uncertainty. Although we are unaware of the couple's past, we can understand Rose's obsession with this space. She is imprisoned by the idea that the cruelty of the outer world does not exist in this chamber. Nobody can take this away from her; she lives here. Her repeated allusions to this room's cosiness indicate her total reliance on it. Her response to this room underscores how alienated she feels.

Mr. Kidd comes with the information that a man, who is staying for few days in the basement wants to

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meet with Rose alone. That man's presence evokes a sense of bewilderment and menace. His presence is causing Rose some concern. Rose is known to that man, Mr. Kid says. Rose rejects acknowledging this. The playwright's use of suspense is apparent to the readers. The man's name is Riley, and he has come with the message from Rose's father. Rose does not behave properly with him. But when the man utters his name, Rose accuses him of telling lies. Rose's reaction makes it clear to the audience that she knows him. She says, "We're settled down here, cosy, quiet, and our landlord thinks the world of us, we're his favourite tenants, and you come in and drive him up the wall, and drag my name into it!"(Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 107) Rose's rage towards this man implies a strange aspect of her background. Riley says that her father wants to see her. He says, "Come home now, Sal."(Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 107) Rose becomes emotional after hearing this from the man. The concept of 'room' and 'home' is highlighted here. Readers are left with open- ended interpretations. May be Rose is not free here , she is imprisoned. She can be free only at her real home. Bert comes at this moment, and realizing the presence of that man heats him brutally until he remains motionless. The play ends with Rose's line "I can't see. I can't see" (Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 110) May be her blindness suggests her metaphorical insight. She has understood that this room is not safe. She considers the outside world violent, but this room can also bring traces of violence in her life. She is confined in her situation.

The Dumb Waiter is Harold Pinter's one –act play written in 1657. Ben and Gus are two hit- men here, who have to stay in a basement room for the next assignment. The play reflects their growing anxiety through their conversations. The characters are imprisoned in this tiny, windowless basement chamber with just one door, a dumbwaiter—a little elevator that brings food to a restaurant above. Ruby Cohn says about Pinter's use of 'rooms' in his plays, "At the opening curtain, these rooms look naturalistic, meaning no more than the eye can contain. But by the end of each play, they become sealed containers, virtual coffins. (Scott 26) We see Gus says in the play, "I would not like to live in this dump. I wouldn't mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked outside." (Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays1* 117) His desire to free himself from this confinement is highlighted here. He is also a hired killer like Ben, but he thinks in a different way. The confinement creates a sense of frustration in him.

The characters are seen engaged in their respective pursuits in the first scene. Gus is occupied in tying his shoelaces. In absurdist theatre, reference to shoes is a common tactic. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we witness Estragon being troubled by his shoes, and in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus is seen busy with shoes. This prop shoe highlights the ridiculousness of life on Earth. The characters believe that their existential issues will be resolved if their shoe-related issues are resolved. However, the plays demonstrate how the people are stuck in their circumstances and that nothing in this harsh reality can change the situation for them. Ben is seen reading the newspaper. The elderly man's death beneath the truck and the news of the cat's murder suggest a harsh outside world. Gus claims that the old man's demise is entirely his own fault. We witness Ben and Gus's indifferent reaction to the old man's passing. The responses point to the post-war generation's mindset. This generation perpetually feels threatened, frustrated, and confused. Here, Ben and Gus are hardly an exception. They have no empathy left for anyone; they are just hired killers.

A defining characteristic of Pinter's work is the use of silence, which heightens the drama and mood of the play. As Martin Esslin has noted in his book *Pinter: The Playwright* that Pinter has said in his interview, "Given characters, who possess a momentum of their own, my job is not to impose on them, not to subject them to a false articulation, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak, making him speak in a way he could not speak, making him speak of what he could never speak."(37) Ben's hesitation to speak with Gus is evident. Gus seems to be more intelligent between the two hit-men. He asks questions, but Ben remains silent most of the time. There are extended, awkward silences between them throughout the play. These pauses include implicit tension and suspense rather than being just empty silences in the conversation. We understand the characters are unable to communicate openly. They are confined in their articulation. Instead of using words, Ben and Gus frequently use nonverbal clues and gestures. They react to the enigmatic messages they receive, make tea, and operate the dumbwaiter as ways of communicating. The characters' incapacity to communicate their feelings of imprisonment is heightened by these nonverbal interactions. The drama makes use of silence to highlight ambiguity and mystery. The actors' silence in the face of these perplexing communications amplifies the suspense, and the mysterious words that come from the dumbwaiter increase this mood of uncertainty.

We also see these two characters are always in conflict with each other. There is always a tension between them. They don't have faith in each other. There is always a power struggle between them. That can be felt in their difficulties of communication. We see them argue about phrases like 'light the gas' and 'light a kettle'. We see here the language politics. Martin Esslin has expressed in his book *Pinter: The Playwright* that this difference in opinions suggest the "dispute about authority, a fight for dominance" (65). They follow the order from Wilson whom they do not know. Gus claims that Wilson doesn't care about their comfort these days.

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Gus also feels guilty aboutf doing his job. He feels a growing sense of guilt after killing the girl on their last mission. He wants to discuss about the nature of their job with Ben, but Ben is the blind follower of this system. Ben is trapped in his own beliefs. He thinks they should not ask any questions, and they should just follow the orders. Like the machine, the dumbwaiter, they are the dumbwaiters, who have to carry out the orders. But Gus is experiencing his insecurities, and he feels trapped physically and mentally. The boredom of this job creates a sense of alienation in him. His inquiries highlight the unfairness of the social structure, which deprives people of their rights. They are nothing more than puppets in the hands of superior power. They are given instructions, which they must obey without question. Deep unhappiness is caused by this. Finally, violence is the inevitable outcome.

The concept of 'room' and 'door' discloses the theme of menace. Ben and Gus wait in that basement, and they try to deliver the orders given by the outside force through the dumbwaiter. They are instructed to kill the person who will enter into this room. So they always look at the door. In the play, *The Room*, Rose views the door as a link to the harsh outside world. But Ben and Gus believe that anyone who comes through it will be killed by them and they will be released from their duties. The play exhibits the traces of distrust, confusion, and suspense. Gus asks so many questions to Ben and Ben's silence and fragmented answers to those questions, build up tension. Finally we see, Gus has left to drink a glass of water and the Ben gets instruction through the speaking tube. Gus enters, they look at each other, and the readers can understand that Gus is the victim. The play ends without a conclusion. The hostility, ambiguity can be felt by the readers. The killers are trapped in that situation with questions: Will Ben kill Gus? What are the reasons for choosing Gus as a victim? The answers are not given.

In *The Caretaker*, Harold Pinter has shown that characters are imprisoned in ways that go beyond their physical limitations and into the depths of psychological complexity. The three characters battling for their positions in this cruel environment are Aston, Mick, and Davies. The play's location is a London flat. Aston and Mick live here. As the play opens, we see Aston brings a stranger with him. This man is Davies. He is rescued by Aston. Davies has been given a shelter here. The play progresses with a power struggle among these three characters. The flat is a miniature version of the decaying society and relationships shown in the play. The depressing mood of post-war society is created by the claustrophobic environment. This setting explores the protagonists' sense of entrapment and confinement. The room has a leaking ceiling, old furniture, a statue of Buddha and other junks. The characters' own emotional and psychological deterioration is visually represented by these components. The room's fragmented condition highlights the protagonists' sense of isolation and loneliness as they attempt to live their lives within the restrictive parameters of this space.

Aston brings Davies in his dwelling, and he takes care of him. Aston speaks in a cool manner and frequently declines to engage in pointless discussion. His quiet manner discloses his mysterious nature. He is always seen to be engaged in repairing a tool. He has a dream to build a shed. But as Nigel Alexander says in his article, "There is no future for the characters created by Harold Pinter. In play after play the curtain comes down on a terrible stasis in which the only possible development for the individuals concerned is, at best, continued stagnation, at worst, putrefaction." (Scott 39) As a result, Aston never finishes building his shed. He purchases items but is unable to construct the plan, so he stays in the room with it. Even though the play's protagonists hope for a miracle to improve their lot in life, it never happens The peculiarities of life limit them. In his speech, Aston tells Davies about his background. We are shocked to hear him giving such a lengthy speech as readers. He has said. "But they always used to listen. I thought …they understood what I said. I mean I used to talk to them. (Pinter, *The Caretaker* 89) So we understand the lack of communication prevailing in the society. The society is ready to accept the conventional characters but if a character is different from others he is treated as abnormal. Aston's mother has signed the form of permission to give him the electric shock. So we see a family is also acting like a society. This suggests the destiny of an individual at the hands of his family. Aston tries to make the room organized but fails. His struggle to occupy a suitable place in this harsh world is presented here, but finally as a person he fails. He is confined psychologically in this place. He gives Davies shelter and also the offer of a caretaker. But Davies is the opportunist, who abuses the humanity of Aston. He is betrayed by Davies.

Mick is known for his dominance and aggressiveness. As Aston's younger brother, he exercises power in the room. The play's power dynamics are greatly influenced by his assertive nature. He has understood the abusive nature of Davies. Though we do not see the brotherly affection visible between these two brothers, but we can understand the hidden feelings. When Mick discloses his plan about this flat, Davies says, "Who would live there?" (Pinter, The Caretaker 97) Mick answers that he and his brother. So they do not communicate verbally with one another, but they have emotional attachment. It reflects Pinter's opinion stated by Martin Esslin in his book *Pinter: The Playwright*, "I think, that we communicate only too well, in our silence." (39) Mick examines Davies but never gives him the option of living with them. Davies is just the intruder for Mick. Mick's future plan is also not executed. Pinter's characters are confined in their harsh present situations.

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Davis is the old man in this play. He is socially abused. The situation makes him the exploiter also. He never feels content with other people. He does seem to grumble a lot and takes advantage of Aston's simplicity. His goal is to persuade the owner to allow him to live in that flat. He has been given the shelter by Aston, but he does not consider him as a friend. He also says to Mick that Aston does not have feelings. Aston tries to provide him all the necessary materials, but Davies plans to expel Aston from his own flat. Davies is the victim, who suffers from post-war identity crisis. He hides his true identity. He always says that he has some reference papers in Sidcup. But he never goes there. His character explores the existential confinement of an old person presented by the playwright. The words from him in the play, " Listen …if I…got down…if I was to …get my papers…would you…would you let…would you…if I got down…and got my…"(Pinter, The Caretaker 125) suggest his utter helplessness. Aston remains silent to this words, and that create a pensive atmosphere in the play.

In summary, Harold Pinter examines the concept of imprisoned souls in three of his plays: *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Caretaker*. He uses great effort to create settings, language, and power dynamics in his plays that represent the complexity of human existence. His plays feature emotionally and physically constrained individuals. The characters explore the common theme of human fragility as they struggle with their fears, and insecurities within the constraints of their circumstances. Pinter's skill lies in his ability to turn comparatively ordinary situations into provocative examinations of the human sufferings, forcing audiences to challenge the realities of internal and external limitations that are a part of everyday existence.

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