Pinter and Shepard: Two Representative Dramatists

There can be seen both points of convergence and divergence in the dramaturgy and weltanschauung of Pinter and Shepard. Though England and America are two countries and continents apart, they have several elements of culture in common right from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers. This trans-Atlantic exchange of cultures reflects in the words of the playwrights, in spite of the artistic identity they retain in their works.

Both Pinter and Shepard turned to writing plays after considerable experience of acting. Born just more than a decade apart, they still share comparable experiences and world views. “Since World War II, dramatic form has been in a constant flux . . .” (McTeague 129). While the climatic condition of the post-war experiences prompted Pinter to experiment with theatrical art, the experiments with Off-Off-Broadway plays in the 60s of America helped Shepard to write plays in an offbeat style.

If Pinter witnessed the atrocities of the Second World War in his teens, Shepard witnessed the turbulent decade of the 60s of post-war America. Born in low middle class families, both playwrights had to face hardships engendered by poverty and unemployment. Pinter belonged to a generation of “angry young men” in England, as did Shepard in America. War-time anxiety was one of the dominant feelings that made Pinter feel apprehensive about the outside; and the neurotic life of the 60s made Shepard feel fearful about the inside also. This explains why Pinter’s characters are always afraid of going out from their room and Shepard’s characters feel trapped within themselves.

What Shepard does is reveal through his writing (and to some extent his acting) a vision of America that is cutting comic, and, most important, tragic. His world is populated by gangsters and farmers,
rock stars and cowboys, gamblers and movie stars and people of myth. (Hamill 78)

Though America was recuperating in the '60s from the damages done by the War, and was improving financially, her interference in Vietnam war raised a hornet's nest around her ears. As a concomitant to this war, there emerged a cultural revolutionary movement known as counterculture which marked this period as a time of frustration in American social history. This frustration of the youth gradually led them to the specious remedy of drug addiction. This situation gave birth to a sect of young men who called themselves the beat generation, characterised by neurotic anxiety.

The anxiety of Pinter's characters is real and Shepard's is neurotic. Pinter's characters, the creations, of an author who lived through the anxiety-ridden life of a war-stricken people, Shepard's characters, a part of the neurotic life of the America of the 60s, and this differentiation is clearly reflected in the anxiety of these characters.

Pinter and Shepard have much in common in their perception of characterisation. To Pinter a character is "unidentified and unidentifiable," and to Shepard there is no such a thing as character. About the obscure past of the characters in the plays since the Second World War, McTeague comments, "[they] present [characters] with an absence of history, behaviour that is frequently contradictory or unexplainable, hidden and often unknown motives (even to the characters), and an absence of smooth-flowing, causally connected motivational units" (129). Shepard once said "In fact I preferred a character that was constantly unidentifiable, shifting through the actor . . ." (qtd. in Hamill 98).

Certain specific concerns recur in the plays of Pinter and Shepard as leitmotif. Their main concern is the human predicament in the context of modern life. Man's loneliness, alienation, confrontation with his drives and moral values,
socio-political injustice, exploitation at many levels, the basic threats to existence, ontological problems, wars and the problems they engender, neurotic perversions in personality, relationships and the sexual and non-sexual problems involved in them are issues that preoccupy the two playwrights. Under the influence of existential philosophy, Pinter draws the image of man confining himself to his room as a hide-out in this insecure world. To the characters of Pinter, the outside world is a threat to their existence. Shepard characters on the other hand are always exposed to threats, and a cosy room is not strong enough to shelter or to give protection to them in this world. Neither the inside of a room nor the outside of it can protect Shepard characters and they find themselves in a prison—a prison within and without, where they are irredeemable.

There is similarity of perception between the two playwrights about the mystery of the universe. As Katherine Burkman says, “the drama of Harold Pinter evolves in an atmosphere of mystery” (3). An atmosphere of mystery pervades the plays of Sam Shepard too. As Michael Earley argues, “Sam Shepard takes it for granted that the mystery is insoluble and will forever leave its imprint strewn throughout the imaginative landscape of both mind and body” (132). In his plays can be seen an effort to mix this sense of mystery with a tinge of comedy. As Kimbal King comments, “The comedy and mystery which Shepard dramatizes reflect the innate chaos of man’s nature and society” (Introduction xi).

Their perception of politics too finds expression in the plays of Pinter and Shepard in different ways. Ever since Pinter started writing plays, he has been concerned with politics and social problems. To a certain extent, Shepard too shares this interest. Pinter’s early plays like The Birthday Party and The Dumb Waiter express anti-authoritarian sentiments. Shepard is also aware of the threat posed by
authoritarianism in the 60s of America. While Pinter is rather explicit in its expression, Shepard’s treatment of the subject remains implicit. Pinter admits his political interest when he speaks about it in an early interview with Lawrence M. Bensky, saying “politics do bore me, though I recognize they are the response for a good deal of suffering” (Interview: “Violence . . .” 3). The influence of the counter culture of the ’60s of America is evident in Shepard. His play The Unseen Hand can be said to be his reflections on the political vicissitudes of that time. In a sense, the play can be said to depict the authoritarian instinct to keep others under control. Ron Mottram comments that “The Unseen Hand is a science fantasy western parable about freedom, partly intended as a response to the constrictions of the political environment in the late 1960s and the growing pressures of Shepard’s artistic success” (69).

Though neither Pinter nor Shepard openly admitted the influence of any school of psychology or any particular psychologist, their plays reveal the powerful influence of contemporary psychological insights into human nature. And about Shepard’s plays, Leslie Wade argues that they “evoke a fear of being pinioned, a paranoia of groupings, and a profound opposition to commitment” (25). This, and the preoccupation with anxiety, point to a persisting interest in psychology.

In spite of the fundamental difference in the presentation of these insights, both these playwrights show similarities in certain techniques of presentation. While Pinter has evolved a personal idiom which is popularly known as ‘Pinteresque,’ Shepard too has found his own unique idiom of innovations and experiments in the theatre. With the experience of screen-writing, playwrights have borrowed
techniques from film also. In the extreme level of employing fantasy in their plays, they owe a lot to films. As Robert Coe observes, "Shepard's originality clearly stands at a certain distance from conventional literary tradition: The early plays took the form of action paintings, with an Expressionistic, apocalyptic roughness . . ." (58).

Pinter in his plays, frequently resorts to 'pauses' and 'silences' as a means of effective communication. He makes these 'pauses' and 'silences' articulate what is inexpressible in human beings. Shepard too faces the challenge of communication in his plays, but the method he employs is different. He gives his audience a conglomeration of images which speak more effectively than words. Discussing the technique of Shepard’s profuse use of images, Gay Gibson Cima compares his plays to the artist Rauschenberg’s “combines.” Rauschenberg uses the technique of collages for “disrupting the viewer’s expectations with regard to the nature and significance of his work, and constantly frustrating the spectator’s search for a definitive frame” (67). Something comparable happens with Shepard’s theatrical images, “His form is often anarchic, always surprising, yet there is a moral sense brooding behind the dazzling surface of action and language” (Hamill 78). While Pinter makes effective use of an interplay of realist and post-realist methods, Shepard relies more on methods closer to expressionism and fantasy.

One of the characteristics of these two playwrights is that their plays create a mythical atmosphere. This comes from their concept of myth which, in their view, is engendered by a mysterious universe. Katherine H. Burkman argues:

Pinter lends himself to ritual or mythical examination more than many of his contemporaries, partly because he focuses continually on the primitive qualities which lurk beneath the civilised veneer of modern life and erupt into that life, and partly because of his determination to confront the mysterious, unsolvable regions
If Pinter thus uses myth as a manifestation of his sense of mystery, Shepard expresses his sense of mystery through the mythical quality of his plays. 'Myth' according to Shepard is a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula ("Language . . . " 217). In this sense, Pinter and Shepard are mythographers and mythoclasts. They make and mar myths.

In the expression of violence in their plays, there are certain points of comparison contrast and. Violence is an obsession with both these dramatists. Both of them present it on the stage primarily as a manifestation of the anxiety of their characters. As, John Orr and Dragon Klaic argue, “terrorism has vital connections to drama for two reasons. The first, as we have reiterated, is the violent and often macabre nature of its theatricality which cannot fail to attract our best dramatists”(10).

In Pinter, most often the characters become devastatingly violent at the climactic stage of the play; in Shepard the characters at times become violent but their violence in the end becomes harmless. In Pinter’s early plays the expected catastrophe cannot be evaded by the characters. They end with the death of some characters or with the expectation of something ominous. In Shepard, bullets come out of the gun but they do not hurt anybody. The violence in Shepard is, as John Orr and Dragon Klaic write, “against poverty” (2). In Pinter’s plays the element of violence has the potential of creating the atmosphere of menace and the threat it poses is realised at the end. The violence in Shepard is defused at the end.

Besides violence, they employ other techniques for presenting the anxiety of their characters. Some techniques employed by Pinter for this are comparable to the techniques of Shepard. Pinter’s characters, when overwhelmed by anxiety, talk too much, and Shepard’s characters on such occasions start telling stories. This technique of telling stories is a modification of Pinter’s technique of making his characters talk
too much. Shepard's characters, when they tell stories, become very eloquent and speak at length. This technique of making characters speak for a long while in the pattern of monologues can be found in the early plays of Pinter also.

Yet another feature common to the expression of anxiety in their plays is the technique of repetition. Pinter uses it frequently whereas Shepard makes his characters strut only on occasions when they are emotionally excited.

Both these dramatists use fantasy as an effective medium of expression. Pinter finds "no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false" (Introduction "Writing for . . ." 11). Wetzsteon comments that, "Shepard realizes that fantasies constitute a great deal of our conscious life, and they are thus as real as, and often more revealing than, our behaviour." (256),

Rosemary Jackson notes:

Themes of the fantastic in literature revolve around this problem of making visible the un-seen, of articulating the un-said. Fantasy establishes, or discovers, an absence of separating distinctions, violating a 'normal', or common sense perspective which represents reality as constituted by discrete but connected units." (48)

These features of fantasy are frequently employed by Shepard as a means for the expression of anxiety. In his early plays the characters always live in fantasy. The mice of 4-H Club and the crab-louse of Red Cross exist only in the imagination of the characters. The Maid in Red Cross swims on the bed only in imagination when Jim gives her coaching in swimming. In The Unseen Hand the characters create a dream world. The Nogoland they speak of in the play exists nowhere but in their imagination. In Action the characters speak of their prison and their incarceration, which too exist only in their imagination.
Evasiveness is a feature quite often observed in Pinter’s characters. They are not gregarious and they do not keep their presence of mind in the company of others. This is also a manifestation of their anxiety. In Shepard the characters are in self-confinement. Nobody knows where they are and they do not try to find a way out. In 4-H Club, the characters are in a kitchen; in Red Cross, they are in a cabin in a place that is unknown to them. In The Unseen Hand, the characters are on a highway in Azusa where nothing turns up in particular. In Action, the characters are in an apartment where they do not reveal their identity or the reason why they are forced to remain there. They consider themselves to be in a prison, nor do they hope that they can get out of it, for they think that their body itself constitutes a prison.

There is as much contrast as there is comparison between Pinter and Shepard. Belonging to different socio-political and cultural backgrounds, these playwrights show certain differences in their temperamental attitude to their art and its techniques. Even while Pinter and Shepard write about similar issues, they make use of different methods and techniques in the presentation of their concerns.

Though both Pinter and Shepard seek new means of theatrical expression, these playwrights cannot entirely escape the tradition of western theatre. Critics have traced the influence of several European playwrights on these two. Biographers of Pinter emphasise his vast reading of classical novelists like James Joyce, Fydor Dostoevski and Franz Kafka and dramatists like August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Anton Chekhov and Samuel Beckett. Edward Morgan draws a parallel between Strindberg and Pinter, arguing that “Harold Pinter, especially has expressed, certain truths about the individual’s encounter with the world that embedded in Strindberg’s dramatic practice” (qtd. in Morgan 161). Richard Gilman sums up the influence on Shepard as “the developments in arts like painting and dance, and with the
revolutionary changes in drama that had taken place in France with Beckett and Ionesco and, more modestly, in England with the early Pinter. Albee’s first plays, Gelber’s Connection, and the work of the living theatre. . . .” (Introduction xiv)

Regarding the influences on Shepard, Michiko Kakutani comments that, “his gothic portraits of the family recall Faulkner; the menacing atmosphere, Pinter; the sense of absurd, Beckett . . .” (“Myths, Dreams . . .” 26). Though Pinter and Shepard have the influence of Samuel Beckett in common and they have existentialist problems as an obsession in their plays, each attempts to find a mode of expression that is his own. While Pinter writes in his own way with a marginal influence of Samuel Beckett and John Osborne, Shepard writes under the influence of Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams, often relying on expressionistic techniques like presenting plays with a profusion of images. This is why Stanley Kauffmann says “Sam Shepard is, to put it somewhat inaccurately, the Tennessee Williams of today” (22).

The striking similarity between Pinter’s The Homecoming and Shepard’s Buried Child has been pointed out by many critics. Clive Barnes points out the influence of Pinter and Beckett on Shepard’s Action. He says, “Action is a far more considerable piece. In fact, its bleakness reminds one of Harold Pinter, very slightly, and particularly, of Samuel Beckett, with the same kind of nihilistic humanism” (54:1).

Unlike Pinter, Shepard as a playwright of Off-Off-Broadway in the 60s is obsessed with the apocalypse. Anxiety in Shepard is, to a great extent, engendered by the apocalyptic vision of the dramatist. Even the paranoic behaviour of some characters in his plays is the outcome of this vision. In Pinter we can see lengthy dialogues at times and these dialogues become long monologues in Shepard and at
times, they assume the form of a story. It can be said that the long dialogues in Pinter were the nascent forms of monologues that are seen in Shepard. Pinter's language is true to the dialect that we hear around us in London; Shepard concentrates on the absurdities in it.

In the use of images Pinter is a minimalist; but Shepard a profusion of powerful images. Shepard's ideas, in his early plays, emerge from the conglomeration of images and hallucinatory episodes. Pinter presents an intruder in his early plays which generally contributes to the sense of menace. In Shepard's characters menace takes its origin within themselves. This menace threatens and harasses them from within. There are more dissimilarities than similarities between Pinter and Shepard in the concept of menace. However, both employ certain common techniques like minimal communication, mystifying episodes, violence, and occasionally, intruders and interrogation. But Shepard does not use minimal communication to create the atmosphere of menace. His characters most often speak torrents of language.

Mystifying episodes are common in the two playwrights. Both are conscious of a Kafkaesque threatening world and the perception of it creates the atmosphere of menace. Violence is yet another element common to them. The violence in Pinter is real and destructive; but in Shepard it proves to be harmless in the end. As Charles Bachman argues:

What Shepard's ambivalent attitude toward violence, menace and power does result in throughout his dramas is the following pattern of action: Menacing, potentially violent characters or forces are introduced, only to have the terror they create defused either by an avoidance of the threatened violence, or vitiation of its effect through audience alienation devices . . . . Such a pattern is in contrast, for
example, to that employed in Pinter's plays, in which menace is almost never defused. (406)

Both Pinter and Shepard exhibit a kind of despondency due to the erosion of human values. In particular, their plays show the repercussions of the Second World War and the consequent threats to peaceful existence. They deal with anxiety as a major issue of modern life. Both are of the view that the anxiety inherent in human nature is mysterious in its origin; but once it is manifest, it creates a feeling of menace. In the modern context, anxiety in life is multiplied as the sophisticated changes in life act as a catalyst in this chemistry and this poses a menace that is inexplicable. Modern life engenders very complicated maladjustments in human personality which give rise to a constant state of menace that again abets the anxiety in man.

Menace is another major theme of their plays. Their characters always face many threats; but the elements that work behind them are different in each of these playwrights. The menace in Pinter plays is external and in Shepard it is internal. What these two playwrights do is to highlight the gravity and intricacy of these problems. The efforts of the characters to dispel the feeling of anxiety and menace make things more complicated and they are bound to reconcile themselves to their lot which is beyond their control.

These playwrights reflect on their insights into human psyche and its fundamental problems in an analytic manner. They analyse socio-economic and political aspects of human life that lie behind various problems, never attempting to suggest any solution. The fact that these playwrights—one from England and the other from America—write plays with similar problems announces that these are very common in western societies. In a close analysis of these plays, it becomes apparent
that these are problems not only of the West but of this world—a ubiquitous phenomenon.

Pinter and Shepard internationalise these problems by exposing them for analysis, though they do not suggest any remedy. Their plays, besides creating a new sensibility, expose the various facets of the changing world.
Works Cited


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