In Search of a New Language of Theatre: Pinter and Shepard

In Virginia Woolf’s novel The Voyage Out, the character Hewet says, “I want to write a novel about Silence . . . the things people don’t say. But the difficulty is immense” (262). This passage sums up the challenge felt by a writer faced with the problem of the inadequacy of language. A difficulty faced by most writers of all times, this was more acutely felt by the post-war writers than writers of any other period. Modern and post-modern dramatists face the challenge with diverse experiments in theatre. Harold Pinter (b. 1930) and Sam Shepard (b. 1943) are two living dramatists who experiment with innovative methods to communicate what cannot be expressed in ordinary language. They have been in search of “a multiple-style dramatic language for plays that speak to a modern audience” (Kennedy 215). As Peter Brook remarks, this search is for a language that can speak to “audience at a depth of feeling that precedes the dissection of man into social and psychological categories, speaking to man in his wholeness” (Roose-Evans 103).

Contemporary playwrights share a rich tradition of theatre shaped by several western, especially European, playwrights and theorists. There have been numerous experiments in theatre in Europe since the last decade of the nineteenth century, and the experimental theatre has, in its search for an effective medium of expression, tried a variety of innovations in theme and language. However, as Andrew Kennedy comments: “Historically, these types of language-consciousness have made themselves felt comparatively late in the English theatre—many years after they had begun to germinate in European culture” (4).

Naturalism in drama was partly an attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by the medium of language. Besides the changes it brought about in the writer’s vision, it “imposed a severe limitation on the resources of the word in the
theatre” and some playwrights tried to use a “natural sounding language—the language of men speaking to men” (Kennedy 2). Naturalism, like realism, to a certain extent, tried to reproduce life as it is; but both failed to overcome the limitations of language. The failure of language was a problem that persisted in post-naturalist plays also. And the failure of naturalism led to the origin of symbolism, imagism, and expressionism. William W. Demastes makes a clear distinction between a realist and non-realist plays, saying that, “if appearances are realistic, then the play is labelled realistic; and if appearances are altered, then the work is labelled symbolist, expressionist or avant-garde” (5). But Martin Esslin holds that “the Expressionism of the 1920s, Brecht’s epic theatre of the Thirties and Forties, the Theatre of the Absurd of the Fifties and Sixties were still essentially both continuations of and reactions against Naturalism” (Esslin, “Naturalism . . .” 67).

Modern drama shares several of the targets of realist and naturalist dramatists and draws from many of their experiments till date. But the uniqueness is seen in the fact that even those early experiments are transmuted to produce a new effect on the stage. Still, “a spirit of free enquiry, totally unprejudiced, unburdened by preconceived ideas” (Esslin, “Naturalism . . .” 70) that is considered the hallmark of naturalism has been retained in modern plays also.

Several major dramatists have contributed to the dynamic developments in drama. They have tried various methods for overcoming the limitations of the medium in conveying the most intensely felt of their experiences. This tradition can be traced back to the Scandinavian dramatists Henrick Ibsen (1828-1906) and August Strindberg (1849-1912), prominent among the naturalists who developed the drama of psychological realism. Ibsen once took a decision to turn to “the very much more difficult art of writing the genuine plain language spoken in real life” (qtd. in
Kennedy 17). His appearance in theatre marked the end of melodrama and romantic drama. His plays struck at the complacency of his society, and revolutionised the pattern of thought in men and women. Strindberg, “the most produced of modern dramatists in Germany,” (Morgan 162) immediately before the First World War, in his preface to Miss Julie gives his manifesto of naturalism. Quite unlike Ibsen, Strindberg shows “a variety of dramatic method and purpose, and an immense range of technical experiment ...” (Williams, IB 79). The early part of his works is an attempt at the naturalism of Ibsen and also a reaction against the then prevalent romanticism. The influence of symbolism and expressionism can be seen in his work of the later period. Some plays written in that period represent the characteristic conflict between reality and illusion. In the best of his plays, he presents a new structure of feelings.

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) is associated with “indirect action” and has been frequently interpreted as a naturalist. In The Cherry Orchard, he makes an attempt to come to terms with life by living without owning an orchard and its servants. The newness in his dialogue is a rhythm which conveys what is not said by the characters. His meeting with Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was momentous and productive. Elena Polyakova comments, “Stanislavsky recognised that it was Chekhov’s theatrical instincts which brought them together. Even more important was the shared worldview which made the combination of Chekhov’s text and Stanislavsky’s interpretations so unique” (156).

Luigi Pirandello’s (1867-1936) Six Characters in Search of an Author is “the pivotal play in the modern theatre. It reveals in the starkest terms possible the meaning of the realistic drama of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov which leads into it and theatre which leads out of it” (Kerman 26). The Chekhov-Stanislavsky friendship
presented some pleasant surprises in the theatre. Their plays presented changes in a thrilling manner. The spectators became observers. This marked the beginning of the relationship between stage and auditorium. Following Moscow Arts Theatre, a new movement known as ‘the avant-garde’ came into existence as a reaction against traditional theatres.

The French theatre artists Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), one a dramatist and the other a theorist, were the first representatives of the avant-garde movement in France. “Artaud and his fellow Surrealists believed in a modified form of Buddhism. They craved, and Artaud in particular, for a state of non-being or nirvana, in which suffering no longer exists” (Knapp 51). His attention was focussed on presenting the irrational. Alfred Jarry’s plays did exactly the same, and Artaud was “drawn to his works because of their spontaneous irrationality, their static and grotesque qualities, as well as their mystical aspects” (Knapp 62).

The concept of stage language underwent a total change with Artaud. According to Artaud’s manifesto “The Theatre of Cruelty,” the dramatist should “choose subjects and themes corresponding to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our age” (qtd. in Bentley 66). The theatre, he says, is “the externalisation of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all perverse possibilities of the mind are localised” (Bentley 76). Artaud says in his The Theatre and Its Double:

A direct communication will be established between the audience and the show, between the actors and audience, from the very fact that the audience is seated in the centre of the action, is encircled and furrowed by it. (Artaud 74)

Words, which enjoyed the position of prime importance in drama till then; began to be considered just “one of many theatrical vehicles; to be combined with lighting,
gestures, music, sound, facial expressions, etc" (Knapp 115). Even the other vehicles of theatre were no more to be presented in a conventional manner. Artaud wanted to give the audience “a sense of the fragmentary and isolated nature of life as experienced in a series of diverse visual moments” (Knapp 117). He strongly held that “the audience must not see a performance as a concentrated whole, but rather as a succession of fragments or moments isolated in space” (qtd. in Knapp 117). It can be said that Artaud’s object of attack was ‘reason’ in theatrical art; and this was why he stood with the Surrealists. His special interest in Alfred Jarry points to this. Eric Sellin points out that “Jarry’s more technical arguments concerning the eradication of the old ‘language’ of the stage and the development of ‘new’ interested him (61).

Artaud’s theories on theatre, acting and language found enthusiastic followers among modern directors and actors.

Jarry’s Ubu Roi, a major event in this movement and modelled on Macbeth, depicted characters like puppets, and presented scatological expressions. His series of ‘Ubu’ plays explored, and experimented with, theatrical possibilities. To Eric Sellin “King Ubu and The Ghost Sonata are archetypes of the modern fantasy theatre which in slight variations has been called everything from, ‘surrealist drama’ (Appollinaire) to ‘anti-theatre’ (Ionesco) and ‘theatre of the absurd’ (Martin Esslin)” (71).

The Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski (1933-99), author of Towards a Poor Theatre and the founder of a theatrical laboratory in Poland, emphasised the actor’s gift of himself in the performance rather than the make-up, scenery, lighting changes etc. So his actors “learned to involve their whole physique in their reaction to stimulus before bringing the voice into the play” (Hayman, AA 151). In an attempt to achieve a sharing of experience between the spectator and the actor, he, in his early works, experimented with rituals in performances. Rejecting the term ‘improvisation,’ he
advocated sketches for the actors in their performance because all rituals “appear to be based exclusively on spontaneity” (qtd. in Kumiega 133).

In America, Joseph Chaikin (b. 1935) is considered a true follower of Artaud, the “natural son” after Brook and Grotowski (Hayman, AA 155). Chaikin has been a friend and collaborator of Sam Shepard in the production of some of his plays in Open Theatre.

Bretholt Brecht (1898-1956), under the influence of expressionism, developed a kind of drama that has grand and universal outlook of life presented in a serious manner. Because of the universality and the grandeur of that theatre, it was called “Epic Theatre.” It rejected many of the traditional methods of Aristotelian theories of theatre, especially the concept of the identification of the audience with characters and the cathartic effect. Instead of these, Brecht recommended and emphasised alienation or verfremdungseffekt. Towards the end of his life, when he returned to Germany from America, he founded a new theatre known as the “Berliner Ensemble” or “Ensemble Theatre” as it is known today. The effect of these two kinds of theatres is still felt. According to Roose-Evans, while Grotowski’s aim is to disturb the spectator on a very deep level, Brecht was concerned to make the spectator think (147).

Several playwrights experimented with poetic drama, and it became another experiment in theatrical language. As T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) himself put it, “It will only be ‘poetry’ when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that the poetry becomes the natural utterance, because it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all” (Eliot 67).

The 1940s and ’50s were periods of further experiments in the theatre, periods of “extreme confusion and eclecticism, made more so by a genuine burst of vitality and energy” (Williams, “NED” 26). The innovations of ‘free theatre’ or ‘independent
theatre' generally attained the form of a movement, and challenged the so-called realistic drama for its inadequacy in expressing inarticulate experience.

Modern dramatists assume that the “surface of life is often deceptive and that to touch reality it is necessary to penetrate this surface” (Williams, “NED” 28). To them the *individual* and *his* problems are more important than the *society* and *its* problems. As Eugene Ionesco says:

No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa. (qtd. in Esslin, TA 126-27)

As the ‘free theatre’ got its foothold, and the audience became familiar with its actions and speeches, the plays of the majority theatre were felt to be artificial and far removed from real life. The new generation of dramatists showed a protest against the complacent pre-war life. “Absurd” and “Angry” were two of them. “The assimilation of the Absurd was slow” . . . and “another kind of theatre appeared that was vociferous enough to make it appear to be the only important one which has been called “Angry” (Hinchliffe 24). John Osborne’s (1929-94) *Look Back in Anger* (1956), considered a landmark in the history of British drama, is also a representative play of “The Angry Theatre.” Osborne, a typical representative of the “Angry Young Men,” deplored “the new non-verbal experiments—happenings and mixed media—which are supplanting and corrupting verbal drama” (Kennedy 198) and introduced the use of broken syntax in a repetitive tone which was later taken as model by Pinter and others.

Unlike earlier drama, modern drama presupposes a theatrical competence for the viewer/reader to be able to understand a play. This is why it is said that
"performances can be properly understood only on the basis of a theatrical competence, more or less shared by performers and audience, comprising familiarity with the kinds of code and sub-code . . ." (Elam 87). Elam goes on to say: "It is with the spectator, in brief, that theatrical communication begins and ends" (97). It is argued that "since the first production of Look Back in Anger in May 1956, [the history of British drama] has reflected a similar move away from a realistic approach to subjects . . . towards a more liberal view both of material . . . and of the techniques" ("The Reaction Against Realism." 400).

Commenting on the future of English Drama, Laurence Kitchin said in 1960 that, "The future inheritors of a context fit for the English drama are scattered over television, films, university groups, theatre-in-the-round and amateur fringe ventures. When they take over in proper buildings the results will be exciting" (21). The emergence of this new drama in England was the result of her contact with European drama. Ruby Cohn places the birth date of modern drama in 1887—"when Andre Antonine, the first modern director, opened the Theatre Libre in Paris, to stage the adaptations of realistic fiction" (Introduction 3). The assimilation of European theatre was facilitated by the internationalisation of the Paris theatre.

Herb Greer observes that "Where most playwrights before the mid-Fifties, had played for the audience in the traditional manner, the new crop began to play at the audience, to 'make them think'" (53). C. W. E. Bigsby and Malcolm Bradbury comment that "the English working class drama" got complicated by the growing influence of continental theatre, of foreign playwrights and companies, of Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, by the growth of fringe theatrical institutions; above all perhaps, by the impact of 'the Theatre of the Absurd,' and the shock of the London production of Samuel
The rise of the Theatre of the Absurd is a turning point in the history of modern drama: “Few spectacles in the history of theatre have been more amusing than the amusing Babel raised upon the grounds of absurd drama” (Oliver 3).

The real challenge before an absurdist is in depicting the monotony of life effectively. Samuel Beckett makes this challenge explicit when he expresses his helplessness: “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Interview “Three Dialogues . . .” 17). For facing this challenge, an absurdist resorts to representational plays employing expressionist techniques, allegory and irony. The technique of monologue, successfully used by Beckett, has been tried by Pinter and Shepard. Beckett offered it as “the perfect fusion of a particular human predicament and a particular dramatic language” (Kennedy 162). Shepard uses monologues in his plays as an expressionist technique and for this he is indebted to Beckett.

In the words of Walter Sorrel in his Facets of Comedy, “The Theatre of the Absurd, if properly dissected, is a dash of Dadaism mixed with a spoonful of surrealism, liberally seasoned with the explosive power of expressionism, thoroughly blended with double the amount of existentialism” (279). According to Edward Albee, “The Theatre of the Absurd, in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theatre, facing as it does man’s condition as it is, is the realistic theatre of our time . . . ”(148). The very same point of view is expressed by Enoch Brater when he says that “Once an audience comes to the theatre expecting the devices of the absurd, even more than a little inclined to their charm, the absurd doesn’t seem quite so absurd any more. Instead, ‘it all’ seems quietly reassuring, familiar—almost one is tempted to say, real” (295). The Theatre of the Absurd, writes Jerome Ashmore, “locates man in
an environment of mistakes, barriers, maladjustment, discord, stupidity, rejection, disintegration, futility, and darkness” (79).

Commenting on Beckett’s use of language, Andrew Kennedy points out that “The whole texture of Beckett’s language is created out of his ever-renewed sense of the failure of language” (135). Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, has inspired a host of dramatists to write plays that were later categorised by critics as ‘absurd.’ Even though many playwrights have repudiated the label of ‘absurd’ stuck on them, the impact of the absurd is still felt almost everywhere in world drama, influencing all European and American dramatists and directors, among them the English playwrights Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard (b.1937).

It was during the time of the First World War that American theatre “found its voice, not international, but peculiarly American and introverted and intense, part of its own avant-garde” (Bloom 3). A theatre group which moved to New York city and was very active there until 1929, the Provincetown Theatre, founded by Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) and her husband George Cramp Cook, “facilitated an erosion of that barrier between performer and audience” (Bigsby, CITAD 1: 16).

Eugene O’Neill, a major dramatist of this theatre, wrote obviously under the influence of Ibsen. But he established himself as a leading young playwright of America, when his Beyond the Horizon was performed as a Broadway debut in the 1920s, the play that won him the Pulitzer prize in 1921. “His characters are pressed to social and psychological extremes by experience” (Bigsby, MAD 14). The term expressionism “entered the vocabulary of American theatregoers in the spring of 1922 with the New York productions of Eugene O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape and George Kaiser’s From Morn to Midnight”(Valgemae, AG xii). This movement that started among German painters who aimed at penetrating “through life’s surface reality and
portray man's inner world" (Valgemae, AG 2), came to America as a wave that spread to 'almost every part of Europe.' As it goes deeper into human psyche, it probes into the problem of split personality. The absurdist playwrights adopt this technique as "a device of indirect communication" (Oliver 15).

The "Theatre Guild," helped by the work of Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959), Philip Barry (1896-1949), Robert Sherwood (1896-1955), and William Saroyan (1908-81) "developed major acting and directing talents and it took first-class theatre on the road to cities other than New York... it adopted an eclectic policy... It also spawned the Group Theatre" (Bigsby, CITAD 1: 158). Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), another influential playwright of the 1940s, "was from the beginning concerned with forging his own forms and exploring his own territory" (Bigsby, CITAD 1: 258).

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, even communist playwrights became silent and, to an extent, conformists, "between 1939 and 1945 no one kind of play was persistently cultivated, and no new theatrical movement became discernible" (Spiller 1330). Lillian Hellman's (1905-84) plays were some of the few popular ones during that period. Her Watch on the Rhine (1941) expresses her protest against the Nazis. The American audiences, especially those on Broadway, were willing to accept fantasy, symbolism, and such deviations from realism and naturalism. Thornton Wilder's extravaganza The Skin of Our Teeth, (1941) was a conspicuous success in this new line.

The only playwrights who stood out in the 1950s and the '60s were Tennessee Williams (1911-83), Arthur Miller (b.1915), and Edward Albee (b.1928). About Williams and Miller, Dorothy Parker observes:

Although very different in temperament and style, Williams and
Miller shared many common concerns—the discrediting of the “American Dream,” the isolation of the individual, even within the family, and his solitary search for values in a chaotic world. Both writers continued, with variations, the Ibsen/Chékhov tradition followed by the mainstream of American playwrights, with Williams leaning toward Chékhov in the veiling of prosaic things with a theatrical vision of beauty and sadness, and Miller tending more towards Ibsen’s social concerns, didactic realism and well crafted plots. (xi)

Albee is still noticed for his singularity among the trio. The influence of Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, and Pinter is very explicit in his plays. Known generally as an American absurdist, Albee wrote plays that disturb his audience. While first full-length play Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf was an embarrassing experience, his “Box is one of the most abstract plays ever written,” with “no action and no actors visible” (Hayman, TAT 149). If his Zoo Story seems to be realistic, his play The Sandbox, is less realistic.

C. W. E. Bigsby points out that at the centre of the plays written during this period, there was “the individual, anxious, suffering, threatened, equivocating, who remained a key to social meaning and cultural achievement. But virtually all these assumptions were challenged as the American theatre underwent major changes in the 1960s” (CITAD 3: ix).

The traditional concept of the actor’s function changed with Artaud. He and his colleagues “derided the ‘dictatorship of speech’ in modern drama, some practitioners have de-emphasised the role of the verbal text in favor of the creation of collages, scenarios, rituals or other non-verbal structures which give the actor and his
director a greater share of creative and lesser interpretative responsibility" (Benedetti 27).

The new generation of dramatists aim at expressing the inexpressible. In an attempt at an “extreme assertion of literal iconic identity . . . Julian Beck and Judith Malina claimed to be representing on stage precisely themselves, so that the similarity between sign and object became supposedly absolute” (Elam 23). Actually this was implied in Artaud’s dream of a ‘pure theatrical language’ freed from the tyranny of verbal discourse—a language of signs, gestures and attitudes having an ideographic value as they exist in certain unperverted pantomimes” (qtd. in Elam 69). This marked the beginning of the application of semiotic theories to theatrical performance. There developed a direct communicative interaction between the actor and the spectator. In Shepard’s 4-H Club the characters are cautious not to spray water on the stage, lest it should make the audience wet.

Under the influence of Artaud and Grotowski, Julian Beck and his wife Judith Malina established Living Theatre in 1959. James Roose-Evans comments: “In holding up their mirror to nature, the Living Theatre was reflecting those restless, wild, demoniac energies that lie so lightly beneath the urban and urbane veneer of our civilization” (105). As Artaud envisaged, the Living Theatre aimed at removing the barrier between the audience and the actor. So this theatre demanded active participation of the audience. Joseph Chaikin gave his actors a training called ‘worlds’ by which he made an attempt to “understand certain inner states which might be outside the actor’s range of experiences—such as paranoia or euphoria” (Roose-Evans 106). Responsible for the production of the plays of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Kenneth Rexroth (1905-82), Paul Goodman (1911-72), Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), it also tested the poetic sensibility of the audience by
staging the poetic plays of W. H. Auden (1907-73), Garcia Lorca (1898-1936), and T. S. Eliot. It contributed considerably to change the sensibility of the audience. In the Living Theatre, the audience felt a change from the familiar cerebral theatre of O’Neill and Miller.

Though Julian Beck was a director directly influenced by Artaud, there was a marked difference between the two; the Becks did not want to seek to deny the utility or value of words but to see them as only one means of communication . . . what the Living Theatre did create, firstly with The Connection, and The Brig in obedience to Gelber’s and Brown’s texts, and subsequently in Mysteries, in Frankenstein, Antigone, and Paradise New was a series of powerful images, plays in which character no longer sustained its conventional form or moral force in which the causalities implied by linear plot were abandoned in favour of the emotional verities established through shared experience, in which the gesture, the modulated sound, the anguished posture communicated what once had been compressed into a language which could not bear such a burden. (Bigsby, CITAD 3: 93-95)

When the Living Theatre was driven out of the country in 1963 by IRS (International Revenue Service), it was replaced by other theatres, but its impact still survives. As the Living Theatre disappeared, John Cage and others popularised Artaud and Grotowski. And these two great theorists of drama set the tone of American avant-garde theatre of the sixties.

The ’60s were very eventful in theatrical activities. Broadway, Off- Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway were centres of attraction for theatre artists. Besides making
Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller popular, Broadway introduced many known dramatists like Genet, Brecht, Beckett, Pirandello, Ibsen and Chekhov to American audience.

Off-Off-Broadway came into being in 1957, with the production of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, staged at a Greenwich Village Coffee house called ‘take 3.’ In a sense it was a reaction against Off-Broadway. In course of time, the Off-Off-Broadway also multiplied, with an amazing proliferation of theatre groups. Before the full-fledged Living Theatre came into being, another kind of performance known as “happenings” had been staged. It was Alan Kaprow who first coined the term to represent a presentation.

Off-Off-Broadway not only gave opportunity for new playwrights but was accommodating to the new techniques introduced by them. Open Theatre, Jack Poggi observes, has been “experimenting with ‘transformation’ from one kind of reality to another” (198). It was in this tradition that Sam Shepard started writing plays. It was the Theatre Genesis that opened in 1964 as a part of Off-Off-Broadway that gave Shepard a chance to stage his plays. And “the discovery of Shepard is its major achievement to date” (Smith 11).

The American avant-garde was an extension of Living Theatre, Open Theatre, The Performance Group, and Manhattan Project of the 60s. Recent plays in America experiment with methods of communication beyond language. They “exclude dialogue or use words minimally in favour of aural, visual and verbal imagery that calls for alternative modes of perception on the part of the audience” (Marranca x). Open Theatre which had Joseph Chaikin as the principal director and Jean-Claude Van Itallie (b.1936) as its principal writer, emphasised improvisation to get natural rhythm and sound for dramatic speech. The plays of Van Itallie, Sam Shepard, and
Megan Terry, performed there, have elements of the absurd. This theatre remained in America until it was announced to be closed by Chaikin.

The most important production of the "Performance Group," organised by Richard Schechner in 1967, was Dionysus in 69. In its performance, Schechner made good use of what he had learnt from Grotowski, and the audience also participated in the performance. Dionysus in 69 can be considered a paradigm of performance theatre.

David Mamet too has written plays like Albee's, in poetic language. Almost all of his characters share the feeling of nothingness. His American Buffalo, an Obie winner, depicts the junk of American society. It presents violence as a contemporary reality, but his plays appear to be simple. He has admitted the influence of Beckett and Pinter on him, especially the influence of some plays of Pinter is strong and direct on his craft.

Theatre of Vietnam expresses the struggle for women's rights. Almost all playwrights of commitment of this decade opposed Vietnam War. S. N. Behrman, Arthur Miller, Robert Lowell were among those who opposed the war. Yale Theatre, the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theatre and The Performance Group reacted to the problem of war.

Esther Harriot observes that, "From the viewpoint of the 1980s, the rebellion in the theatre was as short-lived as the rebellion in society" (xii). Still there were several theatres. San Francisco Mime Theatre, founded by R. G. Davis in 1959, was a reaction against the class system in the U.S. "Bread and Puppet Theatre," established by Peter Schumam in 1961, was given that name because of his belief that "the theatre should be as basic as bread" (qtd. in Bigsby, CITAD 3: 344). It needed no trained
actors. A narrator and some manipulators were the performers. When there is no manipulation of the puppets, narration is given. It was essentially a street theatre. El Teatro Campesino was founded in 1965 by Luis Valdez. In a way “during the seventies and eighties . . . experiments of innovators being recapitulated by a multiplicity of different groups” (Innes 222).

By the year 1939, with the collapse of the Federal Theatre, American Negro Theatre (ANT) was established by Archer Hill. “Three Black playwrights, for whom Blackness is an obsessive theme, have written memorable plays in the last two decades,” says Ruby Cohn (NAD 95), and the major Black playwrights are Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and Adrienne Kennedy. Another curious kind of theatre was Gay Theatre which was founded in 1978 by Joe Cino, and a Lesbian Community Theatre was also established in East Housing in the same year itself by Julia Miles. This dynamism of American theatre is still alive and the search for a language is still a burning concern of every theatre artist anywhere in the world.

In this “Age of Anxiety,” the study of it and its influence on human relations and the changes they bring about in society are very pertinent to the changing world at large. Anxiety and menace, common phenomena in the modern world, are interconnected, one giving rise to the other. Freudian psychology sees two types of anxiety in man: one neurotic and the other real. These two types play a decisive role in creating a sense of menace in man. Though the characters in the early plays of Pinter and Shepard are not neurotic to a pathological level, they do seem to be abnormal beings at times. The method in their madness is interesting to study and rewarding in scope.

Modern drama criticism has given the two playwrights several labels, but they reject these labels. Pinter declares himself to be “a very traditional dramatist”
Shepard says that his writing too "could be called realism, but not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff" (Interview "Chubb et al. . ." 208), and quoting Richard Gilman, Lynda Hart comments that Shepard's plays remain "resistant to conceptualization or categorization" (qtd. in Hart 1). Patrick J. Fennell observes that Shepard's early period evinces a post-absurdist vision ("Shepard's Lost . ."4). Toby Silverman Zinman places Shepard's plays with super-realist paintings (423).

Martin Esslin tries to look at Pinter's plays as absurd plays. Both these playwrights are very much indebted to the Absurdists in their dramaturgy, but their plays do not fully fit in with the popular categories of modern plays.

The problems they present on the stage are real in the sense that they present what they perceive as real. Still the presentation of these problems is quite strange and shocking. In the words of Hugh Hunt et al., "In an important sense Pinter is a realistic dramatist, it is simply that he happens to see reality from an unfamiliar aspect" (250).

Though the theatrical experiments of both Pinter and Shepard received only a cold response at first, they have drawn the attention of almost all critics of modern drama. The plays of Pinter have been analysed and interpreted by critics like Martin Esslin, Irving Wardle, Simon Trussler, Arnold HInchliffe, Austen E. Quigley, Katherine H. Burkman, Ronald Hayman, John Russell Taylor, William Baker, Stephen Ely Thabachnick, Guido Almansi, Simon Henderson, Bernard F. Dukore, and Stephen H. Gale. These critics have assessed the literary and artistic merit of Pinter's plays associating them with contemporary philosophy and psychology.

The approach of all these critics has been to place Pinter among the Absurdists. It cannot be ignored that "Pinter has adopted certain conventions and techniques of the absurd dramatists, especially in early plays like The Room and The
Dumb Waiter. But he stands outside the main current of this theatre” (Pesta 64).

Walter Kerr and Stephen H. Gale connect his plays with existentialist philosophy. Katherine H. Burkman sees the ritualistic undertone in his plays. Michael Billington makes a biographical criticism of the plays and finds the bearings of his personal experiences upon the plays.

Harold Pinter, an English Jew, emerged as a notable playwright on the English theatre scene in the '50s, when it was vibrant with the experimental plays of the avant-garde, both French and English. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* produced in London in 1955, John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) were shocking experiences for the British audience. Accustomed to the sense of *deja vu* of the plays of Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan, the British audiences were waiting for innovations on the stage, when Pinter came with his one-act play, *The Room*. This play invoked mixed reaction from the audience and critics. Some accused Pinter of being obscure on the stage, while others tended to club him with the other available avant-garde playwrights.

Even as a boy, Pinter had shown his penchant for writing, trying his hand at poetry under the pseudonym ‘Harold Pinta,’ and later making an attempt at writing a novel, *Dwarfs*, which was a failure (though afterwards he adapted it for the stage under the same name). Besides these, in 1947, he started his profession as an actor in repertory assuming the stage name ‘David Baron.’ However, he was able to establish his identity in the British theatre only as a playwright.

Among the favourable critical responses to his plays, Harold Hobson’s review in *The Sunday Times* of the original production of *The Room* at Bristol University, and Irving Wardle’s article in *Encore*, were the most notable ones. Martin Esslin writes that Pinter’s “knack of handling naturalism has led some critics to class Pinter
with the social realists among the new wave of British playwrights, the 'kitchen-sink school' ("Godot and His . . ." 66). Seeing the undeniable influence of Beckett on him,— Philip Barnes observes that "His plays have gained international acclaim and together with Beckett he is the central British playwright of what Martin Esslin has called the Theatre of the Absurd" (182). But current critical approaches try to identify the difference between the two. Martin S. Regal declares that, "[Pinter's] two most recent plays, Party Time and Moonlight, are sufficient proof that he has not chosen to follow Beckett's example" (7).

Whatever may be the labels fixed on him, Pinter repudiates them all and asserts that he is "a very traditional playwright" (Interview "Violence . . ." 3). However, he cannot totally escape labels. The sense of threat experienced by some characters in his early plays makes the plays 'comedies of menace;' the violence in his early plays and his association with Osborne, Wesker, and Arden make his plays 'kitchen-sink comedies'; his essential concern "with communicating a 'sense of being,' with producing patterns of poetic imagery makes his plays absurd ones" (Esslin, "Godot and His . . ." 66). And according to Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore "he is a contemporary and countryman of the Angry Young Englishmen who have been raising strident voices against the Establishment" (617).

Close analysis of Pinter's plays shows a preoccupation with several basic human problems. Contemporary schools of philosophy like existentialism, modern psychology, and the political undercurrents of his own time can be seen at the bottom of his plays. His active interest in such matters, even as a boy, has been traced by his recent biographer Michael Billington. According to Billington, Pinter's interest in psychology could be seen in an article he wrote for his school magazine. "He wrote on James Joyce discussing the screen of the subconscious mind in Ulysses (15). Again
it is said that "He opposed the motion in the Literary and Debating Society saying that ‘A United States of Europe would be the only means of preventing war . . .” (15). He revealed his interest in art and literature when he gave a “talk on ‘Realism and Post-realism in the French Cinema’ . . . . He would often rush into class on a Monday morning urging everyone else to try The Brothers Karamazov or The Trial which he had just read” (15).

The study of his plays reveals his continuing interest. At deeper levels his plays speak of the problems and the mysteries of human life and of modern psyche. Sometimes his plays mystify the readers/audience by presenting dream-like episodes on the stage. Even his characters seem not to reveal their true identity. The term, ‘Pinteresque,’ coined by critics to denote all these distinctive qualities in his writing, has now been included in The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. With regard to the dream-like quality of his plays he says that “there can be no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false” (Introduction “Writing for . . .” 11). As for the identity of his characters, he says: “A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motive is as legitimate and worthy of attention as one who alarmingly can do all these things” (Introduction “Writing for . . .” 11). Referring to the silences he uses in his plays he says that “there are two kinds of silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed . . . we communicate too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid” (Introduction “Writing for . . .” 14-15).

Thus a Pinter play is meant for intelligent readers and audiences, and for the proper understanding of his plays, we have to go to their sub-texts. The interpretation
of the subtext reveals several layers of meaning beneath. Pinter's plays speak of many serious problems like the individual's isolation in a threatening world, the corruption of bureaucracy, man's shameless power struggles of various kinds, the intricacies of female psyche, sexuality and its perverting power, limitations of language, language and silence used as weapon, the illusions created by man to escape from reality, and so on. Some of his recent plays, especially the ones he wrote in the '90s, show that the burning concern over contemporary politics is still alive in him.

As for the style of Pinter's plays, he owes a great deal to several writers of different times. He frankly admits: "You don't write in a vacuum; you're bound to absorb and digest other writing..." (qtd. in Dukore, HP 117). With the early interest in fiction, Beckett, Joyce, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Henry James helped him formulate a clear vision of life. For the poetic quality of his plays, he owes to Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot. For the comic quality of his plays, he owes to Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan. For the terror and suspense of his plays, he owes to Hitchcock. For the use of language, he owes to Chekhov. Though he owes to these writers, the originality of his plays transmutes everything he has absorbed from others. His experience behind the foot-lights has also helped him come off in this theatrical art.

Critical opinions differ on the impersonality of Pinter's plays. According to Martin Esslin "Pinter's plays are free from the concentration of autobiographical subject-matter" (PP 261). But according to Michael Billington, "His prime memories of evacuation today are of loneliness, bewilderment, separation and loss: themes that recur in all his works" (6). However as Esslin puts it, "Harold Pinter clearly stands in the front rank [of modern dramatists]: as a craftsman, a master of dialogue, a technician of suspense, laughter, surprise and emotion" (PSP 241).
Michael Scott comments that “Harold Pinter is the product of a post-war generation that has attempted to reject the evils of the twentieth century and present a new outlook on society” (9). But Pinter himself says: “My responsibility is not to audience, critics, producers, directors, actors, or to my fellow men in general, but to the play in hand, simply” (qtd. in Wager 178). C. W. E. Bigsby, among others, finds striking similarities between the plays of Pinter and those of the American playwrights Sam Shepard and David Mamet (CITAD 3. 235-36).

As W. H. Auden’s Pulitzer Prize winning poem suggests, the twentieth century is an “Age of Anxiety.” Albert Camus announces that “The only reality is ‘anxiety’ in the whole chain of beings” (28). There is a multiplicity of reasons for it. With the growth of scientific inquiry triggered off by the Industrial Revolution, religious faith stands suspect. The Theory of Evolution challenges the authenticity and authority of all religions. So man who is at a loss to find a staunch faith to lean on faces umpteen threats. Wars, terrorism, terminal diseases, natural catastrophe and the havoc played by science as a result of the over exploitation of natural resources are some of them. Industrial civilisation and the consumerism of modern days have made life more and more competitive, this competition compels man to look on one another as a rival, and this rivalry eventually leads to anxiety.

The confusion and chaos of this century reached its climax in the fifties, particularly following the global war, nuclear fission, and owing to the discoveries made by psycho-analysis and cybernetics. This situation perplexed people at large, and some sensitive writers in particular, who found themselves in a world far beyond their control. Man was faced with epistemological limitation on the one hand and the recession of religion on the other. The deeper the understanding, the greater is the anxiety. “The upshot of this realisation was the increasing emergence of overt anxiety
as a conscious problem, along with a feeling of ‘homelessness’ ” (May 5).

The atrocities of the Second World War and its dehumanising effect on life made some writers think seriously about the meaning of life and the erosion of human values. Post-war literature tended to present life as silly and meaningless. The writers of post-war period gave more attention to their empirical knowledge, and their vision of life and art differed from the traditional ones they had inherited. They found themselves alienated from the life around them. The literature of this period mirrored the anxieties and frustrations of the life of the times. Man stands looking “upon himself as beset by a multitude of problems in all these great areas of human concern, so that he feels cut off from every source of philosophical certainty and anxiously unsure of his way” (Glasurd vii ). It was in this context that Pinter emerged as a successful dramatist.

A sensitive artist whose formative years witnessed a devastating global war, Pinter was acutely aware of the spirit of the age. The anxiety of the age finds expression in literature in various forms and Pinter expresses it through the medium of plays. His plays of the 1950s clearly evince the dramatist’s preoccupation with anxiety. Bernard F. Dukore comments:

Pinter’s characters reflect the tensions and the attitudes of present-day England. The playwright moves them through highly inventive and bizarre theatrical patterns, but they unmistakably reflect a recognizable life of the world beyond the stage doors. (“The Theatre. . .” 47)

His early plays have been called “Comedies of Menace.” Originally used as the subtitle of a play in a collection of plays called The Lunatic View by David Campton, the term was later employed by Irving Wardle to The Birthday Party, when he made a study of a few plays of four British dramatists in 1958. According to him a ‘comedy
of menace' is a play in which, in “its exhibition of fluctuating identities, its satire, its comic preoccupation with cliché, and its surrealistic actions, a note of menace is constant” (87). The early plays of Pinter were given this label. Now the term has become a catch-phrase in dramatic criticism to describe a kind of play that has an element of menace that is a potent threat to the peace of characters. The menace that Pinter presents in his plays is also a reflection of the dread people felt in his time.

Some of his characters appear to be xenophobes and are afraid of the terra-incognita. Though it is an unknown fear, we can see that there are certain problems lurking behind it. Comparing the visions of Pinter and Kafka, Simon O. Lesser argues that “both men are preoccupied with our fears—our anxieties really—rather than our hopes” (34). Anxieties of various kinds are predominant among the problems that Pinter presents on the stage.

On a close analysis of the early plays of Pinter, we can see certain common philosophical, psychological and political premises, which form the basis of the sense of anxiety in the characters.

No sensitive writer of this century can ignore the philosophical problems of his time and Pinter is no exception. Contemporary schools of thought strongly influenced post-war literature, the prominent among them being Sartrean existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre evolved his own theories from what he had learned from Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, the earlier exponents of this philosophy. William Spanos points out that the “proclamation by Nietzsche’s madman of the death of God was the annunciation of the age of anxiety” (1).

Sartre, under the influence of Nietzsche and Hegel, announced that “there is no God” (qtd. in H. Barnes, xxxiv). According to Sartre, “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world” (59). He comes to the conclusion that
“Everything happens as if the world, man, and man-in-the-world succeeded in realizing only a missing God” (Sartre 792). But man’s longing for *raison d’être* makes him acknowledge the mystery of the universe, and at the same time makes him search for the truth behind it. In the search he finds that there is no purpose for human life, and one’s life is what one makes of it. “One must be what one is” (101). Thus, man, according to Sartre, is free in this world to lead a life of his own. But one’s freedom can be in conflict with the freedom of others. Thus ‘the other’ becomes a hell. So there is a metaphysical anguish in every man in his search for finding a medium through which he can establish his identity and existence. But his attempts fail miserably; and as Jerome Ashmore says, “The individual speaks and the world does not answer” (76). A serious reader can easily discern the undertone of such a philosophy in the plays of Pinter.

Several of the characters in Pinter’s plays exhibit existential anxiety. Psychologically, existential anxiety is the anxiety which arises from a responsibility which the individual takes to be that one takes up as something imposed upon him. To such a man life in itself is an imposition. “Man’s existential fear” says Esslin, “is something real ordinary and acceptable as an everyday occurrence” (PSP 36). The existential anxiety of the characters of Pinter is seen in their shrinking away from taking up responsibilities. A room, to Rose in *The Room*, as L. P. Gabbard comments, is “the womb that nurtured her” (26). This applies to many of Pinter’s characters. What the poet in this dramatist “tries to communicate by such an image is, ultimately, the totality of his own existential fear” (Esslin, PSP 80). Existentialists generally use the word *angst* instead of anxiety. Walter Kerr argues:

> the dictionary defines [angst] as ‘a feeling of dread, anxiety, or anguish’... ‘anxiety is the expectancy of evil or danger, without
adequate ground’... a man in a state of anxiety is anxious about everything—his dread is not confined to responsibility for an act but is distributed throughout his environment and becomes his environment.

(19)

This kind of existential fear plays a major role in Pinter's plays. A method commonly used for presenting it is introducing characters who appear to be either symbols or agents of death, and whose presence creates a sense of menace in the central characters.

Pinter's plays "combined existentialism and the then very influential notion of the "theatre of the absurd," to look at the ways in which violence or the threat of it impinges on [his] characters’ relationships with one another and the world they inhabit" (Gregory 328). He is a realist in a special sense. His works, especially the early ones, are in a sense attempts to express silence. His frequent use of pauses in his plays and the uniqueness of his dramaturgy earned a new epithet for his style: Pinteresque. Ronald Hayman makes the term clear:

[His style] succeeds by breaking all the rules of writing. It’s good because it’s so realistically full of bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasms, repetitions, non sequesters and self-contradictions. The characters are not only uninterested in listening; they’re hardly interested in what they’re saying themselves. (HP 2)

Pinter "has always been acutely aware of the language beneath language" (Kalem 40).

At times a Pinter play astounds his reader and audience, and sometimes puzzles them. The meaning of a Pinter play can be made clear only with the help of his contemporary philosophy and psychology. Richard Schechner says: "If there is a "meaning" in Pinter, it seems to me closely related to both Henry James and Franz
"One of the most characteristically American aspects of Shepard," as seen by Ross Wetzsteon, "is that he has altered the conventions of theater as radically as Brecht or Beckett without an accompanying theoretical rationale" (Introduction 6).

The problems that Shepard deals with in his plays are, to a certain extent, the problems of contemporary America. He is truly an American and this insight is essential for the proper understanding of his plays. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta comment:

Shepard is the quintessential American playwright. His plays are American landscapes reflecting the country's iconography, myths, entertainments, archetypes and in a less glowing light—the corruption of its revolutionary ideals, and the disorientation of its victims. What is remarkable about the plays is that they go beyond sharing experience to creating it. (111)

The very same conclusion is drawn by Ross Wetzsteon:

Shepard is at once as quintessentially American as Melville or Whitman and as quintessentially modernist as Beckett or Handke. Sam Shepard--existential cowboy. (Introduction 5)

Shepard emerged as a product of the Off-Off-Broadway in the '60s of America, and today he is ranked with O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. Besides being a prolific playwright with about four dozen plays, he has to his credit some poems and autobiographical prose writings.

Shepard's wander-lust after his falling out with his father, and the penchant for acting brought him to Bishop's Repertory Company. A drop-out from a junior agricultural college, he started travelling with them all over the country, and reached
New York eventually. Later he changed his name from “Steve Rogers” to Sam Shepard, dropping the “Rogers” part of it because “Samuel Shepard Rogers” was too long a name and the name had been in his family for generations. He started his stay at the Village Gate as a busboy, “knocking around, trying to be an actor, writer, musician, whatever happened” (Interview “The Art of Theater . . .” 211). Luckily for him, New York was then very hospitable to experimentalist writers. With the help of Ralf Cook, the head-waiter, at Village Gate, he was able to stage his first play _Cowboys_ in New York.

Though he had to wait for a while for a favourable criticism and acceptance as a playwright, when it came from Michael Smith he had a meteoric rise as a playwright. About his beginning in New York, he himself recounts:

Jerry Talmer from the New York Post came, and all these guys said [ _Cowboys_ ] was a bunch of shit, imitated Beckett or something like that, I was ready to pack it and go back to California. Then Michael Smith from the Village Gate came up with this rave review, and people started coming to see it. (Interview “Metaphors, Mad Dogs . . .” 192)

Ever since his plays came out, critics have endeavoured to trace the influences on him; but he bluntly accounts for his originality saying: “the so-called originality of the early work just comes from my ignorance. I just didn’t know” (Interview “Metaphors, Mad Dogs . . .” 191). In an interview with Shepard Michiko Kakutani comments that the “gothic portraits of the family recall Faulkner; the menacing atmosphere, Pinter; the sense of absurd, Beckett. But the debt to popular culture—songs from the Rolling Stones, ancient Indian legends, science-fiction novels and old Hollywood movies—is equally pronounced” (Interview “Myths, Realities . . .” 26). Beyond these, the long
tradition of playwrights from Pirandello to Beckett can be traced in Shepard, as David Savran says:

Like the work of so many playwrights from Pirandello to Genet and Beckett, Shepard conjures up a world stripped of certitude and the presence of God. (70)

Though the most obvious influence on the theoretical aspects of Shepard’s dramaturgy is Antonin Artaud, the most influential plays he read during his student days were Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, and Jack Gelber’s The Connection, plays that set a new-theatre consciousness among the young generation of playwrights in the 1960s. About his promise, Lynda Hart quotes, “Michael Smith, the first critic to recognize Shepard’s promise, found Shepard’s voice ‘distinctly American and his own,’ but was certain that Shepard had been aware of European models” (qtd. in Hart 15). However, Shepard’s plays revolutionised American theatrical art with his thematic and technical paradigm shift. “Shepard has been a loner in the predominantly liberal political theater world” (Tucker 27). His plays defy conventional story line and the concepts of character. At first, the plays appear to be accumulations of images. These images “begin beyond words but words prove the primary refracting device through which they can be perceived” (Bigsby, CITAD 3:221). It is through the images that his plays speak, and the playwright “picks up these images from his society” (Bigsby, CITAD 3:223). Shepard says that “we’re continuously taking in images of experience from the outside world through our sense of it” (“Language . . .” 215). Primarily, Shepard uses “the stage to project images: they do not relate to the spectator by reflecting outside reality...” (Shewey 46). These images give the plays the impression of a collage for which he owes a great deal to “Rauschenberg’s combines” (Cima 67)—a multi-faceted art form which combined painting and
sculpture in a surreal attempt apart from the collages of Braque and Picasso.

One of Shepard’s major innovations is in characterisation. A new definition to character. Shepard has expressed his bewilderment at the traditional concept of character:

What exactly is character? He just asked me that directly. And it started a whole kind of thought in me about it that is still going on. The simplicity of it. What exactly is character? (Hamill 96).

Pete Hamill quotes him as saying that, “I preferred a character that was constantly unidentifiable, shifting through the actor, so that the actor could almost play anything and the audience was never expected to identify with the character” (98). Here he seems to follow the Brechtian technique of alienation.

The language of a Shepard play is American vernacular. Don Shewey writes:

Shepard expressed his creative energy on the conceptual framework of each play, inventing purposely banal dialogue to stitch together images, actions, and comically, poetically extended monologues which puncture the surface of the theatre event to release gusts of pure spirit.

(45)

To a certain extent, the dialogues of his characters are lyrical monologues. About the strength of his language, Michael VerMeulen comments that a Shepard play “makes no ‘sense,’ nor does it fit easily into absurdism or expressionism or any other critical ism. But its author’s language is strong and obsessive stuff, and the drama has its own charisma and drive” (65).

His plays with their offbeat techniques at times confound the audience; still the playwright’s deep insight into the complex and mysterious problems posed by life cannot go unnoticed. Shepard acknowledges the insights in Shakespeare in the
“Rolling Stone” interview: “There’s an awful lot of amazing insight in his plays that
doesn’t come from an ordinary mind . . .” (170). And a close analysis of Shepard’s
plays reveals “amazing insights” into life and its problems.

Many of Shepard’s plays of the ’60s, “an exciting time for young and
experimental playwrights,” (Tucker 24), are indirectly a document of Americana. The
plays produced in this period on Off-Off-Broadway reflected the problems of the
youth. The anxiety of H-bomb as a threat to peaceful existence in the country in those
days is reflected in his plays as a vision of the apocalypse. There can also be seen
certain burning concerns of the time such as counterculture, terrorism, science fiction,
the sense of alienation, absurdism, rootlessness, search for identity, drug-addiction, and
the decadence of familial relations that have gone into the making of his plays of the
’60s.

The plays sometimes shock his audience because of his radical deviations
from the conventions of playwriting. Basically, Shepard’s plays concentrate on man’s
ontological and psychological problems. He looks at life as a mystery and tries to
penetrate into the root of it. C. W. E. Bigsby comments that Shepard writes about the
mystery of life and universe, the rootlessness of men and the intricacies of human life
(MAD 174). At the same time, he is acutely aware of the changes brought about by
science and their dehumanising effect. He makes use of the techniques of science
fiction in his plays. This vision sometimes makes him apocalyptic. In many of his
plays he suggests the vision of the end.

It was in 1964 that Michael Smith discovered the genius of Shepard. Ever
since then a host of critics have written on his plays, some favourably and others
unfavourably. Many critics “slammed the plays as bad imitations of Beckett” (Coe
118). Walter Kerr predicted a bleak future for Shepard, seeing the cold response of the
Richard Gilman comments on the rootlessness of his plays and declares that they are fragments having some relevance to the themes like “sociological political etc—” (xvi). Lynda Hart comments that “A majority of the criticism . . . is impressionistic, rather than analytic and perpetuates diffusive readings of the plays” (2). Her criticism takes it for granted that “he follows a natural development through a variety of forms—personal expressionism, absurdism, at the last returning to a modified realism” (5). Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta find that “Shepard is less interested in character than in consciousness” (82). Sheila Rabillard feels “some peculiar difficulties” when approaching Shepard’s plays (58). She says that his “plays defy easy categorization but the attempt to apply a familiar taxonomy may help to clarify their character. The early plays are, in some sense, abstract, yet they seem neither expressionist nor symbolist” (59). The striking feature of the early plays, as she finds it is, “they seem to convey no overall 'message’ ” (59). Quoting Ebbe Roe Smith, Gary Grant comments that whatever a Shepard play may be, “it can leave an audience with distinctly different feeling . . . . The audience sees it and they don’t know what it is but they understand it and they go ‘YES, YES, YES’” (qtd. in Grant 122). David J. DeRose calls him a myth-maker who “has created his own myth but his life and his art seem to be a constant struggle to retain control of that myth” (2). He says: “Critics who have sought to give conventional “meaning” to these early plays have been trapped by the limitation of their own rationalising approach. For these plays are not thematically “about” a sense of anxiety or a state of consciousness; rather they materially manifest those conditions on the stage” (18).

Though these are views of some critics, there are others who attempt to give an analytical interpretations of his plays, Doris Auerbach and Martin Tucker among them. Ellen Oumano tries to find the biographical elements that contribute to the
making of these plays. Leslie Wade has made a study of the influence of political and social conditions of America in providing the fragmentary pieces of his plays.

William W. Demastes argues that Sam Shepard’s recent venture into realism has resulted in greatly expanding the potential of that form (97). As a dramatist of the post-war period his experiences are unique, and he “has been forced to search for a form to accommodate his content; and it is a search that has recently led Shepard to move further and further away from experimentation and seemingly closer to convention in his search for an accommodating form closer to realism in fact” (Demastes 98). Though it is said that Shepard inherits the tradition of O’Neill, his realism is different. As Bigsby notes, Shepard’s realism reveals a “1960 desire to make fragments cohere and the 1970s belief that truth may ultimately lie in these fragments” (CITAD 3: 221). This is why Shepard’s early plays seem to be a collection of fragments. Thus his realism is moulded in such a way as to fit in his experiences that are not seen in the plays of other realist playwrights. However, he makes his plays experiences that can be shared by actors and spectators as they are performed. Again Demastes comments that, “Most of Shepard’s output prior to 1976, in fact, was experimental in nature, pieces that experiment with forms that grew out of the material Shepard was creating rather than having the material conform to pre-established form” (101). Demastes continues, arguing that his experiments were never contentless formalism:

Unlike 60s and 70s bred experimenters like Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and even Schechner, Shepard was not looking at theatre as simply a tool to awaken audience sensibility; he was not merely trying to move it from ‘the world of signs . . . to . . . a world of perception as Foreman put it.’ (152)
“Sam Shepard’s characters from the 1960s come across as maladjusted refugees from a society they find insufferably paradoxical” (Hoffman 17). Many of his plays are expressionistic. His “use of brilliant colors, elaborate patterning, and constant objectification suggest . . . an affinity with the German expressionist Denkspieler George Kaiser . . .” (Valgemea, “Expressionism . . .” 232). As a playwright who has expressed the anxiety of his times, he cannot but apply this technique because it is a successful style that “is indicative of a stressful, anxious psyche, a sensibility fearful of its contacts with reality,” and “The accent on anxiety and on crystalline form as being typically the motive force and creative manner of Expressionist work does touch upon certain truths” (Cardinal 92-93). Shepard’s plays are a kind of spurts of energy at emotional level and this is one of the reasons why they seem indigestible to human reason. Robert Coe points out that his “early plays took the form of action paintings, with an Expressionistic, apocalyptic roughness . . .” (58). And sometimes an Expressionist feels it compulsory “to express himself in terms of malaise, neurosis, nihilism” (Cardinal 42). Shepard has made use of all these elements in his plays. He makes clear his attitude towards playwriting and plays in an interview:

Because it seems to me theatre contains all the other arts. You can put anything in that space—painting, film, dance music, it can all be contained. Whereas in other arts everything is narrowed down, a spatial art like theatre is unlimited—there is every possibility.

(Interview “The Most Promising . . .” 81)

Thus he becomes an expressionist in his technique, while he has been labelled as absurdist and post-absurdist by his critics. Anyway, he “has the real playwright’s gift of transposing his feelings and visions into drama as a mere matter of praxis” (Feingold 72).
The early plays of Shepard forestalled Theatre of Images, in which the painterly and sculptural qualities of performance are stressed. The Theatre of Images makes use of all the sophisticated technology of light and sound very effectively to give it a new dimension. As for the images in Shepard, Ross Wetzsteon is of the opinion that they stand at times for words and he comments:

Again and again in his plays, Shepard uses stage images not merely to illustrate his themes but to embody them. Although he has an extraordinary facility with language, the climactic moments of most his plays are wordless. (Introduction 2)

Shepard has experimented with many techniques in his plays. Hallucinations, images and fragments suggestive of myths are the hall-mark of a Shepard play. Sometimes, especially in the early plays, monologues could be seen along with the story-telling of characters. Most of his characters are presented without exposition and Robert Passolli comments: “He avoids elements of exposition, like identification of the scene and of the relationship of Jim and Carol” (224). Another feature of his characters is that many of them do not have what we call personality and about which Ross Wetzsteon says that the characters “didn’t seem recognizable, who didn’t have that bundle of traits which we add together and label personality” (EA 254); and again Bigsby comments that his “characters often seem borderline psychotics” (MAD 165). Shepard’s own identity crisis was open and Don Shewey documents it saying, “He spent a lot of time staring at himself in the mirror, noticing how his right eye was more open than his left and speculating that the good eye came from his mother, the bad eye from his father” (118).

There have been various interpretations of the plays of these playwrights taking diverse aspects of their dramaturgy, characterisation, themes, and the
influences on these dramatists and of these dramatists, but a serious study of anxiety and menace in these plays has not been made. Though Ray Orley’s study “Pinter and Menace,” and Charles R. Bachman’s “Defusion of Menace in the Plays of Sam Shepard” throw light on certain aspects of ‘menace’ in these two playwrights, they do not attempt to connect anxiety with the menace in their plays at a deeper level.

What follows is a study of ‘anxiety’ and ‘menace’ in the selected early plays of Harold Pinter and Sam Shepard, two contemporary playwrights, one English and the other American. These authors are chosen for this study because they can be considered two of the most representative playwrights of contemporary theatre, but certain aspects of their thematic and technical experiments in drama still remain unexamined.

Four plays from each playwright have been selected. It is found that these plays have certain features in common at a deeper level which, if studied in detail, would be rewarding. Pinter’s The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party and A Slight Ache have been selected because these plays were written in the late ’50s and they have an atmosphere of menace, and most of the characters are generally found in a state of anxiety. Though anxiety and menace run as the leitmotif of many plays of Pinter, the selected plays in this study give us an insight into the nature of these.

The plays selected from Shepard are 4-H Club, Red Cross, The Unseen Hand and Action. Among these, the first three were written in the ’60s and the last one in the mid ’70s. ‘Anxiety’ and ‘Menace’ are seen in a recurring pattern in the first three plays; the fourth deals with these problems with a difference as it was written during a period which could be taken as a turning point in the playwright’s career as a dramatist. However, these plays can be looked upon as the playwright’s nascent
works that heralded the complex plays written later. These plays mirror the psychological and philosophical insights of the playwright into his contemporary America and into life in general. A look at the plays provides a better understanding of the playwright’s art and its evolution.

Though anxiety and menace are closely connected with psychoanalytic theories, this study does not concentrate on any particular theory. Certain psychological concepts are borrowed from popular psychologists like Sigmund Freud, J. A. C. Brown, Alfred Adler, Eric Fromm, James M. Glass, Karen Horney, R. D. Laing, Michael J. Mahoney, Rollo May and others for the interpretation of the plays.

The term ‘menace’ in drama criticism is often coupled with ‘comedy’ as in ‘comedy of menace.’ Though Pinter’s early plays are stuck with the label ‘comedy of menace,’ the focus of discussion here is not on that but on what causes anxiety in his characters and how it creates the atmosphere of menace in the selected plays. This study makes an attempt to trace the nature, causes and consequences of anxiety and menace as presented in the early plays of the two dramatists. They are seen as the reflection of the political, sociological, and psychological changes that have taken place in western societies, especially in England and America.

This study makes an attempt to analyse the selected plays of these two playwrights taking the ideas that lie locked beneath the words, and the gestures in them. Sometimes the words in these plays do not appear to convey any idea. The images they create, the ironies in them, automatic repetitions, monologues and all give particular shades of meaning to words in different contexts.

The study has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter examines the developments in contemporary drama with special emphasis on the crisis of communication faced by playwrights. It looks at the major experiments in theatre and
the search for new expressive modes, particularly since the last decade of the nineteenth century. Briefly examining the major developments beyond realism—the recognition of the failure of language in reproducing life, the lowering of the elevated status of the spoken word to that of one of the several vehicles of theatrical communication, considering the play as a succession of fragments or moments, and the efforts at expressing the inexpressible in the theatre—this chapter attempts to place Pinter and Shepard in a proper theatrical perspective.

The second chapter makes a detailed study of Pinter as a contemporary playwright, highlighting the distinctive features of his plays. It examines the socio-political, philosophical and psychological background of the fifties which determine the nature of the themes and characters of the plays. The impact of Sartrean existentialism and the interrelations among the various intellectual currents reflected in the plays are analysed. The different varieties of anxiety manifested by the characters are categorised against the background of this analysis.

The third chapter identifies the various methods and techniques adopted by Pinter for the effective presentation of anxiety in the selected plays. The chapter goes on to examine the nature of menace, differentiating between the idea of menace in this study and the idea of menace in the label 'comedy of menace.' It further examines the nature of menace presented in the selected plays, finding one of its primary sources in Pinter's political awareness and his insight into man's will to power. The other sources of menace in Pinter are also studied.

The fourth chapter discusses Shepard and the features that distinguish him from other contemporary American playwrights. It attempts to relate the early plays of Shepard to the socio-cultural background of the America of the 60s, the counterculture, the avant-garde writers of America and Europe, the nihilist
movements of the sixties, and the absurd situation portrayed by Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*. The pervading influence of psychology and the subtle impact of political issues found to underlie the anxiety of the characters in the plays are identified. Different varieties of anxiety manifested by characters in Shepard's plays are categorised.

The fifth chapter tries to examine the methods of presentation of anxiety in Shepard's plays, recognising the imagistic method to be his favoured method of presenting emotional states, and looking at the variety of images that abound in the plays. This chapter also tries to study the nature of menace in Shepard's plays, making a distinction between the menace in Pinter and the menace in Shepard. The nature and features of the menace presented in the early plays of Shepard are studied.

The concluding chapter makes a comparison and contrast of the two playwrights who have much in common even from the biographical point of view. Both Pinter and Shepard have been influenced by several major dramatists and theorists of drama, Luigi Pirandello, Anton Chekhov, and Samuel Beckett the prominent among them. Pinter himself has influenced Shepard. In spite of the shared need for finding new expressive methods, and in spite of a great common tradition and shared influences, Pinter and Shepard emerge as two distinctly unique talents that represent some of the chief preoccupations of modern drama.
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