The World of Anxiety: The Early Plays of Pinter

The subjects of Pinter’s early plays are mostly human beings who live in anxiety of one kind or another, and who are perennially haunted by a sense of menace. In the context of the individual play, these fears and anxieties revolve round the presence of strangers, the insecurity of the ‘outside,’ the confusions about the surroundings, the lack of confidence in oneself, a desire to dominate and the struggles for the same, all of which are mental states identified and analysed by psychology. In this sense, the plays of Pinter are realistic in their concerns. However, in philosophical terms these can be said to represent themes such as a being’s fear of death, his sense of mystery about the universe, his sense of mystery about his own identity, and his will to power.

In all the four early plays in this study, Pinter portrays the image of death which confronts man with the question as to why he is born and why he dies. Man’s innate urge to know who he is and what he is here for can be seen to be a leitmotif in these plays. While on this search, he strikes up friendship with others and establishes relationships in this world. But neither these relationships nor any of his material possession is enough to give him complacence in life, as the interference of death frustrates him by depriving him of all these. A haunting fear of death with its implications is a constant preoccupation in the early plays of Pinter.

In The Room, Riley comes to the house where Rose and her husband Bert live in comfort. The life of the couple is presented in such a way that any intervention is seen as a threat to them. As John Pesta argues, “The play calls for a symbolic interpretation. Riley, threatening the womb-like security of the room, serves as a death figure” (55). When Kidd informs her that Riley is going to meet her, she shrinks away expressing her unwillingness to face him:

MR KIDD (rising). I don’t know what’ll happen if you don’t see him.
ROSE. I’ve told you I don’t know this man. (27)

This unwillingness is a manifestation of existential anxiety. Existentialists hold that “The consciousness of death is the call of anxiety and ‘existence then delivers itself its own summons through the intermediary of consciousness’” (Camus, Myth 29). At last she yields to death and sends for Riley:

ROSE. Fetch him. Quick. Quick! (28)

Then Riley, the blind man, enters. Here the stage direction is worth noticing: “Enter a blind Negro. He closes the door behind him, walks further, and feels with a stick till he reaches the armchair” (28).

Though Pinter denies using symbols and declares that he has “never been conscious of allegorical significance in [his] play” (qtd. in Gale 25), the blackness and the blindness of the character are indicative of death. Augusta Walker comments: “Figuratively the basement denizen must be death and his room the coffin” (4). Death is irresistible, that is why he enters Rose’s room without her permission, though he is an unwelcome guest. She does not want to be touched by him, still he touches her in the teeth of her objection. He not only touches her but tries to take her away. The dramatist describes the way she reacts to him: “she touches his eyes, the back of his eyes, the back of his head, and his temples with her hands” (31). She welcomes it when she feels at bay. Thus man’s reaction to his inevitable death is presented here very touchingly, but with a philosophical indifference. Though Stephen H. Gale does not admit that Riley is a specific representation of death, he says that there are suggestions to take him to be so (37).

In The Dumb Waiter the playwright uses a dumb waiter—a small lift used in restaurants for carrying food from one floor to another—as a symbol of death or as an agent of death. Ben and Gus, the two hired killers, are waiting for their next victim. At last, quite unexpectedly, Gus himself turns out to be the victim. The order the dumb waiter gives is that he
should be murdered, and Ben has to obey it. This is the nature of death. It takes man away ruthlessly, and man finds himself helpless before it. Here the dumb waiter either becomes death or an agent of death.

In *The Birthday Party*, the guests who arrive at the boarding house run by Meg also can be taken as the agents of death. The very mention of their name creates fright and tremor—anxiety—in Stanley. He repeatedly asks Meg whether they are sure to come. Then he speaks wistfully:

STANLEY (decisively). They won’t come.

MEG. Why not?

STANLEY. I tell you they won’t come. Why didn’t they come last night, if they were coming. (20)

When they arrive, Stanley’s anxiety can be seen getting doubled. He protests and asks them in an intimidating manner, to leave the place. But they insist on taking him away.

STANLEY (moving downstage). . . . We’re booked out. Your room is taken. Mrs Boles forgot to tell you. You’ll have to find somewhere else.

(44)

Here they seem to be indifferent to this remark. They tell him that they are going to make arrangements for celebrating his birthday party. He tries to dissuade them from this. His attempts fail and he surrenders to them in the end. Stanley’s early resistance and subsequent surrender can be taken to be suggestive of man’s struggle against death and his ultimate surrender to it.

The Matchseller in the play *A Slight Ache*, can also be considered a symbol of death. Edward has been a bit fidgety about the presence of the Matchseller right from the time he happens to notice him. “The horror of death as it is perceived by Edward remains” (Burkman 335) throughout the play. As he had apprehended, the Matchseller tries to dispossess him of his
worldly possessions. To begin with, he attracts his wife, then comes in and approaches him to take his wife away from him, and does so, slowly but surely, as death takes human lives. Here the most valuable thing to Edward is his wife, and death takes her away from him, as surely as death takes away life which is dear to all human beings. Edward can only accept the loss meekly.

The problem of death is invariably dealt with in almost all of Pinter’s plays, especially in the early ones. The projection of the subject of death and its consequent frustration are features of existential literature. As Albert Camus says, in his Caligula, “Men die; and they are not happy” (40).

Presenting this universe as a mystery is yet another feature of Sartrean existentialism. It is such a vision that the early plays of Pinter give. Michael W. Kaufman comments: “An enigma in itself, Pinter’s theatre reflects the spiritual and philosophical enigmas of our age, and no criticism can presume to penetrate its ultimate mysteries” (167). The dramatist confuses the audience regarding the location of the room the characters occupy. The room that appears in almost all of his plays is without details of location. The characters “are kept in the dark about everything . . . they know neither the origin nor the results of anything they do” (Walker 2). This image of a mysterious space, suggestive of a mysterious universe, can be seen in many of his plays. Pinter’s drama, in the words of Katherine Burkman, “evolves in an atmosphere of mystery” (326).

Like the mystery of the universe, the mystery of existence is also a problem in Pinter’s plays. In The Room, we do not get a clear picture of the real owner of the house. There is a vague and gruesome description of the actual location of the room. Taking Mr Kidd to be the landlord or the caretaker, Rose asks him how many floors they have got for the house. Then the answer is suggestive:

MR KIDD. Well to tell you the truth, I don’t count them now. (14)
After a while, when Mr and Mrs Sands reach there, their discussion shifts to Mr Kidd. Rose speaks of him as the landlord, but Mr and Mrs Sands do not agree with her. Mrs Sands is doubtful of Kidd’s ownership of the house:

ROSE. Well, that’s his name. He is the landlord.

MRS SANDS. Who?

ROSE. Mr Kidd.

(Pause)

MR SANDS. Is he?

MRS SANDS. Maybe there are two landlords. (19)

The confusion regarding the landlord is in a way suggestive of the mystery that enwraps the universe. No one knows for certain what or who is behind this universe, some holding that God is the creator of all, others denying the existence of such a power. On the whole there is no certainty regarding the creator of this universe and the uncertainty about the owner of the room presents, on a small scale, the confusions and uncertainties about God. This and other concerns of existentialist thought can be identified in several plays of Pinter. Walter Kerr observes: “Harold Pinter seems to be the only man working in the theater today who writes existentialist plays existentially” (3).

In The Dumb Waiter, Ben and Gus, the two hired killers, are again in a room; and they are not even sure whether it is a kitchen or something else. What they do there is simply to obey the orders of their master. One of them, Gus, often asks questions. He wants to know who the owner of the house is. He takes Wilson, who is supposed to be their master, for the owner. He is very eager to see him in person and, asks Ben:

GUS (feverishly). I told you before who owned this place. Didn’t I? I told you. (68)
The confusion regarding the real owner recurs in many of his plays. Misgivings about the origin of the universe and man are echoed in *The Birthday Party* also. During the scene in which Goldberg and McCann ask a series of questions to harass Stanley, Goldberg asks him:

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?

MCCANN. That’s the question.

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force responsible for you, suffering for you. (50)

Again they ask casually:

GOLDBERG. Which came first?

MCCANN. Chicken? Egg? Which came first?” (52)

The very same feeling is echoed in the casual comments made by Mr and Mrs Sands in *The Room* when they talk:

MRS SANDS. I said, I didn’t bring you into this world.

MR SANDS. Who did then? That’s what I want to know. Who did? Who did bring me into the world? (22)

All these questions reveal that the mystery of this universe is a preoccupation with the playwright, and it haunts his characters. This philosophical pondering can also be heard in the play *A Slight Ache*, when Edward says that he is much concerned with “the dimensionality and continuity of space... and time” (174).

The mystery of identity has been a burning concern for Pinter since his student days. He deals with this problem in many of his early plays. Sometimes he perplexes his audience by the use of names. Almost all his characters are given, indicating the possibility of multiple identity while also questioning the validity of the most common means of fixing an individual’s identity, that of using names.

The double named characters of Pinter lose the real identity attributed by their
names. In *The Room*, Rose is called Sal (30). Ben in *The Dumb Waiter* is called Blimey (53). In *The Birthday Party*, Meg is called Mrs Boles and Goldberg is called Nat (43) and McCann declares that he has been called Simey (59) by his mother and wife, and his father would call him Benny (78). Stanley when asked says that his name is Joe Soap (50). This preoccupation with names is indicative of Pinter’s interest in the question of identity, which is a vital element in existentialist writings.

Pinter acknowledges the influence of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka on him: “Beckett and Kafka stayed with me the most—I think Beckett is the best prose writer living [at that time]” (“Harold Pinter: An Interview” 22). The influence of Beckett on Pinter is evident in his world view and its presentation in poetic images on the stage. Beckett’s writings, as Martin Esslin comments, “might be described as a literary exposition of Sartre’s Existentialism” (“Godot and His...” 63). The Sartrean influence on Pinter has been indirect, coming through Beckett, and like Beckett “Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature, of man’s situation in the world” (Esslin, “Godot and His...” 66).

Undeserved punishment has been a prominent theme in European writers, especially in the fiction of Franz Kafka. This kind of punishment is a recurring theme in Pinter’s writings also. In *The Room*, when Rose is overtaken by the appearance of a stranger called Riley and he himself is attacked by Rose’s husband Bert, the dramatist does not give any reason for it. In *The Dumb Waiter*, one of the two killers, Gus, is given capital punishment at the end of the play, while they are waiting for their victim. We cannot find any reason for such a strange turn of events. Maybe, such is the kind of punishment man has to undergo in this world. In *The Birthday Party* we see two strangers come to a boarding house on a fine morning. They, together with the landlady, Meg, decide to celebrate a birthday party of another lodger, Stanley. Even he himself is not sure about it. They impose the celebrations on him. Stanley is mute and dumb after the celebrations. The audience do not get any clue to the reason why he
is punished like that. In these plays the audience get a picture of a cruel and unknown force (God) that inflicts pain upon human beings for no sufficient reason. In all these plays characters suffer from one or another problem which is fundamentally connected with their existence. This makes the characters anxious about their lives, and makes them tense in all their interactions in life.

Pinter's plays have been subjected to psychological analysis by critics like Lucina Paquet Gabbard, Elizabeth Sakellaridou and Ann C. Hall. Gabbard analyses the dream structure of Pinter's plays and says that "approaching Pinter's play as a dream has provided a glimpse of the psychological realities of life" (36). Sakellaridou uses "Psychoanalysis, Sociology, and Feminism" as "illustrative rather than theoretical" (15) method in her approach to Pinter's plays. Ann C. Hall offers her book as a "feminist, psychoanalytic reading of the plays of Eugene O' Neill, Harold Pinter and Sam Shepard" (1).

The growing sophistication of life creates several kinds of psychotic problems in man. The developments in psychoanalysis, besides widening the vistas of psychiatry, expose the increasing number of psychopaths in our society at large.

Statistically, a person is considered abnormal when he or she deviates from the average. In this sense, almost all of Pinter's characters are abnormal. They do not act or behave like the characters of any other traditional dramatists, and they shock the audience. Pinter says:

My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore.

(Introduction. "Writing for . . ."13)

Though Pinter denied reading Freud, his plays offer endless scope for the exploration of this territory, for psychological interpretations.
Pinter may seem to be a dreamer, but his dreams have a method, which he shares with his audience. Psychological problems like Identity Crisis, Anxiety out of Frustration, Mid-life Crisis, Moral Anxiety, Real Anxiety, Machiavellianism, and Existential Anxiety can be seen running through the characters.

Pinter himself has admitted that his characters have the problem of identity, apart from the philosophical mystery regarding individual identity. His reply to one accusation regarding the mystifying nature of his characters reveals his attitude. Instead of a clear-cut answer, he asked some counter questions:

Dear madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter. (qtd. in Esslin, PSP 37-38)

A writer who asks such questions is a man who is very much worried about his identity. This identity crisis can be seen in many of his characters.

Questions regarding man's identity abound in The Birthday Party. Goldberg and McCann "exacerbate Stanley's anxiety by asking over and over again questions of identity" (Kaufman 172). The problem becomes explicit when Stanley, in The Birthday Party, asks Meg:

STANLEY (deliberately). Tell me, Mrs Boles, When you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?"

(21)

This may sound his bold reaction to Mrs Boles's irritating behaviour; but a playwright like Pinter who is obsessed with the problem of identity does not write his words as plainly as here appear to be. The audience are forced to interpret these words in the sub-text of it. The very same idea has been expressed by Pinter in an interview with Lawrence M. Bensky. When
asked whether he represents himself through his characters, Pinter gave him an answer that revealed his identity crisis. He said, “I often look at myself in the mirror and say, ‘Who the hell is that?’” (Wager 181). The problem of identity is a serious issue both to the playwright and his characters, and the plays abound in expressions of this problem.

Normally, this crisis occurs in a man in his adolescence, but it recurs in the forties also. Psychologists point out that people in their forties “question who they are and what they want out of life. Many of the same questions of identity faced in adolescence seem to re-emerge with renewed force at this time” (Duke and Nowicki, Jr. 483). The central characters in many of the plays of Pinter are middle-aged and they express their crises sometimes verbally and sometimes non-verbally.

In the very first play The Room we can see psychological undercurrents of midlife crisis. Rose in this play is introduced as a woman in her sixties. She is a woman passing from her middle age to old age and in this transition stage, she exhibits signs of an emotional crisis which psychology calls \textquoteleft midlife crisis.\textquoteright She has menopausal frustration on the one hand, and sexual frustration on the other. Her husband seems to be inept and she understands that she can no longer rely on him, and this is one of the reasons for her anxiety.

A good number of Pinter’s characters are middle-aged, individuals who show the psychic problems engendered by stress and frustration in their midlife. Rose and Bert of The Room; Petey and Meg of The Birthday Party; Ben and Gus of The Dumb Waiter, and Edward and Flora of A Slight Ache are all either in their midlife or in a transition from it. “People suffering from their forties transition crisis report a number of fears, especially those regarding their loss of youth and the threatening ageing process” (Duke and Nowicki, Jr. 484).

In a way, the anxieties expressed by Rose could be the psychological reaction to her menopause. Menopause is a decisive turning-point in women and with this they realise they
have reached the peak of their developmental process. This is the anxiety seen in Meg of The Birthday Party. Because of her frustration, she wants to go back to her youth. This becomes evident in her ambivalent attitude to Stanley. To him she is his mother and a whore at once. Her concern about her ageing becomes clear towards the end of the play. When Stanley has been taken away by McCann and Goldberg, she comes in search of him. Even when she learns about it she does not seem very much worried about it. What interests her is her performance in 'the birthday party,' rather than the disappearance of Stanley. She remarks that, "I was the belle of the ball" (BP 87). Ben and Gus also have their crises. They remember their good-old days: "We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we?" (DW 68). This indicates their nostalgia. In A Slight Ache the two characters Edward and Flora are in their transition stage. They are threatened by the presence of the Matchseller, who could be seen as the externalisation of their anxiety. Their anxiety, in turn, is a manifestation of their forties crisis. Their deteriorating potency is compensated imaginatively by projecting it even in an old man who appears to them as "a great bullock of jelly" (SA 189).

Though psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Karen Horney find the threat which cues off anxiety as the threat of the frustration of libido (May 226), frustration of any kind is conducive to creating anxiety. This is a commonplace experience in post-war life, and Pinter highlights the different aspects of such a sudden loss of trust in people.

In the plays of Pinter, this loss of trust is evident in several characters. In The Room Bert loses his trust in Rose when he sees her with the blind Negro, Riley. Rose also loses her confidence that she is safe in her room with her husband in it. Her tension is obvious even from the opening of the play. She has a premonition about the impending loss of the room and of the sense of security she has pinned upon her husband. In The Dumb Waiter, Ben and Gus lose their faith in their master who orders them to send him many things which they are not capable of. Gus is upset when his friend, Ben takes him for his next victim. In
The Birthday Party. Stanley's sense of security in the seaside boarding house is lost when he learns that two strangers are coming there to stay there. In A Slight Ache, the emergence of the Matchseller at the back-gate of Edward's house makes him lose his faith in his wife Flora.

Freud makes a distinction of between realistic anxiety and neurotic anxiety:

Real danger is a danger that is known, and realistic anxiety is anxiety about a known danger of this sort. Neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger. Neurotic danger is thus a danger that has still to be discovered. (325)

Some of the anxieties expressed by the characters in Pinter's plays are real. Sometimes, their anxiety over something becomes true eventually. Anxiety of the characters over some unknown force or thing outside their room seems to be an illusion of threat to them in the beginning; but it becomes real at the end of the play.

Rose's apprehension about the stranger in The Room comes true in the end. Stanley's apprehension is also proved real as he is taken away by McCann and Goldberg. Edward's approach to the Matchseller is also with some anxiety because of his unwarranted presence there. As he had suspected, the Matchseller becomes a threat to him and gradually takes possession of his wife. The anxiety about the motives of the master of Ben and Gus in The Dumb Waiter also becomes real when Ben turns to Gus with his gun. The characters of Pinter always live in fear. Most often they fear something that is a genuine threat. So the 'menace' we speak of in his plays is something real, though sometimes the characters appear to be hysteric about it.

Man's propensity to dominate others—which modern psychology calls Machiavellianism—is very much evident in several characters in Pinter's early plays, and the ways of that force are often unpredictable.

A personality syndrome known as Machiavellianism, named after the
Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, has been used to predict the social manipulativeness of people in interaction and their ability to dominate certain interpersonal situations. (MS Encarta “Social Psychology”)

This trait is strong in some characters of Pinter, who are often found engaged in a struggle for power.

This sort of personality evolves from ‘the will for power,' an inherent quality in man, according to modern psychology. Alfred Alder finds a neurotic will to power in human beings stronger than the drive of sex. In a case study, he discovered that outbreaks of anxiety recur at certain intervals as the result of excess of will-to-power that becomes operative as soon as the force of the will-power gets abated (5-6). Philosophers like Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer seem to agree to this view. Nietzsche holds that human behaviour is motivated by a ‘will to power,’ which is the biological urge to survive on earth. Schopenhauer, another German philosopher, says that there is ‘a universal will,' as the primary reality, and an individual’s will forms a part of it. So he assumes that this ‘will’ dominates every other aspect of an individual’s personality.

This struggle and competition for dominance create anxiety in the characters. Several of Pinter’s characters manifest a desire to dominate others. In The Room, Rose tries to dominate Bert, and Bert in turn tries to dominate Rose. Martin Esslin comments:

The room, the relationship between the brutal husband and his sentimental wife, who is tormented by dark forebodings and existential fears, is seen entirely realistic and psychologically accurate terms; indeed, the other couple—Bert/Rose—is subtly contrasted with the young couple, Mr and Mrs Sands, who are looking for a room; their relationship also shows the signs of tension between a more intelligent woman and a lazy and
dull man who dominates her by sheer brutality. (PSP 66)

This drive for domination can be seen in The Birthday Party, when Petey tries to dominate Meg and Meg tries to dominate every other male character in the play. McCann and Goldberg try to dominate each other. At a point when they ask certain questions, Stanley is not given a chance to answer their questions to his satisfaction. He becomes a silent listener. They ask the questions one after another in such a way as to maintain the interrogators’ upper-hand, “[p]hysical dominance still is linked to verbal dominance” (King 251). In The Dumb Waiter Ben tries to suppress the questioning instinct of Gus. Gus’s protest against it is also an indication of man’s innate tendency to protest against others’ domination on him.

According to Sigmund Freud, moral anxiety is the feeling that human beings experience when they do something which religion or some social moral code has taught to be wrong. Moral anxiety is a kind of punishment anxiety, because the man who does something which his conscience or morality says wrong, fears punishment for that act. In Pinter it is particularly evident, when the characters have to take an important decision.

Rose, in The Room, is very conscious of her wifely duties. She serves her husband food and often asks him many questions in an endearing manner. She shows signs of anxiety when she is alone in her room, especially when the stranger Riley turns up. The moral anxiety she feels there is manifested when she hastens to send him back:

ROSE. You have got a grown-up woman in this room, do you hear? (28)

The insinuation here is sexual. She wants his riddance from the room because she suspects his motives. The sense of morality inculcated in her tells her that her fidelity to her husband should be kept at any cost. This feeling makes her anxious about the situation.

A similar feeling seems strong in Flora of A Slight Ache, when she faces the Matchseller. While she is having a chat with him, Flora tells him one of her sexual experiences.
FLORA. . . Between ourselves, were you ever a poacher? I had an
encounter with a poacher once. It was a ghastly rape, the brute. (191)

The indirect reference to the rape is an indication of her moral anxiety. This kind of
anxiety can be discerned in Stanley when Lulu approaches him with sexual overtures:

LULU. We must as well stay here.
STANLEY. No, it is no good here.
LULU. Well, Where else is there?
STANLEY. Nowhere.
LULU. Well that is a charming proposal. (He gets up.) Do you have to wear
those glasses?
STANLEY. Yes.
LULU. So you are not coming for a walk?
STANLEY. I can’t at the moment.
LULU. You are a bit of a wash-out, aren’t you? (BP 26)

Stanley gives her a negative answer because he is disturbed by his moral anxiety. In the same
play, after a while, when Lulu realises that she has been seduced by Goldberg, she bursts out,
“That’s what you did. You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl shouldn’t
know before she has been married at least three times” (BP 80). This reaction shows that she,
in spite of her flirting with Stanley, has a prick of moral anxiety.

In The Dumb Waiter the two hired killers, Ben and Gus, also feel this moral anxiety,
though connected with sexuality. They feel it not because of their sexual morality; but
because of their sense of guilt about their crime. Though they have been appointed by an
agency to execute its orders of murder, they do not seem to be disposed to do it. Gus
complains of his indisposition when they busily get ready to obey the orders of their master:

GUS. I’m feeling a bit off. I have got a splitting headache. (DW 59)
This physical discomfiture is also a symptom of their moral anxiety.

Psycho-analytic studies on Pinter's plays have diagnosed many maladjustments in his characters. Some phobias and manias can also be seen in the plays of Pinter. Agoraphobia, claustrophobia, and xenophobia are some of them. Rose in The Room can be seen as a character who is suffering all these phobias. "Agoraphobes tend increasingly to avoid more situations until eventually they become housebound" (MS Encarta "Phobia"). She is not safe outside, but even inside she cannot be at ease because of her fear of strangers. This is true of Stanley also.

Freudian theories of anxiety have been applied to the characters of Pinter by several critics. They find Oedipal anxiety, the anxiety of growing up, castration anxiety and so on. Sexual symbols have been identified in many of the words used by the characters and in the visual images used by the dramatist. The image of the room has been interpreted by L. P. Gabbard as 'womb.' She comments, "These oral elements provide the play with its most popular interpretation, man's fear of expulsion from the womb" (51). Esslin sees the anxiety of some characters in growing up. He writes, "As in all poetic imagery there is a deep and organic connection between the multiple planes on which the layers of ambiguity of image operate . . . the process of growing up is in itself an image, and a metaphor of dying" (86). All such studies underline the psychological undercurrents in Pinter's plays.

Modelled on other playwrights' works, Pinter's plays exhibit a perception of life replete with various kinds of threat. The roots of the menace he presents in his plays can be traced to the fear which lurks in every man. Stephen H. Gale, in his study finds out the universality of menace in the plays of Pinter. Commenting on The Room, he says that "the basement may simply equal fear of the unknown, and Riley may be equivalent to any outside menace—since the play is about problems faced by all people" (37). Modern life poses problems that, in turn, assume the proportion of a menace. The immediate reaction to this
menace is anxiety; again this anxiety gives rise to menace. Menace finds its artistic expression in the early plays of Pinter. In this sense, menace in a Pinter play is always connected with anxiety; menace produces anxiety which in turn causes menace. While the primary source of the sense of menace felt by Pinter characters is apparently the various types of anxiety in them, an equally important source is Pinter's own acute perception of man's will to power and its consequences.

Generally, Pinter's characters do not seem to have any express interest in politics. It was this impression that prompted Kenneth Tynan to ask Pinter in an interview why his plays were "unconcerned with ideas and showing only a very limited aspect of life of their characters omitting their political ideas and even sex life" (qtd. in Esslin, TA 290). But a close reading of Pinter's plays reveals that at deeper levels, they do have strong political undercurrents. The Pinter who said, "I have no interest in the matter and do not care what happens" (qtd. in Esslin, PSP 32) about Britain's entry into the Common Market is the same Pinter who declares in an interview with L. M. Bensky:

"I tell you what I really think about politicians. The other night I watched some politicians talking about Vietnam. I wanted very much to burst through the screen with a flame-thrower and burn their eyes out and their balls off and then and inquire them how they would assess this action from a political point of view. (Interview "Violence . . ." 3)

This evolution shows Pinter's burning concern with politics. And his interest in politics has been there because his formative period was one which witnessed the worst of the political problems in the known history of man.

In the 1930s and 40s, the world in general and Europe in particular was in a state of terror under two political leaders of Europe, Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. Their dictatorial politics made lasting impression upon Pinter. Pinter's own words reveal how deep
the impression these fascists created on him was:

> Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. It so happens I did
> encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in London’s East End, when
> the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights
down there. (Interview “Violence . . .” 3)

This violence and the fights find expression in Pinter’s plays as struggles for domination which recurs as a “repeated theme” (qtd. in Trussler 185) as Pinter himself has conceded.

Pinter began to be very revealing about his early plays in the 1980s. Of course, there had been some hints about his political interest in many of the interviews and production notes in the 1950s and those hints have been expressly expounded later by Pinter himself.

Some parts of the letter he wrote to Peter Wood in 1958 and quoted by Benedict Nightingale strengthen the argument that Pinter had a clear vision of the political metaphor he meant through the play The Birthday Party. Pinter’s comment on Stanley Webber is worth noticing:

> The hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters
arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has
discarded responsibility . . . towards himself and others . . . he collapses
under the weight of their accusation—an accusation compounded of the shit-
tainted structures of centuries of ‘tradition.’ (qtd. in Nightingale 138)

Pinter, the angry young man, protests against the establishment in strong language. And it is this protest that makes some of his characters anxious in their lives. Pinter’s anger is different from that of his contemporaries. As Ruby Cohn says, “Pinter has created his own distinctive and dramatic version of Man vs. the System” (56).

Rose’s anxiety in The Room arises, to a certain extent, from many things that happen around her, without her knowledge and control. She doesn’t even know where her room is in
the house. Somebody lets her room to somebody else. She remains helpless. Everything is manipulated according to the design of an unknown force or authority. That was the state of political affairs in Europe during the Second World War.

Rose shelters herself from something that she fears outside. Pinter spoke of this fear and shelter in 1960 in an interview given to the BBC:

This thing of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in last 20 years. Not only the last 20, last two to three hundred. (qtd. in Nightingale 138)

Even at the outset of the play, Rose expresses her anxiety about the outside:

ROSE. . . . It’s very cold out, I can tell you. It’s murder. (The Room 7)

The anxiety that she shows reaches its climax when she hears that the messenger Riley has come to take her to her father. She asks Riley:

ROSE. . . . Who have you got a message from? Who?

RILEY. Your father wants you to come home.

(Pause)

ROSE. Home?

RILEY. Yes.

ROSE. Home? . . .” (30)

Here the repetition of the word ‘home’ shows the embarrassment the word creates in her. She speaks as if she did not know the meaning of the word; but the fact is that she feels so because of her total ignorance of the outside, the mystery that remains outside, the mysterious operations on the house she resides in without her participation in it.

In The Birthday Party, Goldberg and McCann arrive at the seaside boarding house as the agents of a mysterious organisation. They are bound to carry out the instructions of an authority unknown to them. When they approach their victim, they recall the assignment for
the job. Goldberg remarks:

GOLDBERG. You know what I said when this job came up. I mean
	naturally they approached me to take care of it. (29)

This indifference and objective approach to their job is again revealed when McCann expresses
his diffidence in it:

MCCANN. This job—no, listen—this job, is going to be like anything we’ve
ever done before. (29)

These are the indications in the play that tell us that Goldberg and McCann are acting there
according to the instructions imposed upon them by somebody else. They are not willing to
perform what they finally do there. There are passages which suggest that Stanley himself was
one of the members of the organisation from which Goldberg and McCann have come. During
the interrogation, Goldberg and McCann ask him:

MCCANN. Why did you leave the organisation?

GOLDBERG. What would your old mother say, Webber? (48)

After a while McCann comments again:

MCCANN. You betrayed the organisation. I know him! (48)

This is a clear indication that Stanley has been their acquaintance and they all are inescapably
bound to obey the orders of the organisation.

Stanley reminds us of a Jew in Hitler’s days. And Pinter who is a Jew has got much of
the bitter experiences the Jews suffered then. William Baker and Stephen Ely Thabachnick
comment on the days in East End during the formative period of Pinter:

The calm atmosphere of Hackney was shaken by the events of the later
1930s and destroyed by the bombs of the 1939-45 war. The Mosley
marches and the demonstrations in the East End took place but a few miles
from where the young Pinter was growing up. (8)
The very same atmosphere can be seen in the play *The Dumb Waiter*. Here we see a kind of fear arising from the fact of being controlled by a mysterious force. And this force is depicted through the image of a dumb waiter. In this play Ben and Gus, the professional killers, seem to be two obedient servants carrying out the orders given by the dumb waiter while they are awaiting their victims.

The political metaphor in the play is made clear by Pinter himself in the interview he had with Nicholas Hern in 1984. When the interviewer asked him whether he has changed his attitude in *One for the Road*, his reply was authentic and revealing:

> I have been thinking about this. They are doing *The Dumb Waiter* on television, so I went to see a run-through of it. It was quite obvious to the actors that the chap who is upstairs and is never seen is a figure of authority. Gus questions this authority and rebels against it and therefore is quashed at the end, or is about to be quashed. . . .

("Hern Interview" 7)

The dumb waiter in the play stands for an agent or power that makes men obey the orders of an unknown authority. Ben and Gus have to obey the orders. Gus, by nature, is inclined to question the authority. The power behind the dumb waiter does not tolerate such men and hence gives the order to undo Gus.

This was the nature of the authoritarianism of Pinter’s days and even today we can see the ripples of it in some places as Pinter depicts it. The injustice in it has made him write a play with such subtlety that only those who go deep can discern it.

A ruler’s indifference to his subjects can be said to be the theme of *The Dumb Waiter*. Ben and Gus are very much concerned about their master. Gus is very eager to know the details about this master. So he asks too many questions about him and the plight in which they are. His comment about the master is worth noticing:
GUS. . . . He doesn’t seem to bother much about our comfort these days.

(41)

Though Ben warns him against making such comments, Gus keeps on asking questions as well as commenting on the apathetic attitude of their master:

GUS. He might not come. He might just send a message. He doesn’t always come. (50)

While executing every order given by the master, Gus criticises him strongly. Seeing the menu in the dumb waiter he comments:

GUS. All these menus coming down and nothing going up. It might have been going on like this for years. (57)

Through this Gus gives us the impression that the self-willed commander’s orders must not be tolerated. The authority upstairs doesn’t care about their limitations in the room. Nor does it want to hear from them anything. The authority is there to order and they are to obey. They have no say in how they are to be treated there. When an order for a cup of tea is placed before Gus, his grumbling attains a poignant tone:

GUS. He wanted a cup of tea! What about me? I’ve been waiting a cup of tea all night. (63)

Here we get a clear picture of a dictator who is never satisfied with all that his servants have to do for him and never bothers about others.

Ben and Gus are also true representatives of the soldiers who fought for their masters during the Second World War. Their lot was to shoot at their fellow-beings at the order of an unseen power which is totally ignorant of them.

Pinter’s next play, A Slight Ache can also be seen as a study of dictatorship which gradually becomes a threat to ordinary human beings. The Matchseller in the play appears to be an amusing thing when the couples Edward and Flora just see him, but he becomes a
potential threat to them later. They try to propitiate him, but the dominating power in him gets the upper hand and when he goes away he takes with him Flora, leaving Edward helpless.

A dictator pleases all for some time and some try to please him. But those who love freedom cannot follow him, as Edward cannot. In the meantime, the emergence of the Matchseller produces anxiety in them. When Edward comes back having an interview with the Matchseller, Flora asks him:

FLORA. You are not still frightened of him?

EDWARD. Frightened of him? Of him? Have you seen him?

(Pause)

He is like a jelly. A great bullock fat of jelly. (189)

The image we get here is that of a matchseller who appears all on a sudden and becomes a threat to Edward and Flora. They try their best to accept him only as a street-vendor. Failing in it, Flora tries to appease him. However, the Matchseller becomes a real threat to Edward when he comes in and takes away his wife, Flora. The image of the matchseller is reminiscent of the dictatorship in a peaceful country. Some try to conform to it, some support it as they are made subjects of it. And there are some who protest against it but become helpless before its might. Thus the metaphor in this play can also be interpreted as a political one.

In Pinter's early plays, we can see his conviction of reality as he says in his interview:

There is only one reality, you know. You can interpret reality in various ways. But there is only one. And if that reality is thousands of people being tortured to death at this very moment and hundreds of thousands of megatons of nuclear bombs standing there waiting to go off at any minute, then that's it and that's that. It has to be faced. (“Hem Interview” 21)

It is this conviction that made him a conscientious objector even at the age of eighteen.

Stanley can be taken as a representative of the Jews who have been in the process of a
constant search for a shelter. He is taken away from the shelter where he reaches and is persecuted for some guilt of which he is ignorant and perhaps innocent.

Such living conditions in England during the formative period of the dramatist must have been a constant source of anxiety in his life. And this anxiety finds expression in his plays. His plays, as he says, have "dealt with the individual at the mercy of authoritarian system" (Nightingale 139). This authoritarian system makes an individual anxious in his existence, so the anxiety expressed in the plays is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the political atmosphere of the England of the times.

Even in his personal life, Pinter has been a man who stands for human rights and freedom. He has condemned the American interference in Vietnam and he says that his own country has become a satellite of America as Czechoslovakia is of Russia (Nightingale 133). As Benedict Nightingale comments, his active interest in Amnesty International, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Arts for Nicaragua, the Index on Censorship and International PEN etc. points to Pinter's personality as a rebel (130). His Turkish trip along with Arthur Miller again was an eye-opener for him. When there was a threat against Salman Rushdie by Iran in 1989 for his book *Satanic Verses*, it was Pinter who led a delegation demanding action in defence of Rushdie, and his Turkish visit made him an indignant, vociferous, and demonstrative man (Nightingale 133). Its reflections can be seen in the plays *Mountain Language*, *One for the Road* and the dramatic fragment *Precisely*. As he himself admits, some specific political incidents "shocked" him "into life and into the act of writing" (Nightingale 145). This doesn't make him a political writer, but the political background of the plays has its part in making him create politically anxious characters who are disturbed by factors of political nature.

The plays of Pinter thus present the image of man in the grip of anxiety and insecurity of a variety of kinds—psychological, moral, social, philosophical and political. These
concerns emerge all the more strikingly in the plays because of their being rooted in the playwright's own life and times.
Works Cited


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