

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Dislocation is an inevitable condition of contemporary social processes. Harold Pinter's plays manifest elements of social dislocation at several levels, puzzling his critics, who find it difficult to categorize his plays under a single rubric. Initial response to Pinter's plays was based on the reception of his plays as an English manifestation and adaptation of the Absurd movement in Europe. Peacock (1997:1-12) views Pinter's theatre as 'hermetically sealed' and points out his comparability to Beckett. The Pinteresque has also been compared to the Kafkaesque. Billington(1996:349) perceives Pinter's strong affinity to Kafka, on the basis of his screenplay on Kafka's *The Trial*. Similarly, Naturalist elements in Pinterian drama have been observed by Lahr (1972:61) :

The same passion for objectivity and clinical analysis of the human animal, which gives Chekhov so much of his strength, feeds the work of Harold Pinter, who uses the conventions of Naturalism, to go beyond them and chart mankind's evolving sense of its own boundaries.

Pinter's success as a playwright lies in his being elusive to the existing analytical practices within drama criticism. He seems to have developed what Williams (1977) calls a new 'structure of feeling'. On the uniqueness of Pinter's dramatic mode, Lahr (1972:61) says, "Pinter's impulse is for a supra-realism, which can offer a vision of life in its ambiguous entirety, a theatrical hypothesis for an audience to entertain, in which all the facts are presented but never prejudged."

The progress of Pinter's criticism has derived its impetus from the unsettled debate on the nature of his drama. This diversity of approaches in Pinter criticism has been possible due to the absence of a pre-given conceptual framework in his plays ( see Schechner 1966:177), so that the plays can be subjected to multiple conceptual structures.

The aim of this chapter is not to offer a review of Pinter criticism, because such an exercise is not relevant to the purpose of this study. Moreover, a review of Pinter criticism is available elsewhere (see Vashista 1998, Sakellaridou 1988). The only purpose of evoking the diverse interpretations of Pinter's plays is to acknowledge the wide range of approaches available within Pinter criticism and to justify the need for the present study. A common aspect of focus in various approaches to Pinter's plays is the sense of terror faced by the characters in diverse ways. Ganz (1972:161) says:

As the inhabitants of Eliot's waste land fear the cruel April whose rains threaten the sheltering spiritual winter in which they live, so the focal characters of Harold Pinter's plays often find their insulated worlds menaced by the intrusion of some vital elemental power.

The menace in Pinter's plays manifests itself in various subtle forms, individual as well as institutional. As a result of this menace, Pinterian drama is characterized by social dislocation, at physical level as well as in terms of change in one's position within the social structure.

Pinter criticism has a complex dynamics. While some of the early adverse responses to his drama have been replaced by a positive reception of his plays, there are other critical opinions about his plays, which have remained unchanged, for example, the nature of language in his plays. Esslin (1972:35) says:

A true understanding of Pinter's use of language must be based on deeper, more fundamental considerations. It must start from an examination of the function of language in stage dialogue . . . Pinter has . . . discovered that traditional stage dialogue has always greatly overestimated the degree of logic that governs the use of language, the amount of information that language is actually able to impart on the stage, as in life. People on the stage, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Rattigan, have always spoken more clearly, more directly, more to the purpose than they would ever have done in real life.

The strategies of Pinter's representations place his drama in the sociology of everyday life, distinct from the metaphysics of Beckett or Kafka.

The role of Pinter criticism has been to provide multiple conceptual frameworks, rather than solving the problems inherent in Pinter's theatre. In fact, the richness of Pinterian drama is due to certain problems in his plays remaining unresolved. The consequence of the vast body of Pinter criticism has been to establish the Pinteresque as a familiar dramatic idiom. As a result, Pinter's world no longer remains an unfamiliar world to the audience/reader, because his plays depict the world through an inversion of the familiar conventions of dramatic representations. Pesta (1972:127) writes: "Pinter evokes a mood of

terror and mystery by creating a distorted world in which the reasons for events are suppressed, and the trivial daily affairs of life give rise to the most passionate actions and revelations.”

The menace in Pinter's early plays like *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* remains vague and unidentified. However, in his later plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, the source of the terror is identified as state itself. This shows a gradual change in Pinter's dramatic rhetoric, which makes his classification in terms of existing rubrics an impossibility. Cohn (1962:79) comments on this:

Like Osborne, Pinter looks back in anger; like Beckett, Pinter looks forward to nothing...Pinter has created his own distinctive and dramatic version of Man vs the system. Situating him between Beckett and the Angries is only a first approximation of his achievement.

The discussion so far indicates that it would be an analytical futility to begin an analysis of his plays with an attempt to categorize his drama in terms of rubrics like 'Absurdist', 'Naturalist', 'Kitchen Sink' and so on. Pinter is Pinter because he is not Beckett, Osborne or Kafka. The present study of his plays begins with a disregard to the stereotypical tendency of classifying his plays.

Pinter's drama manifests the symptoms of the postmodern condition, — especially at the level of language; silences and pauses in his plays are the linguistic representations of the postmodern predicament, relegating identities and relationships to a perpetual state of redefinition. This theme is explicitly depicted in plays like *The Basement*, *The Dwarfs* and *The Collection*, in which there is a

suggestion for a new configuration of relationships. Bold (1994:35)

comments on the uncertainty of language in Pinter's Plays;

This obstacle (i.e. language) and its nature are better understood if Pinter's ingenious theatre language is appreciated as a feature of 'the post-modernist world' and if Pinter's work is recognized not as a radically unusual departure from tradition, but as a part of a wider movement and concern with language affecting much of twentieth-century literature.

This, however, does not imply that Pinter's plays can be analysed in terms of a particular post-modernist theory / perspective. In fact, chapter two discusses why it is not possible to study Pinter's plays in terms of available post-modernist theoretical resources. One vital reason for this impasse is that Pinter's plays demonstrate a wide swing across the traditional and modernist/post-modernist discursive domains, which makes it impossible to select a particular framework as the exclusive context for an examination his plays.

A recurrent theme in Pinter criticism is that his plays constitute a 'minimal' drama at several levels, as the playwright minimizes the use of dramatic features. The characters in his plays are devoid of explicit motivations and personal histories (Pinter 1976:9-16), which can at best be inferred ambiguously. The situations in his plays are not well defined and seem to be devoid of specific purposes. The dialogue in Pinter's plays involves minimal words, interspersed with silences, pauses and reformulations. Boulton (1972:98) comments:

The language in which Pinter's vision is conveyed is fragmented and staccato; long speeches are rare and even when they occur they consist of brief sentences; indeed the language is appropriate to characters whose

sense of security extends no further than the length of a few words.

This minimalism imparts ambiguity, discontinuity and vagueness to the plays. However, at a deeper level it makes the plays aesthetically rich, by providing a scope for multiple interpretations of the plays. It can be said, though in passing, that because of the ambivalence at several levels, Pinter's plays are potential texts for the Reader-Response approach. Another crucial aspect of Pinter's plays is that the social image in his plays is simultaneously local and global. It is this wide range of social concerns in his plays that renders them amenable for a sociological analysis.

There has been a growing shift in Pinter criticism from a character-based study to a socio-political study of his plays. Billington (1996) has brought about a complete reversal in the earlier Pinter criticism, through his first authorized biography of the playwright. Billington's biography places the work of Pinter in the context of the playwright's personal life and relationships, experiences and dramatic changes. The function of Billington's book in Pinter criticism is revolutionary for two reasons. First, it provides an interesting personal context to the plays, which had been ignored by the earlier criticism of his plays, due to an over-emphasis on his similarities to Beckett, Kafka and Chekhov. Second, the book carries further the shift in Pinter criticism in the direction of a social, political and cultural study of his plays. Suffice it to hint at the idea of these shifts rather than dwell on the actual shifts, because such an exercise would be repetitive and hence, redundant.

The need for this study of Pinter's plays arises due the fact that most of the earlier studies of his plays have focussed on individual characters in the plays and their specific predicaments, whether at psychological level (see Gabbard 1976), in a feminist perspective ( see Sakellaridou 1988), or at any other level. Therefore, there is a need to construct the larger society in Pinter's plays, through the micro-level personal encounters in the plays. The characters in Pinter's plays find themselves engaged in everyday encounters on trivial subjects, whereby they make an attempt to establish themselves in the social world around themselves. For a long time in his career as a playwright, Pinter was preoccupied with the possession of physical spaces. Plays written in the vein of *The Room* focus on the image of a few people in a room. Pinter (1976:10) says, "I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground." It is also interesting to relate the locations of Pinter's plays to the kind of social drama that is enacted in the plays. From his pre-occupation with spaces, Pinter moves on to a mental drama in plays like *Landscape* and *Old Times*. An important feature of Pinterian drama is the gender based encounter ( see Billington 1996), with an emphasis on the male exploration of female psyche, dramatized in plays like *The Collection*, *The Lover* and *Ashes to Ashes*.

Pinter's plays posit the problem of impossibility of maintaining a stable and homogeneous society. This social aspect is dramatized in the context of family relationships in plays like *A Night Out* and *The Homecoming*, in which the structure of family is at stake because of the divergent values held by the members, though in different social contexts. *Family Voices* and *Moonlight* also depict the fragmentation of family life. Peacock (1997:154) says about *Moonlight*, "Its themes are divided family, betrayal, paternal bullying, loneliness and death." The drama of family life in Pinter's plays points to the larger scene of fragmentation and dislocation of social life. While *The Homecoming* dramatizes the subversion of the normal concept of family, *A Kind of Alaska* portrays the dislocation of family relationships at temporal level, by depicting the freezing of memory and therefore, an anachronistic perception of life. The theme of memory appears in Pinter's plays frequently in various forms, most explicitly dramatized in *Landscape and Silence*. From the location of family, Pinter's plays shift to an institutional setting, the signs of which are visible as early as in *The Birthday Party*, in which the conflict is between the individual represented by Stanley and the organizational control represented by Goldberg and McCann. The institutional setting grows in its dramatic intensity across *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Hothouse* and *Victoria Station*, till it manifests its utter control of private lives in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*. In depicting the institutional life, Pinter has drawn data from diverse types of organizations: a criminal organization in *The Dumb Waiter* to the state in *One for the Road*. Thus, the plays of

Pinter gradually expand their canvas, beginning from an encounter between individuals, they move towards larger social groups, through family as the basic unit of social organization and eventually depict the image of a complete society, by introducing state itself. Therefore, it becomes necessary to study the nature of society in his plays.

*1/ The* The growth of post-structuralist literary theory seems to have given primacy to novel as a genre and has marginalized drama. This is indicated by the fact that there have not been comparable developments in the methods of drama criticism, which depends on the terminology borrowed from the criticism of novel. Therefore, drama invites alternative analytic frameworks, in the absence of well-formulated literary theory related to the study of drama. With the choice of Pinter, the predicament becomes doubly intensified, because Pinter's plays cannot be analysed in terms of the established conventions and practices in dramatic representations. The choice of a sociological framework for the present study is necessitated by some of the existing problems in drama criticism. The sociological approach also does away with the necessity of using the abstract jargon of the contemporary poststructuralist literary theory. In this sense, the present analysis of Pinter's plays seeks to offer a new perspective on the plays, without discarding the available interpretations of his plays. The specific direction of the analysis is discussed in detail in chapter two, which specifies the method and framework of the intended sociological analysis of Pinter's plays. *12*

In most of Pinter's plays, the action results in a visible change in the power relationship between / among the characters. The action in his plays suggests social dislocation indirectly, by depicting the fate of private relationships of the characters. Thus, in order to construct a continuous narrative of social dislocation, the plays need to be read in an appropriate sociological manner. Since most of Pinter's plays involve two or three characters, his plays depict the drama of isolated social actors rather than a drama of social dislocation. The task involved in this dissertation is to enlarge the micro-level representations and discover the possible macro-level social condition implicit in the limited actions of the plays. The events in the plays are fragments of various types of social processes, which imply dislocation of characters in physical as well as symbolic terms. The symbolic nature of social life is discussed in detail in chapter two. Thus, the newness of this dissertation lies in the shift at a 'symbolic' level, in the sense that the usual symbolic interpretations of Pinter's plays at a literary-dramatic level have been shifted to the social-symbolic level.

There is an element of repetition in Pinter's plays. Parallel and comparable situations reappear in several of his plays. The aim of this study is to identify the different ways in which social dislocation has been manifested in the plays. The twelve plays are selected for analysis on the basis of two criteria. The first criterion of selecting the plays in this dissertation is their amenability to a sociological analysis.

The emphasis in selecting the plays has been on their representation of a social 'process' rather than a private encounter between individuals. The actions in the plays selected for analysis imply processes of dislocation, generating subcultural themes at several levels. The next chapter analyses the relevant aspects of subculture, by focussing on the shifts in the definition of subculture and the method of identifying subcultural processes in the plays selected for analysis. It is for this reason that plays like *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *Moonlight* have not been included in this analysis, though the excluded plays otherwise embody several significant aspects of the Pinter canon. The second reason for choosing the present plays and excluding some others is that the plays selected depict social dislocation at its peak, though dislocation is expressed in many other parallel plays at a low key.

The present sociological study of Pinter's plays can be justified on the ground that among the post-1950's British dramatists, Pinter has isolated himself from commitment to any socio-political ideology and has often claimed that he writes for 'himself', as reflected in his views in 'Writing for Myself', a conversation with Richard Findlater, quoted in Pinter (1977:12):

I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function. I write because I want to write. I don't see any placards on myself, and I don't carry any banners. Ultimately I distrust definitive labels.

While Pinter may have been truthful at the moment of making the above statement, his plays do have deeper sociological meanings. Moreover, the social concerns in his plays have been universalized and there lies Pinter's dramatic aesthetics. Thus, in spite of his conscious desire and claims, Pinter's plays constitute a 'social drama', not in the usual sense of depicting the conditions in a particular society, but in portraying the general postmodern social condition, which defies stable social definitions. This background necessitates a full-length sociological study of Pinter's plays, the present dissertation being a modest attempt to illustrate one of the several possibilities in a sociological approach to Pinter's plays.

The subcultural framework is chosen for the analysis because formation of subcultures is one of the most immediate concomitants of social dislocation. Therefore, logically speaking, the plays selected in this dissertation are analysed as symbolic manifestations of diverse subcultural processes. The aim of using the subcultural framework is to examine whether the dislocation in Pinter's plays leads to some social change and if yes, what are the nature and implications of this change. The subcultural perspective is also significant from the point of view of the fact that Pinter himself represents the Jewish subculture in the context of the mainstream British culture. If Billington's analysis of Pinter's plays in terms of his personal life and perceptions is accepted, it follows as a corollary that Pinter's personal experiences, as belonging to a minority social group, are likely to be manifested in his

plays as a decontextualized subcultural rhetoric. This justifies the selection of a subcultural framework. Another reason for the choice of subcultural framework is that Pinter's plays posit multidimensional manifestations of subculture. Therefore, the plays have rich sociological data for studying various subcultural processes and hence, the potential for generating analytical data for empirical subcultural studies, based on the 'lived' experience of social actors. Thus, the present study has an interdisciplinary relevance.