

The Devaluation of Language in the select plays of Beckett and Pinter.

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Abstract:

The rise of ' Absurd Theatre' is one of the most remarkable contributions to contemporary art and literature. The Absurd playwrights have, in common, the profound awareness of the absurdity of existence marked by acute sense of existential anxiety and dilemma. Suffering from these vicissitudes of the existence made them too much thoughtful and philosophical. This shows why these writers have experienced intensely the existential angst and non- entity leading to their distrust of the traditional mode of communication. Both in theme and techniques, the Absurd drama radically departs from the traditional writers' reliance on logicity and fixities of expression. They even take stage as a multidimensional medium undergoing the interplay of visual elements and devices like light, sound, props, settings etc. Thus, the Absurd playwrights communicate this very anxiety of alienation by means of complex elements both verbal and non- verbal. Their experiments with the various nuances of the non- verbal communication and highly descriptive language are the natural corollary. The introduction of a novel theatrical language, therefore, remains a hallmark of the Absurd/ Existentialist writers. The present paper is a critical endeavour to analyse the devaluation of the language in the select plays of Beckett and Pinter. It would seem that Harold Pinter, like Beckett, Genet, Adamov, and Ionesco, developed a theatre language marked by minimalism and non- verbalism thereby leading to the devaluation of the language.

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What distinguishes the dramaturgy of the Absurd playwrights is the innovative employment of the anti- linguistic aspects like devaluation and contrariness of the language. In his famous book, '*Language of Silence*' George Steiner remarks:

" The devaluation of language is characteristic not only of the development of contemporary poetry of philosophical thought but, even more, of modern Mathematics and the Natural Sciences. It's no paradox to assert that much of reality now begins outside language. Large areas of meaningful experience now belong to non- verbal languages such as Mathematics, formulae, and logical symbolism. The world of the word has shrunk".(13)

The critics like Martin Esslin and Ruby Cohn often talk about the wordlessness in the Absurd writers. In '*The World of Harold Pinter*' Ruby Cohn observed regarding the Pinter plays that he " often feels languageless through all his work"(56). Beckett equally intensely felt the problem of communication and the devaluation of language. The characters in his plays do realise the limitations of the conventional mode of verbal communication as it fails to adequately depict the nullity of existence. In '*Waiting for Godot*', he aptly declares: " Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"(41). The verbal repetitions like, " Nothing

to be done" and " we're waiting for Godot" throughout the play refer to the inadequacy of the verbal medium. In his well-known play, '*Endgame*' , through the characters of Hamm and Clov, Beckett brings out the sheer desperation of the humanity and the utter failure of the words for expressing the anguish of existence:

Hamm: ' We're not beginning to.....to....
Mean something?'

Clov merely laughs,

' Mean something! You and I
Mean something'(32)

Harold Pinter is one of the most powerful practioners of what is called the devaluation of the language in the theatre.As in his major, so in his minor plays, we notice a consummate execution of the various aspects of the non- verbal communication characterized by mental gaps, pauses, silence etc.It seems that these devices are not extraneous to the characters, their dialogues arising from the conflicts in their minds. As in life, so in drama, these pauses and gaps surface the inner turmoil of the characters. '*The Dumb Waiter*' has the manifestation of the mysterious/ supernatural elements which become incredible unless we relate them to the subconscious motivation of the characters.Thanks to the great explorations of Freudian psychoanalysis, the playwrights like O'Neill, the Absurd playwrights have made essential use of the Depth- psychology to lay bare the inner conflicts of the characters. The pioneers of the Modern Verse dramatists like Eliot and Yeats had already evolved a dramatic language with minimum words and maximum suggestions/ connotations. Pinter seems to start with the idea that profound awareness of the truth and intense feelings lead to the verbal incoherence. He vividly observed:" The more acute the experience, the less articulate the expression"(11) He uses incoherent halting prose that tends to be almost sonorous hinting at poetic meanings. Through the conversation between Ben and Gus over the trivial activity like " Lighting the Kettle" we notice the playwright' s unique communication marked by repetitions, incoherence, minimalism, dots, pauses and silence:

BEN:(powerfully) if I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

GUS: How can you light a kettle?

BEN: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech.

GUS: I've never heard it.

.....
.....

BEN: I'm looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.

GUS: Yes, but I've never heard....

BEN: (vehemently) Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

GUS: What does the gas.....?

BEN: (grabbing him with two hands by the throat ,at arm's length) The Kettle, you fool!

(GUS takes the hands from his throat)

GUS: All right, all right.

(Pause)

BEN: Well, what are you waiting for?(7)

The devaluation of the language could be seen here in the repetitions as the verbal medium has failed to fulfil the adequacy of the enigma in the mind of the characters. So both of them keep harping:

" Let's finish and go. Let's get it over and go. Get the thing done. Let's finish the bloody thing. Let's get the thing done and go."(8)

Both the characters recall a messy incident which disgusts the audience by its very disjointedness or contradictions. The way Gus and Ben remember with conviction a girl whom they had killed in the past:

" It was a mess though, wasn't it?

What a mess! Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one.

They don't seem to hold together

like men, women.A looser texture. Didn't she spread,eh! She didn't half spread."(7).

In another minor play, '*The Room*', Pinter delineate s the role of the unseen forces in governing man's life.

Rose(wife) and Bert(husband) suffer from cold relationship as the husband doesn't fully reciprocate with the wife. Rose goes on referring to the warmth of the room as opposed to the dampness and obscurity of the basement flat. The entry of an intruder (Riley) into the cosy atmosphere is unbearable to the couple. Both of them attack him and beat him to his blindness.When another man Kidd interrogates her about the room , she deliberately escapes and doesn't adequately respond:

Mr Kidd: when I lived here.

Rose :I didn't know that.

Mr Kidd: I will sit down for a few ticks.(He sits in the chair)

Rose: Well, I never knew that.

Mr Kidd: Was this chair here when you came?

Rose: Yes.

Mr Kidd: I can't recollect this one

(Plays : One,107).

We notice a sort of evasion of communication here, rather than a proper reciprocation.Through the devaluation of language, Pinter does convince us that the inside the room and the outside world aren't compatible with each other.

The devaluation of language enabled the playwright to effect the reduction of the communication into brevity and compactness. One also comes across the twists and turns of

the conventional expression accompanied by the pauses and silence. Like other plays, Pinter employs, with felicity and facility, the least possible words in his play, '*No Man's Land*' to suggest the endless confusion pertaining to the existence. The dialogic interaction between the leading characters of the play, Foster and Hirst show it. Whereas Hirst shows desire for change, Foster opposes it and laughs at this idea. He opines that a thing, once happened, can't be further changed because this is a truth as cold as the Winter. He argues: "There's no possibility of changing the subject since the subject has now been changed" (Act 2, 93). His philosophical attitude to life deepens and he finds the eternal winter pervading all:

Foster: So that nothing else will happen forever. You'll be simply sitting here for ever.

.....

Hirst: It's night.

Foster: And will always be night.

Briggs: Because the subject---

Foster: Can never be changed.

Silence. (Act 2,95)

We discover that the characters around Hirst also realise the all- pervading sense of nothingness and chaos . Spooner starts feeling the same eternal winter of dilemma and enigma all around and cries desperately:

No. You are in No Man's land which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent.

Silence

Hirst: I'll drink to that

He drinks. (Act 2,95)

To sum up, the devaluation of language is the lasting contribution of the Absurd playwrights to the world of drama. It's through this reductionist method that they could succeed in exposing the saga of existential angst lurking in the inner world of characters. This is a sort of communicational strategy by which the Absurd playwrights come very close to the Postmodern techniques marked by heterogeneity, indeterminacy and complexity.

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