

The Theme of Isolation in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*

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The human being in modern life has become victim of frustration, loneliness, loss of communication and isolation. Harold Pinter, the British playwright reflects exactly this state of human being in his play *The Caretaker*. His well known plays are *The Room*, *The Homecoming*, *The Birthday Party*, etc. But his real breakthrough came with the publication of *The Caretaker*. Harold Pinter's works present directly or indirectly the influences of pre-war and post-war incidents. The sense of rootlessness, loneliness and isolation can be seen in his characters. The audiences are made to laugh but at the same time they are threatened by violent action that destroys the central character.

The Caretaker discusses the critical condition of characters in the play. All the three characters Aston, Mick and Davies do represent their isolation with more or less intensity. This play of Pinter opens the life in general and life in 1950s England in particular. The isolation is either forced on them or it is selected by them on their own. His characters do not allow themselves to form good relationship with others. From the very beginning of the play, the realistic details occur. Aston lives in a room of an apartment that is owned by his brother Mick. Though they are brothers there is no proper communication between them. Aston lives the life of mentally retarded human being because of the electric shock treatment given to him. The very isolated condition of Aston suggests the critical existence of man in the modern world, who may live the life as mentally retarded person like Aston. Aston not only rescues Davies but helps him by providing with tobacco, a pair of shoes, bed and above all allowing him to share a room with him. Aston's activities of helping Davies express Aston's need for companionship. He expects Davies to stay with him. Aston realizes his isolation and when he gets the opportunity to end it, he tries to cherish it. Davies is also badly in need of companionship. He says to Aston:

"You been a good friend to me. You took me in. You took me in, didn't ask me no questions, you gave me a bed, you been mate to me." (1982: 75)

Davies is cut off from the society and he is outcast. He lives his life in dirt and nearly all dislike him. It is Aston who shows some kind of kindness to Davies. He is brought home by Aston and is offered everything that Aston could offer. Aston also offers him the job of caretaker. Davies fails to enjoy this situation. He accepts everything but with complaining nature.

Though Aston and Davies feel isolation and are in need of companionship, both are different in their nature. Aston is in his late twenties or early thirties. He is generous and co-operative. He has some qualities of Lord Buddha, as the statue is placed in Aston's room. Aston not only rescues him from cafe fight but also places him in sound position as needed for Davies. It seems that Aston was intelligent and gave harsh comments on some of the issues in the society. However the society represented through the character of Mick, does allow him to express his comments. Therefore Aston is unwillingly forced by his mother and brother to accept the electric shock therapy. The shock treatment leaves Aston mentally retarded person. He is forced to be isolated. However he is good even after becoming mentally retarded. He does not take revenge of the society. He works for compromising with society. Unfortunately he fails to get proper response from Davies. His dream to build a shed and develop communication with Davies result into frustration.

On the other hand Davies is old tramp probably in his sixties. He is homeless and badly in need of companionship and a house. He gets the opportunity to stay in Aston's room. Rather than cherishing the chance, Davies always complains about the inadequacy of things. He blames others for his own mistakes. He disturbs Aston but does not accept the charge. He seems to be racist, as he charges the black people without any fault of them. He is no doubt isolated. When he gets the chance to end it, he tries to dominate it. Davies takes the help as it is his right. He is offered a job of caretaker by Aston as well as Mick. But he does not like to work, he excuses of his documents and papers that he has kept in Sidcup. It was expected that he should decrease the gap between the two brothers, but on the other hand it is Davies who not only increases the gap but also tries to separate them completely. Mick comes to know Davies's intentions and decides to speak in favour of and to support Aston, his brother. Davies's isolation thus continues.

Like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* Harold Pinter uses limited characters and presents the absurdity of life. Pinter's play begins and ends in that isolated room in an apartment. Davies's isolation looks self imposed because of his greedy nature. He is aggressive and unstable. He disturbs others and is thoroughly unpleasant person. Though Davies is poor he fails to receive sympathy from the audience. One might feel that Davies's isolation is inevitable for what he is. He seems deceptive as he postpones his visit to Sidcup where, he says, he lived before and where the documents are kept.

Aston's isolation is not as simple as that of Davies. Aston's isolation springs from different causes. Davies trusts no one and turns on them who help him. Aston believes even a person like Davies. Aston's fault is that he trusts people too much. He says :

“ I thought...they understood what I said. I mean I used to talk to them. I talked too much. That was my mistake.

The same in the factory.” (1982: 54)

Aston's reward for too much trust is that he is betrayed by not only an intruder like Davies but also by his mother and brother. And the result of this is the isolation.

The isolation in the play can be seen from very setting of the play. In many of Pinter's plays, the setting is an isolated place and the isolated place is “the room.” Actually this domestic setting provides a serviceable environment for the action. The room literally expresses limitation of characters. The characters stay within this limitation. However they try to dominate one another in this limitation, win over each other and possess the place where they stay. Pinter has said:

“ I have usually began 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...” (1998: 17)

The particular context is the isolated room in which normally two or three characters could be found. These characters do not communicate properly with each other. As in the play , *The Caretaker* the two brothers fail to communicate and both of them lead isolated life, particularly Aston. The third character, Davies also lives the life of outcast and isolation. His greediness of nature does not allow him to enhance the communication either with Aston or with Mick. Davies, then, continues to be the victim of isolation.

Harold Pinter's many plays present the intruder who disturbs the privacy of a character. The privacy of these characters is not accepted by themselves but it is forced on them. Therefore they are not happy in their privacy. The character like

Aston needs the company of someone. He feels that as Davies is outcast, isolated and helpless in his condition, Davies could be the best partner to end his isolation as well as of Davies's isolation. Aston helps Davies, brings him home though Davies is not a good man. Davies complains as soon as he enters Aston's room. As Aston has failed to develop proper communication with his own brother, Mick; Aston turns to Davies for help. Aston does not want Davies to leave the room. He offers everything that he could offer to Davies. This illustrates Aston's strong wish for communication.

Pinter's character tries to identify himself within the limited space of the room. Sometimes the character seems to be happy with the place that he lives in. It seems that the character himself wants to lead the life in isolation. He tries to avoid the communication with the outer world. He does not give complete information about himself. Davies's identity depends on the papers that he has kept in Sidcup. He does not go to Sidcup or postpones his visit. Therefore his identity is doubtful. This is one of the reasons that Davies leads the life of isolation. It is not clear in the beginning of the play where from Davies comes and it is not also evident where Davies goes at the end of the play. However one thing is quite clear that Davies was isolated and is isolated. At the end Mick seems to be on good terms with his brother, as both Mick and Aston smile looking at each other. This is a sign of need for communication. However, Mick does not stay with his brother and leaving everything in charge of Aston, he goes. Though there is slight hope of collaboration between the brothers, they do not live together. The play ends where it begins. All the three characters are separated from each other and continue to live the life of isolation.

Aston was very talkative kind of person before he was given the electric shock therapy. He used to ask a number of questions about the certain things in society. He had certain doubts about such things in life. As it was dangerous to the society, his questioning ability was hampered by electric shock therapy. He is made mentally retarded. Then Aston not only loses questioning ability but also fails even to communicate properly. It is his questioning nature and goodness that makes him a mad person. Thus he becomes the victim of isolation. It seems that Aston himself knows that his mental illness can be cured by developing communication with others. He tries his level best to establish communication with Davies, but unfortunately his fate does not allow it to happen. As Aston fails to improve communication with Davies and Mick, he continues to be a mentally retarded person. The person like Aston faces the punishment of isolation without any fault of his. The so-called society does not allow him to be the part and parcel of society. Therefore Aston is forced to lead an isolated life and the character like him is given inferior treatment in the society.

Mick and Davies represent society. Mick does not like his questioning nature. He supports the electric shock therapy to be given to Aston. Mick probably knows that the therapy would hamper Aston's questioning ability. The therapy rather than curing Aston turns him into an abnormal human being. Aston continues to speak but illogically. Mick's non-communication with Aston increases Aston's problem. The fact is that a mentally retarded person can be cured properly by emotional attachment along with medical treatment. It was Mick's responsibility to treat Aston with brotherly affection. Unfortunately Mick treats Aston as 'the other'. Mick indirectly forces isolation on Aston. Though Mick smiles at looking at Aston at the end of the play, he does not stay or live with him. He also does not allow Aston to be part of society. However his attitude towards Aston is not as harsh as of Davies. Mick gives the authority to do whatever he likes to do with the room and apartment. But Mick leaves the room at the end; Mick leaves Aston again in isolation.

Aston tries hard to be the part of society. He does help Davies who in one way represents society. He is an abnormal but behaves like a normal and very cooperative human being with Davies. On the contrary, Davies who is a normal human being, behaves abnormally. By helping Davies symbolically he wants to be the part of society. However the society in the form of Davies treats him as mad and abnormal human being. Davies declares Aston does not understand anything. One really feels extremely upset that Aston is rejected in the society and that he has to continue his life in isolation. Aston's helping nature results into nothing but in frustration.

The term isolation is different from solitude. The isolation is normally forced on human beings. It becomes a punishment for the isolated person. Solitude is something that is willingly accepted. The solitude can be creative. It can provide peace of mind. The isolation of a human being may result into frustration. Harold Pinter tries to say that the human beings are destined to be isolated and lonely. Therefore his characters prefer to live in isolation. His characters fail to improve proper communication with others. Davies is completely isolated, whereas Aston has a brother who gives his support at the end. Mick says:

“Aston can do it up, he can decorate it, he can do what he likes with it. I am not bothered. I thought I was doing a Favour, letting him live here. He's got his own ideas. Let him have them. I am going to chuck it in.”(1982: 74)

Pinter through his play, *The Caretaker* suggests that the isolation is inevitable companion of life. Davies's isolation is result of selfishness and lack of proper attitude. Aston's isolation is the result of his too much trust on others in society. Aston's isolation is not the fault of him but of the society.

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