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## **Existentialism in the Plays of Harold Pinter: Reconsidering the Existing Research**

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### **Abstract:**

Existentialism is a twentieth century's influential literary and philosophical movement which focuses on individual existence. The movement, which originated in the philosophical and literary works of Sartre and Camus, has influenced various disciplines. Existentialism deals with the problems of the meaning and purpose of life on earth. Man has found life meaningless, full of absurdity and without any purpose. Such issues are addressed by the philosophical movement called existentialism. It is an attitude, an outlook that lays emphasis on the purpose and meaning of human existence in this world. The basic theory of existentialism is an insistence on the actual existence of the individual as the basic and important fact, instead of a reliance on the theories of abstractions. The central doctrine is that man is what he makes of himself; he is not predestined by a God or by society, or by biology. Failure of communication, search for identity, ominous past, and isolation of human being are some of the existential issues significant for the study.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Existence, Isolation, Insecurity, Loneliness, Rootlessness, Absurdity.

The present review paper examines existentialism as a school of philosophical thought, its exploration and application in the plays of Harold Pinter. For the said study five research papers related to existential issues have been selected. The study proposes to explore how existential issues have been analysed by various scholars in these research papers published in various national/international research journals or anthologies of high repute. Before going into the deeper waters of Pinter's existential issues and their exploration by varied scholars, it is important to comprehend the term existentialism. Indeed the term is applied to the work of a number of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who, despite profound doctrinal differences, generally agreed that the focus of philosophical thought should be to deal with the conditions of existence of the individual person and his or her emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, posthumously regarded as the father of existentialism, maintained that the individual solely has the responsibilities of giving one's own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom.

Apart from Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger influenced other writers and existentialist philosophers such as Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka who undertook existential themes in their literary works. In the works of all these writers emphasis is on the individual, on what constitutes a fulfilling life, and on identifying what are the major obstacles that hamper the realization of a happy human life. After Second World War (1939-45) existentialism became fashionable and it reasserted the importance of human individuality and freedom.

Regarding the key concepts of existentialism we can point out a few major beliefs of the school.

1. Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence. They do not believe in hypothesizing a human essence. Life cannot be lived in mere philosophies, talks, discussions or deliberations. We need something concrete to make it meaningful. Otherwise it is like the one in Albert Camus's work *Myth of Sisyphus* where a man moves a huge stone to the top of the mountain and it falls down when it is about to reach its destination, he moves it again and it falls down again. Similarly, do we find our life dull and boring, meaningless and fatally repetitious like the hero of Camus's work? If yes, we need to bring some concrete meaning to it. Thus one issue in existential philosophy is to reject abstractions and bring concrete meaning to human existence.
2. Secondly, a central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is important. As Sartre puts it in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."
3. Thirdly, angst, sometimes called dread, anxiety or even anguish is a term that is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is generally held to be the experience of humans' freedom and responsibility.
4. Fourth is the existentialist concept of freedom where almost anything is possible and where values are inconsequential to choice and action.
5. The fifth existentialist concept is closely related to freedom that is that of facticity. Sartre has defined this concept in his work *Being and Nothingness* as that "in-itself" of which humans are in the mode of not being. This means that one's past reconstitutes one's present. However, to say that one is *only* one's past would be to ignore a large part of reality (the present and the future).
6. Sixth existentialist concept is the theme of authentic existence which is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is often taken to mean that one has to "find oneself" and then live in accordance with this self. In contrast to this, the inauthentic is the denial to live in accordance with one's freedom.
7. Seventh concept is related to despair. Commonly defined as a loss of hope, Despair in existentialism, is more specifically related to the reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the "pillars" of one's self or identity. What sets the existentialist notion of despair apart from the dictionary definition is that existentialist despair is a state one is in even when one isn't overtly in despair.

8. The next concept is related to reason in human beings. Emphasizing action, freedom, and decision as fundamental, existentialists oppose themselves to rationalism and positivism. That is, they argue against definitions of human beings as primarily rational. Rather, existentialists look at where people find meaning. Existentialism asserts that people actually make decisions based on the meaning to them rather than rationally.

Now, measuring with the parameters given above, we can analyze the research papers proposed for the present study. Five research papers from various scholars based on similar issues have been selected for the analysis. The complete details of the five papers selected for the study are as follows:

1. Sanjay Kumar, "Shifting Images of the Past in Pinter's Plays" (2003).
2. H. Aliakbari and F. Pourgiv. "Harold Pinter: The Absurdist-Existentialist Playwright". (2006).
3. Saeid Rahimpour. "The Ambiguity of Self & Identity in Pinter's Comedy of Menace". (2011).
4. H.B. Patil. "The Theme of Isolation in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*." (2011).
5. Fatemeh Azizmohammadi and Hamedreza Kohzadi. "The Language of the Absurd Theatre in Pinter's *Birthday Party*" (2011).

The paper "Shifting Images of the Past in Pinter's Plays" contributed by Sanjay Kumar chooses to study several of Pinter's plays. The division has been made as - early play of Pinter, plays written in the middle of his career as playwright and plays written towards the end of his career. In this paper Dr Kumar studies how the past of the characters is a dominating force in their present and how it affects their lives at present. The ghost of past makes the life of Stanley uneasy in *The Birthday Party*; it hovers all the time in the memory of Davies in *The Caretaker* who wishes to go to Sidcup where he had a great life in the past. In *Dumb Waiter* and *A Slight Ache*, which were written towards the end of Pinter's career display only a little impact of past on the life of the characters. The paper points out varied shades of past and how these shades change with the change in the career of the playwright. While in the early part of his career Pinter depicted past as an ominous presence; in the middle of his career past registered its presence but it made life a little absurd and towards the end of his career the ill impacts of past fade away from the life of his characters.

The paper has been organized very well. It looks into the whole of Pinter's career as a playwright and analyses one aspect of existential life of the characters, that is, past and its shifting shades.

The paper in collaboration by Aliakbari and Pourgiv, the title of which is "Harold Pinter: The Absurdist-Existentialist Playwright" looks into varied aspects of Pinter as an existentialist playwright. First of all, the paper analyses absurdity of human existence with the help of textual study of Pinter's play *The Caretaker*. It sees into the issue of insecurity, lost identity and puzzling past through the character of Davies. Similarly the issues of violence, insecurity, disintegration, evasiveness and purposelessness are some of the

dominating issues in the life of characters in the play *The Room* which this paper undertakes to study. While studying the play *Birthday Party*, the paper focuses on how language fails to unite various individuals and how intentional deviation from communication leads them to the solitude of a fearful void. Thus, the bigger questions concerning man and his position in the universe emerge: what is man and where does he really belong? Does his existence mean anything? Such existential questions have been explored at length in this paper. Apart from the three plays mentioned above, another significant play *The Dumb Waiter* is also taken into consideration to explore how frivolous the human existence is, and how man cannot escape its onslaughts.

The paper is quite comprehensive and covers almost all aspects of existentialism in simple terms. The language and ideas flow like free waters in a river and the meaning is made clear like crystal clear streams of the river water. The paper successfully sees how existentialist thoughts have been embedded into the texts of the plays from Pinter's pen. However, all the plays have not been included in the study, nor can they be included in the little space of a research paper.

Saeid Rahimpour's paper entitled "The Ambiguity of Self & Identity in Pinter's Comedy of Menace" analyses the theme of menace-stricken identity in Harold Pinter's drama. The major issue highlighted in this paper is the one of threat and its influence on identity. He explores how feelings of uneasiness, restlessness, evasiveness, disintegration, instability and domination get manifested in Pinter's themes. The protagonist of the play Stanley has been found suffering from purposelessness, nothingness, hovering sense of lack of meaning, unknown fear, threat and violence and hence miserable challenge to his identity. A certain sense of mystery runs through the drama. Stanley is seen grappling with angst and sense of loss of identity. Two mysterious people Goldberg and McCann, whom he does not know or does not want to know, pose a threat to his existence. They come to his abode and try to take him away to an unknown place. The paper also analyses how Stanley feels isolated despite the love and care showered on him by his landlady Meg. The inner turmoil as well as the outer reality that pose threat to the existential identity of the protagonist has been represented well. However, the paper proposes to analyse language of the characters towards its outset but the same is forgotten. Again the title appears to encompass Pinter's drama, which means several of Pinter's plays, but actually one play *The Birthday Party* has been analysed which can be called a mislead wittingly or unwittingly done. On the whole the paper is a good one which goes in depth to analyse the selected aspects of existential issues in the play *The Birthday Party* which makes an interesting reading.

H.B. Patil's paper "The Theme of Isolation in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*" undertakes to investigate the theme of isolation in Pinter's play *The Caretaker*. The paper explores how the three characters Davies, Aston and Mick are isolated from society and what impact this isolation has on their existence. The absurdity of human existence where irony is found at every step and where the contemporary habit of thanklessness is in the air, finds place in this play. Davies is saved by Aston; he is given shelter but once safe in the sanctuary he tries to oust Aston and secure the place for himself. A better manipulator of language Mick, Aston's

brother comes and restores Aston and kicks Davies out of the sanctuary. The paper also compares the existence of three characters with the existence of three characters in Samuel Beckett's absurd play *Waiting for Godot*. The isolation faced by the characters in Pinter's play generates a feeling which is experienced by Beckett's characters: "Nobody comes nobody goes its awful!" In this paper "the room" has been represented as a limited place which occurs in almost all of Pinter's plays. This room itself stands for isolation. The paper concludes that Pinter through his play, *The Caretaker* suggests that the isolation is inevitable companion of life.

The paper focuses on isolation as an evitable part of human existence in one play of Pinter and explores it well. However, the deeper impacts of isolation on human psyche could have been explored in this paper the opportunity of which has been missed.

Finally, the paper entitled "The Language of the Absurd Theatre in Pinter's *Birthday Party*" written by Azizmohammadi and Kohzadi point out how Pinter's plays disclose man's state of solitude, nothingness, meaninglessness and isolation on this sorry planet of ours. In Pinter's world, language has lost its semantic power and significance. The paper divulges that the characters in *The Birthday Party* are not capable using language which can pave way for communication. Moreover the paper analyses how language, like an absurd hero, brings to the audience the absurdity of human situation. There could be another aspect of language in Pinter- language as a means of escapism from the onslaught of unbearable existence which could have been explored. On the whole it is good paper, different from other papers, as it focuses on linguistic aspect of Pinter rather than the thematic one.

Now all these papers register a certain kind of development in research on existential issues in the plays of Pinter. While Dr Kumar's paper analyses one aspect of existentialism in Pinter, which is, shades of past, Aliakbari and Pourgiv's paper encapsulates several aspects of existentialism in the selected playwright's plays. Rahimipoor's paper attempts to explore two more aspects of existentialism – identity and ambiguous self which were not explored in the papers mentioned earlier. Patil's paper "The Theme of Isolation in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*" focuses on one play but it explores isolation, a very significant feature of existentialism which is not addressed in earlier papers. The final paper, as stressed above, undertakes an altogether new aspect of existentialism, which is, language of the absurd. However, despite the varied aspects covered by these papers, one area of research remains untouched. And this area is linguistic nuances which make human existence all the more absurd. This part of existentialism can be an area which needs more exploration. With this hope the otherwise absurd existence continues...

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