

# Chaos in Post-War Life —Analysis of *the Caretaker*

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**Abstract:** The life in post-war period has been adverse due to the sudden eruption of the World War II that inflicted human suffering. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, human life has been awful, problematic and miserable etc. the paper is an effort to understand post-war human suffering. Harold Pinter, the absurdist playwright investigated the unfavourable circumstances in this period where every kind of predicament troubled the humans. Existential dilemma has been the foremost issue discussed in the paper; it kept post-war humans on shocking edges all the time. The other issues reflected in the paper are Identity crisis and Breakdown of communication which have been the factors for human absurdity. The issue of hegemony or domination found among individuals is revealed through the events of the play.

**Keywords:** Communication breakdown, Hegemony, Identity crisis, Post-war, Suffering, The Caretaker.

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In the post-war period, human disturbance has been at its peak throughout the world in general; and massive in England in particular. The life in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been in utter chaos that people were unable to live life in a normal way. It seemed that the modern individuals have given up the life and so affected the other members in the family. Ubiquitously, these individuals like to be idle, and dragged their life towards absurdity. Harold Pinter investigated the abnormalities of the modern humans, and portrayed their sense of dwelling through his plays. In the play *The Caretaker*, Pinter delineated the absurdity and existential dilemma in the post-war world through three characters—Aston, Mick, and Davies. The three characters have three different stories to portray respectively. All these characters struggle in their respective ways of being and existence in the course of the play. The characters are confined to a single room and the process of the play focuses on their hopes and aspirations.

Pinter begins his play by portraying the undisciplined life of the modern individuals. The random and disordered manner of objects represents the distorted existence of post-war people. There are many useful objects, utensils and cooking materials which are wasted by absolute neglect. The activities of all the three characters characterise their psychological and behavioural disorders. Davies is an old-man among the three who suffers most throughout the play, while Aston and Mick are two brothers both contradictory in each other. Physically, Mick and Aston are two bodies with distinctive characteristics. They are totally paradoxical in thoughts, ideas, emotions, temperament, and behaviour etc. In the words of Almansi and Henderson, “Mick and Aston are extrovert versus introvert, active versus passive, work-hungry versus work-shy, aggressive versus gentle, strong versus weak and so on” (55).

Pinter detected relationship breakdown in the modern society, where even intimate and close relations lost their worth. In the play Mick represents the relationship breakdown through his strange attitude. Even his intimate relatives such as his uncle remain unfamiliar to him, “To be honest, I’ve never made out how he came to be my uncle’s brother” (*Caretaker* 31). Both Aston’s and Mick’s relationship represents conventional brotherhood. Due to absence of a woman-figure, the two brothers Mick and Aston do not have a single conversation throughout—until play comes to its conclusion. The presence of a woman-figure in their lives would have brought them closer in contact with one another. As there is no woman-figure in the house and in the characters’ life, so they are seen apart from one another. The absence of a woman leads the life of characters towards tension, anxiety and absurdity. A house bereft of woman drags its members towards suffering and predicament. A woman is a channel to hold relations and communication is facilitated by the presence of

woman in a house. One feels comfort and joy in the company of women, but their absence brings misery. Pinter staged his play to show the relationship breakdown in the post-war period, i.e. individuals are unknown to their relatives. Relatives are strange to each other. Even close relations do not have value in the eyes of absurd characters. Love and care for relatives has faded away and individuals have become materialistic and selfish beings (*Caretaker* 31).

After World War II, people entirely lost interest in life and did not like to do any kind of work, but preferred to be idle at their homes; and this idleness made their families to suffer. The idleness and unemployment have crippled the whole world since man put foot on earth, passed through Pinter's period and continues to date. Masses of people face predicament and strive to get desired jobs and to adjust in suitable positions. Also many people remain idle and do not like to do any work. Under such circumstances life becomes hard to live and turns absurd. The individual talent is lost due to their stillness and passiveness. The family conditions in such circumstances remained in despair and miseries haunted its inactive and dull individuals. In the play, we notice Mick is worried and anxious about his brother's idleness who dislikes work, "I'm . . . I'm a bit worried about my brother" "No, he just doesn't like work, that's his trouble" (*Caretaker* 48). Such idleness caused a drastic effect on the work of their intimates and spoiled their attitude, mood, behaviour; and thus made them restless. It also badly affected another's job, business, and profession; and causing them to suffer, "Causing me great anxiety. You see, I'm a working man: I'm a tradesman" (*Caretaker* 49). Mick is an active man in the play dealing with business and has concrete ideas of turning the house into a penthouse. He has pure thoughts and dreams to build a palace for himself and his brother Aston (*Caretaker* 60-61).

The idea of idleness and unemployment is found in the contemporary world too. We realise the struggle of individuals, the trouble that unemployment and idleness caused leading the world towards anxiety, suffering, hopelessness, terror, wars, etc. People face hardship in getting jobs and majority of the people remain idle after their vigorous efforts to get desired jobs. Unemployment has been the foremost factor for human suffering. It has made the society to suffer—not only the illiterate part but the literate part as well. Nowadays, it has become very difficult for an individual to adjust to any position in life.

Pinter certainly has acted as psychologist and studied modern human behaviour. He proposed that an individual usually talks to himself out of threat, anger, anxiety, and tension etc that represent human absurd behaviour. Pinter's characters are not friendly but rivals who dislike one another and feel threat of each other. Most of the times they endeavour to gain supremacy over others. Pinter's most absurd characters are easily irritable and short-tempered; they lack the power of tolerance. Absurd characters mostly abhor each other but often feel tenderness toward someone. The attitude of post-war individuals is observed to be short-tempered, jealous, irritable, having feelings of superiority or inferiority complex. In modern era, no respect is found among individuals for senior citizens who are considered a burden not only on society but on the family too.

Pinter's plays are dominated by verbal and physical violence in which characters contend for positions of power. Mick's aggressive interaction acts as a dominance over miserable Davies who could not speak properly without uttering clichés and gigs. The cycle of domination continues through a number of stages that makes Davies to suffer more and more at the hands of Mick. Since he is an old man and cannot protect himself, he does not have any power and authority to silence the opponent. Pinter's characters are unsophisticated and remain unaware of the circumstances around them. We come to know about the characters' psychological realities depicted through the absurd events in the play such as fear, threat, terror, turmoil, depression, etc. It gives rise to dramatic tension that audience feel from characters' actions. Regarding his character, Pinter says:

A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things (qtd. in Almansí and Henderson 54).

Davies is Aston's accidental guest who after being given refuge begins conspiracy against both brothers in which he never succeeds. He plays the role of conspirator and instigates Aston thus, "your brother's got his eye on you. He knows all about you" (*Caretaker* 67). He also threatens him by recounting his past treatment, "They'd come here and pick you up and carry you in! They'd keep you fixed! They'd put them pincers on your head, they'd have you fixed" (*Caretaker* 67). Thus Davies tries to achieve the power to dominate Aston and then to stay at the home permanently. He resists to do the job as caretaker at Aston's house:

You think I'm going to do your dirty work? Haaaaahhhhh! You better think again! You want me to do all the dirty work all up and down them stairs just so I can sleep in this lousy filthy hole every night? Not me, boy. Not for you boy. You don't know what you're doing half the time. You're up the creek! You're half off! [. . .] Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nuthouse! (*Caretaker* 67).

Pinter conveys the message that a young man can do anything with his power, passion and strength; but in old age, he is deprived of all authority and is merely left a wretched figure, a vulnerable, exploited being. Those who are oppressed necessarily do not raise their voice, and merely utter gigs, puns, and non-sequiturs. It reflects the period of England after World War II, when humans used to attack and beat each other inappropriately. To dominate over others and then to reign perpetually is inherent to man's nature. So Mick torments Davies both physically and verbally and questions, harasses, and encounters him (*Caretaker* 30). Pinter creates extreme violence in his theatrical world (Dukore 27).

The ignorance of religion has led humans to trauma and made drastic changes in their absurd existence. During modern period, man lost his ties with religion, and remained ignorant of it. Circumstances became totally unfavourable and harmful. It seemed nothing favours to absurd characters. Religious ignorance caused natural changes and disasters and this is represented in the play *The Caretaker*. When the play begins, there has been a torrent of rainfall outside, "I'm waiting for the weather to break" (*Caretaker* 51). It shows that modern humans have given up life due to dangerous damages done by World War II; it filled man with fear. Absurd individuals do not have any curiosity to live more but only yearn to die. The concept of life and death has made them detest almost each and everything. The existence in this melancholic world is for a limited period of time. The thought that humans struggle, strive a lot to earn, to achieve certain goals and objectives has to depart permanently sooner or later. So as per Pinter's and other absurdist's investigation there will remain nothing in the Universe, everything has to vanish with the passage of time. In reality man is unaware of his existential condition. He does not know anything about his existence. So, people after post-war period did not take care of their society, home and even themselves due to their absolute absurd behaviour. Ionesco submits:

I have never succeeded in becoming completely used to existence, neither to that of the world, nor to that of others, nor above all to my own. I sometimes feel that forms are suddenly emptied of their content, reality is unreal, words are only noises stripped of all meaning. These houses, the sky, are only facades of nothingness; people seem to move automatically, without any reason; everything seems to evaporate, everything is threatened — including myself — by an imminent, silent sinking into I know not what abyss, beyond day and night. By what sorcery can all this still exist? And what does all this mean, this appearance of movement, this appearance of light, these kinds of things, this kind of world? And yet, I am here, surrounded by the halo of creation, unable to grasp the smoke, understanding nothing, disoriented, torn away from I know not what which makes me feel that I have nothing (705-6).

The conversation between characters in absurd plays is random rather than sequential, one speaks about some subject while another responds totally out of context on most occasions; and there is continuous repetition of dialogue. Whatever strikes to the character's mind is uttered without any content. Random conversation is the supreme quality of Pinter's plays. People speak unnecessary things citing their dreadful phobia. They converse on varied subjects simultaneously without any proper sequence; they gossip about one subject but leave it unfinished before they begin to talk concerning another subject. So this kind of conversation goes on throughout Pinter's plays and highlights the features of absurd characters.

Love as a bonding element in communication is also perceptible. While we analyse the play, it proposes the love between two brothers in the end. At one moment Mick ensures that he is worried about his brother Aston, who does not like work, but at the end of the play he gives up, "He can do it up, he can decorate it, he can do what he likes with it. I'm not bothered," "He's got his own ideas. Let him have them" (*Caretaker* 74). Love maintains the psychological and emotional balance in individuals, but 'love in a Pinter play differs from the conventional definition of love' (Gale 108). Pinter's love is a psychological need for homeostatic balance and for acceptance or affection or emotional attachment (Gale 108).

Pinter's characters have limited dreams, thoughts, and ideas yet they cannot execute their limited reveries in their real-life situation. The individuals in the modern world dreamt of many things but unfortunately could not fulfil them in real life and remained in their dreamy worlds. Similarly, in the play Aston has golden dreams of converting flats into house but could not do anything to make his dreams come true. Aston has his dreams to fulfil, "I might build a shed out the back" (*Caretaker* 17). Dreams come true when one has passion to work on them in real life. Similarly, Mick has lots of thoughts and dreams that he desires to fulfil, "I could turn this place into a penthouse" (*Caretaker* 60); his dreams inspire the audience to a large extent, he wishes a man should not sit idle rather busy. He hopes, "it wouldn't be a flat it'd be a palace" (*Caretaker* 60). But Aston's idleness makes him anxious and he wishes him to be active, "But he doesn't seem to be interested in what I got in mind, that's the trouble. Why don't you have a chat with him, see if he's interested?" (*Caretaker* 61).

Pinter's characters lack boldness but are well aware about their hidden secret that they themselves have forgotten who they are and where they are (Almansi and Henderson 52). So before Davies' expulsion he cunningly makes an effort to convince Mick and then provokes him against Aston:

What? What I'm saying is, you got ideas for this place, all this . . . all this decorating, see? I mean, he's got no right to order me about. I take orders from you, I do my caretaking for you, I mean, you look upon me . . . you don't treat me like a lump of dirt . . . we can both . . . we can both see him for what he is (*Caretaker* 70).

Davies persuades Mick to consider taking action against his brother Aston, "Yes I could tell him to go. I mean, I'm the landlord" (*Caretaker* 71); so Davies instils in Mick the feeling of ownership and further argues, "I tell you he should go back where he come from!" (*Caretaker* 71). But Mick reflects on his thoughts when Davies speaks ill of Aston making it excruciating and intolerable to a brother like him, "You get a bit out of your depth sometimes, don't you?" (*Caretaker* 71). Mick offers the job as caretaker to Davies and expects him to be first class interior decorator but gets enraged when Davies refuses to accept that he is an interior decorator. He blames Aston for the communication breakdown, "It was him who told you. It was your brother who must have told you, "He's nutty! He'd tell you anything, out of spite, he's nutty, he's half way gone, it was him who told you" (*Caretaker* 73), and it provokes Mick who gets enraged and desperately scolds Davies in a violent manner:

You're really strange. Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. [. . .] Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian (*Caretaker* 73-74).

The issue of Backbiting has been observed in the play, where Davies backbites of Aston before Mick in order to incite him against Aston and to create conflict between them, which proves Davies' conspiracy, selfishness, and meanness. So Aston once out of anger told him, "You've been stinking the place out" (*Caretaker* 35), and it is a fact since Davies stepped into the house, the peace, calm, happiness, and even the relation between brothers got strained. Initially, they did not mind his foolish activities but as soon as he crossed the extreme limits it was impossible for both brothers to tolerate him any longer, and they 'nipped the evil in the bud'. He was like a father figure to them and they served and helped him in every possible respect. Thus, his stay was made comfortable but unfortunately he remained ungrateful. He compelled and provoked both brothers mostly Aston and was kicked off and thrown out of the house. Thus, Newton's third law of motion applies here, i.e. 'to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction'. It all happened as he forgot his real identity, his being, and his status and thought himself something like a partner to both brothers, which Aston resists.

In the words of Gale, "People are existing on the edge to the extent that they will accept any possibility that is offered that might fulfil their individual psychological needs" (107). Davies realises the benefaction of Aston and persuades him to let him stay at home. He feels grateful to some extent for all good Aston has done to him. But his plea to stay on further is not entertained at all. Davies is made to leave the house for ever. Davies feels comfort in his room but in reality he has been tortured there in many ways: he is attacked by Mick in their first interaction, he feels threat from the gas stove near his face, he is awakened during his sleep by Aston, he is unable to sleep due to the open window through which rain falls in on his head. It is his illusionary comfort that he feels through refuge. And ultimately due to his ridiculous and imprudent bent of mind, and his conspiracy gets him expelled from the province of both Aston and Mick. In this way, defeated and dejected Davies makes his way out of the house.

From the play *The Caretaker*, it is understood that predicament haunted humans terribly in the post-war period. The breakdown of communication and breakdown of relationship is also reflected from the life of the characters portrayed in the play. The idleness and unemployment has given way to ubiquitous human absurdity in the modern England. Thus human brain has been polluted to a large extent which polluted the human culture, and so triggered the life to utter absurdism.

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