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## **PHYSICAL VERSUS SUPERNATURAL COMMUNICATION IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAY *THE ROOM***

**Dr Santanu Ganguly**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Netaji Nagar Day College  
University of Calcutta  
Kolkata-700092, West Bengal, India  
E-mail : [sgacademic@yahoo.com](mailto:sgacademic@yahoo.com)  
Website: [www.nndaycollege.com](http://www.nndaycollege.com)

"Apart from the known and the unknown, what else is there?"

Harold Pinter: *The Homecoming*

As a dramatist Harold Pinter needs no introduction. The architect of 29 plays, he is a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. Although he was 24 years younger than Beckett, the term "Pinterese" was in circulation long before "Beckettian" had come into currency. In the canonical text-book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin describes him as having achieved "the status of a major force in the contemporary theatre". His first play *The Room* (which is the subject of my paper) was written for the drama department of Bristol University in a span of just four days that contained all the ingredients, thematic and linguistic, that would establish him as an acclaimed dramatist in future.

*The Room* by Harold Pinter is a one-act play and opens with the protagonist Rose Hudd, a homemaker, preparing tea and snacks while her truck-driver husband Bert sits silent at the table, reading a magazine. Soon, the landlord of the house, Mr. Kidd enters. What follows is an inconsequential piece of conversation in which they live happened to be his bedroom once upon a time and is in fact the best room in the house. He provides some

unimportant details regarding the architecture of the house that the upper floors are more damp than the basement because the rain gets in. When Rose asks him how many floors there are in the building, he gives the incredulous reply that he does not know because he has stopped counting the floors. Mr. Kidd now gives irrelevant information about his family that his mother was probably Jewish and his younger sister resembled her. He now contradicts himself saying that there was no room empty in the entire building although earlier he had claimed that people who used to live "upstairs" had vacated. In fact, when choosing his bedroom now, he could take his pick. Mr. Kidd now departs, as does Bert, when Rose opens the door of the room once again, she finds Mr. and Mrs. Sands on the landing. They ask her the name of the landlord and when she replies that it is Mr Kidd, they contradict her. Rose invites them in and soon the conversation turns to the damp condition of the house. At this moment they inform her that they had been to the basement where they had come across a man. The Sands were actually interested in renting a room in the house and were therefore looking for the landlord. The mysterious man in the basement informed them that there was indeed a room vacant in the house and it was Room Number 7— Rose realizes with a start that this is the number of the room in which she was living. When the Sands leave, Kidd rushes in unexpectedly to inform her that the man in the basement wanted desperately to meet her. When Rose asks Mr Kidd to fetch him quickly, a blind Negro who enters who introduces himself as Riley. Rose accuses him of harassing their landlord and enquires about the purpose of his visit. Riley addresses him as Sal and says that her father wants her to come home. He starts feeling her eyes affectionately when Bert enters. In a fit of anger, he abuses Riley and kicks him on the head till he dies. The play ends with Rose unexpectedly going blind.

Although Pinter bases himself essentially on the form ground of everyday reality, supernatural communication often pervades the action, especially in his early plays. Thus we have the mysteriously-operated food-lift in *The Dumb Waiter* bringing communications from an eerie force above like a modern-day *dues-ex-machina*; the enigmatic match-seller in *A Slight Ache* who stands immobile outside the house of Flora and Edward communicating nothing, but is an object of potential terror; or for that matter, the two men Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party* who appear from

nowhere, communicate something that Stanley cannot understand, and carry him off to nowhere. Supernaturalism therefore becomes an important ingredient of Pinter's dramaturgy for the creation and deployment of the "menace" or menacing communication (spoken or unspoken) that critic Irving Wardle and his followers characterize Pinter's plays with. Deployment of this unexplained supernatural communication in the plays of Pinter has been subjected to various interpretations though Pinter was very much against such stereotyping. Riley in *The Room* has, for example, been looked upon by Martin Esslin in his book *The Peopled Wound* as "a dead man or a messenger of death" (63) while Terence Rattigan labelled Mick, Aston and Davies of *The Caretaker* respectively as "the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New, and Humanity" (quoted in Hinchliffe 8).

Although pauses and silences are predominant in the plays of Pinter indicating the breakdown of communication in the modern world, *The Room* is probably an exception largely because it is the dramatist's first play. Although non-communication is the forte of Rose's husband Bert who remains silent till he re-appears at the end of the play to kick Riley dead, his wife Rose more than makes up for his taciturnity, with her communication aimed at Bert and also at herself. In fact, the play begins with Rose talking away garrulously as she feeds and pampers her husband Bert with overwhelming motherliness much like Meg in Pinter's later play *The Birthday Party*. She places a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him, urging him to eat it up as she butters the toast, while commenting on the room in which she lives: "That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (Pinter, *The Room* 7). She makes tea and decides to have some cocoa when Bert comes back, but cannot take her mind off the basement of the building below her room and who might be living there:

I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy.

...

I think it's changed hands since I was last there. I didn't see who moved in then. I mean the first time it was taken.

...

Anyway, I think they have gone now.

...

But I think someone else has gone in now. I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me. ... (Pinter, *The Room* 8).

Thus, the simple-minded woman Rose who "sees the room as her only refuge, her only security in a hostile world" (Esslin, *Absurd* 235) has a deep fear of the unknown outside the space of her room, making it ideal for the supernatural to work its will on her.

My interpretation of supernatural communication in *The Room* is that the different people who visit Rose's room at different points of time are different manifestations of fate or destiny in a person's life. The intervention of destiny is not new and has been a popular theme in literatures across the world. English literature especially, from the time of Old English literature to the post-modern period, has preoccupied itself with the role of fate. Whether it is the mighty Beowulf who speaks or the humble Maurya, the popular opinion is that fate goes as it must. Having lived the precarious existence of a Jew in Nazism-dominated World War II Europe, Pinter may have often wondered what his destiny would communicate to him next. It is this that may have led to his pronounced symbolic representation of fate in his maiden play and in subsequent productions. He had once proclaimed, "I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid..." (qtd in Pinter, *Writing* 20). Destiny is the only thing that communicates silently with people it controls, and everyday experiences of its efficacy shows that it communicates "only too well".

"My plays are what the titles are about," (82) Pinter had once pronounced to William Packard in the magazine *First Stage*. The room in Pinter's play is not any ordinary room but a symbol of Rose's body. In the programme brochure of the performance of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* at the Royal Court Theatre in March 1960, Pinter had

communicated to his audience — "Given a man in a room and he will sooner or later receive a visitor. A visitor entering a room will enter with intent" (qtd in Esslin, *Wound* 33). If that be the case, then the visitor like Mr Kidd, the Sands couple and Riley cease to be visitors and become allegorical personages entering with the intention of intruding into the world inhabited by Rose, with the internecine desire of communicating sinister things. Moreover, the extent to which 'darkness' crops up during the running time of the play both as a theatrical prop as well as a pronouncement by the characters, leaves us in no doubt that Pinter may indeed have had the dark recesses of fate in mind when he wrote this play.

Commensurate with the three different types of people who visit Rose that fateful evening in her room, are the three manifestations of fate in Rose's life as represented symbolically by Pinter. The appearance of the first intruder Mr Kidd signifies that moment when a person's fate is indifferent to her and exists without affecting her in any way. It neither communicates anything, nor supports her, nor destroys her but remains merely as a presence just as Rose's landlord remains as a harmless presence inside her room. If one observes carefully the conversation between Mr Kidd and Rose, one realizes that the conversation is not of much consequence. Rose asks him whether he has a woman to help him, which he denies; he in turn asks Rose if the rocking chair in her room has been there from an earlier time and Rose replies that it is her own. Rose asks her landlord about the damp in the basement; and he answers that it is worse upstairs. At one time he claims that the entire house is packed with tenants, and the next moment he says that so many rooms are empty that he can actually pick and choose his bedroom. He refuses to sit down when Rose tells him to, but does so a little while later nonetheless. He even tells her certain baffling things such as despite being the landlord, he does not know how many floors are there in the house. He says that he used to count them earlier, but with the death of his sister, he has stopped. Many of the verbal exchanges between Rose and Kidd are actually non-sequitur. For instance, from talking about counting floors in the house, Kidd suddenly starts reminiscing about his sister and moves on to a description of his mother and how she was Jewish. When Rose asks how his sister died, his reply is "I've made ends meet". At no point of time during the entire conversation with Kidd does

Rose appear ill at ease or discomfited by his words or presence. On the contrary, Mr Kidd appears strikingly as a comic character and even his name — Kidd — suggests that he is as innocent as a kid and is merely kidding Rose through his talk. So it can be concluded that Mr Kidd and his intrusion into Rose's ontological space is symbolic of an indifferent fate that, to paraphrase words used by Pinter himself, neither illuminates nor horrifies Rose, despite all the conflict and confusion in the conversation.

But it is neither the characteristic nor the intention of destiny to remain neutral forever without impacting the person concerned in some way, or without communicating something that will shock the person out of her wits. "Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening" (qtd in Pinter, *Writing* 20), Pinter had opined, and it is only man's fate that is omnipotent enough to enter into man's life without any fear. The advent of the Sands at Rose's room after Kidd departs is exactly Pinter's dramaturgical movement in this direction jars her tranquil world. Unlike Mr Kidd who had knocked and entered Rose' room on his own, in the case of the Sands family, Rose opens the door herself to find them standing in the dark and invites them in, symbolizing how a person is often responsible for bringing dark, malefic forces of destiny into her own life. Contrary to the previous incident, the conversation between the Sands couple and Rose is not at all innocuous. The tension begins with the mutual verbal sparring over what the name of the landlord is and whether he actually lives in the house or not. Earlier the two had said that they were going upstairs from the basement, now they claim that they were going down and Rose catches their contradicting communications. Mr Sands has a habit of bullying his wife verbally into submission which is also superficially aimed at Rose to an extent, indicating how fate often bullies its victims into muted acceptance of its power. But the danger posed by the Sands turns menacing when they reveal to her the presence of a stranger in the basement who cannot be seen and is a terrifying voice in the dark really. This unnerves Rose greatly because it demolishes her conviction that no one could live in the damp basement. To make matters worse, the menace posed by malevolent fate becomes complete when she is told that there was indeed a room vacant in the house and it was the room occupied by Rose.

Unlike many critics who have viewed the Negro Riley as a dark, supernatural messenger of death, I choose to look upon Riley as a representative of the benevolent fate that supports and guides mankind. In contrast to sterile fate symbolized by Mr Kidd, and in contrast to evil, inscrutable fate symbolized by the Sands, this is man's familiar fate which man knows he can bank upon for protection and succour, because in the play both Rose and Riley seem to know each other. Riley calls Rose by the alternative name Sal, which she does not deny. And when Riley claims that he is named Riley, Rose protests that it is not. Riley feels Rose's eyes affectionately, and with great sensitivity invites her to return home. This is very benevolent on his part because "home" provides a person greater refuge than the rented room atop a damp, mysterious basement. The Negro's addition, that her father wants her to come home, adds poignance and familiarity to the communication. The very fact that Riley offers to accompany her home is an indicator of a person's good luck channelizing her in the right direction.

Rose's response to these three encounters is Pinter's way of communicating the utter confusion in the mind of modern man. When the indifferent and the malefic had come into Rose's life, she had actually invited them in, given them chairs to sit and warm themselves before the fire and offered other forms of hospitality. When good fortune does come into her life in the figure of Riley, she is inimical towards his presence, hostile and cantankerous in her communication with him, and attempts to dismiss him as quickly as possible. Since anything good has a very short-lived presence in the modern world, Riley (or Rose's positive destiny) enjoys only a temporary presence in her life. Very soon evil, in the form of Rose's violent and bullying husband Bert, comes and kills Riley in a gruesome manner, thereby snuffing out the good from her world.

Pinter's play ends with the climactic incident of Rose going blind. Literally this may seem inexplicable and may be another pointer to Pinter's mysterious world in his plays, but metaphysically, it is not too difficult to explain the sudden occurrence. Like Lear and the Earl of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* who cannot 'see' who their friends and enemies in reality are and Gloucester even proclaims sadly "I stumbled when I saw" (305), Rose too has lost the ability to see and identify what is good for her and what is

bad. She becomes an embodiment of the type of person Eugene Ionesco has in mind when he observes, "cut off from his religions, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd in Esslin, *Absurd* 23). It is therefore appropriate that Rose should go blind in the end.

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