

Ecological Absurdity: A Study of Identity Crisis in Urban Landscapes in Select Works of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett

Antara Bhattacharya

PhD Scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Abstract: The sensibility or trend of Absurdist Drama was a product of the Second World War, whose horrific events threw the very existence of a healthy environment or humanity into question with the severe environmental degradation caused by numerous dead bodies, smoke, pollution due to weapons and damaging effects of the nuclear bombs. The philosophical concerns of Theatre of the Absurd echo with isolation, human angst, loss of relationships, etc., resulting in an environment of emotional aridity. The loss or destruction highlighted in absurd plays is emotional and ecological in equal measure. This paper discusses the ability of the Theatre of the Absurd to express ecological concerns and environmental anxieties through the plays of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, where depicted landscapes form a bridge between the environment and the psyche of the characters, reflecting their distorted sense of self and identity. Martin Esslin clearly stated that the idea of Absurdity is an ever-evolving concept that remains relevant even in the twenty-first century when the potentially catastrophic environmental crisis is looming large on our planet. For example, the landscape outside the room in Pinter's play *The Room* seems too menacing for the protagonist to step out, no seeds sprout in Beckett's world of *Endgame*, Lucky and Pozzo desperately attempt to grapple with the question of identity and life's purpose on a street i.e. the urban landscape in *Waiting for Godot*. This paper will explore how, in many of the absurd plays, the home and the ecological landscape outside is a space for the negotiation of identities.

Keywords: Absurdist Drama, Emotional Aridity, Ecological Concerns, Identity, Environmental Crisis, Urban Landscape

Introduction

Theatre of the Absurd was a literary movement that became popular after the Second World War. The movement got its name after Martin Esslin's seminal 1961 work *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin defined 'absurd' as "out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical" (Esslin 23). This movement was heavily influenced by the Existentialist philosophy propounded by Albert Camus in his work *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), where he describes the figure of Sisyphus from Greek mythology who endlessly tries to push a boulder up a hill, but the boulder keeps rolling back to the bottom. This futile process was a symbol of the aimless existence of human beings, a theme recurrent in Absurdist plays. As Esslin explains:

Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought [...] The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images. (24-25)

Esslin emphasised that absurdity is not an exhaustive or time-bound idea but an ever-evolving concept that remains relevant at every point in time. Moreover, the real significance of absurdity lies away from the shadows of a post-Second World War society. Most of the research related to the Theatre of the Absurd has been confined to existentialist criticism, but interestingly, Absurdist drama has shown environmental anxieties and ecological concerns as well, which is an aspect of absurdity that largely remains unexplored. This ability of Absurdist drama to depict the damaged ecology of the world that we live in, becomes even more important in contemporary times when the potentially catastrophic environmental crisis is looming large on the planet.

Absurdist Drama was a product of the post-World War II society which in itself highlights the movement's intimate connection to environmental concerns. The Second World War witnessed a horrendous amount of damage to the environment with smoke, weapons, nuclear bombs, numerous deaths, ruthless exploitation of resources, an abuse of nature and collapsing properties everywhere;

much of this damage is actually irreparable. The human race was stuck in a society of broken promises, a struggle to make ends meet, a shocking human obsession with violence, a complete breakdown of communication and a broken trust in all societal structures—a world where individuals felt like strangers in their very own lives, bodies and community, they were devastated by this dismantling of a safe living environment.

The absurd nature of the ‘human condition’ that Martin Esslin talked about is heavily influenced by environmental factors as well as the toxic and damaged relationship that exists between nature and humans. This paper focuses on two of the most prominent absurdist playwrights—Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter whose works express ecological concerns through the troubled condition of the individuals within the human society. The selected plays of the two playwrights depict how the characters struggle to find anything to hold onto in life, their inability to come to terms with who they really are and what they can identify with: the outer world or the environmental setup outside the seemingly safer four walls, becomes menacing for the characters and this feeling of being isolated from nature makes their identity crisis even worse. Their troubled psychic spaces mirror the chaotic state of the environment in contemporary times.

The strongest thread that binds Beckett and Pinter’s dramaturgy with ecology is the idea of power. Ecology is not just the study of various elements of nature or the living and non-living components that form the biosphere but the power dynamics that exist between these components. The world has witnessed numerous natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc., or on a lighter note, the world is full of magnificent wonders; observing the magnanimity of the elements of nature makes one realize how insignificant an individual is in this enormous creation, how trivial we are before the power that nature holds over us. This power dynamic is pivotal to the thematic concerns of these two playwrights—Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter—because both of them emphasize the powerlessness of man against the world, which includes the overwhelming impact of nature on humans. The way humans have endlessly tried to exploit and destroy nature has

made their environment unlivable; this emotion is reflected in their plays through the plight of the characters.

Many critics also suggest that Beckett's and Pinter's characters are actually 'placeless'; they are everywhere and yet nowhere; these individuals fail to communicate with the fast-moving, merciless urban landscape outside their cocoon where they try to find an escape. This makes one question whether we can establish a healthy relationship with the urban landscape where we are situated or does the same landscape further alienates us from our own identity. Thus, is this landscape a threat or a saviour? Furthermore, an analysis of the ecological concerns of the works of Pinter and Beckett would give an insight into how the characters respond and connect to nature in contemporary society and interrogate if they can comprehend what their environment is trying to tell them or expects out of them.

Analysis

The term 'ecology' has a Greek origin: 'oikos' meaning home and 'logos' meaning order or economy. Thus, ecology is not a term that is restricted to an understanding of the ecosystem or the existing connection between humans and nature's elements, but it is necessarily a discourse about what it really means to be home. The purpose of this study is to delve deeper into the relationship between the relatively safer world inside the four walls of a place one may call home and the threatening ruthless world outside i.e. the urban landscape, because the struggle for identity is a tussle between these two spaces. The natural world outside is a threat to the characters as it disturbs their domestic space and distorts their sense of self. Pinter's characters represent the existential dread of modern urban society, its pressures and power dynamics. A recurring absurdist feature of many of Pinter's plays is the attempt of the characters to (re)turn to a place called home; the desperation of the characters to find their identity by coming back 'home' in a physical and metaphorical sense. Pinter's works give the readers and the audiences a deep insight into the helplessness or inability to co-exist with the environment or to operate in their ecological setup, thus highlighting the dependent yet detached and complex relationship between the characters and the landscape around them. It is

interesting to observe that in plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker* or *The Room* and others, Pinter situates his protagonists in a closed space, establishing and perhaps asking the characters to believe that it is their home where they are present physically but struggle to truly belong. *The Room* is set in a stuffy space with a bed and a space with cooking facilities, but even in the stuffed, cramped space, there is a sense of emptiness or rather nothingness, as Esslin would have described. *The Homecoming* plays out in a working-class house of 1960s London. *The Caretaker* takes place in a cramped disorganized house in West London where silence speaks louder than words.

These spaces act like a boundary between what is real and what is made up, between the urban landscape and a concrete domestic safe space, between order and chaos—a landscape and the homescape. Una Chaudhuri theorizes on the way the image of home is built as the focus of two very conflicting impulses firstly the longing to find a place of stability for individual identity and the other is the desire to displace or de-territorialize the self. But the tragedy is that the characters representing the contemporary urban society, neither feel a sense of belongingness inside nor outside. Inside the homescape, they struggle to comprehend what their purpose in life is, how they would operate in this unforgiving world, lamenting for a plethora of things that are now permanently lost to them, whereas the thought of stepping outside only creates fear and insecurity in their minds. It is as if their life would decay into chaos the moment they get out of this homescape; unlike the world outside, this is the place where they feel they can somewhat control their identity, even the angst they feel is bearable inside. Harold Pinter himself stated in an interview taken by Kenneth Tynan in 1960, “(they) are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room, there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening.”

Pinter shows how the characters feel that the outside world is constantly posing a challenge to them. Some characters even show the will and courage to step outside to face this challenge but are unable to do so, such as the trip to Sidcup that Davies plans to go for multiple times in *The Caretaker* but it's never executed, and Bert from *The Room* aggressively takes out his van to go into

the cold. Stanley from *The Birthday Party* tries to find a home in a strange place, an Inn which in fact, cannot be anybody's home, but he believes that there is 'nowhere' he could go, so he must settle for an artificial home like this; when he is dragged away from Petey and Meg's guest house, Pinter describes it as an "allegory of death" where Stanley is taken away from a place, he wanted to find a home for himself in. In the play *The Room*, the sixty-year-old protagonist Rose Hudd constantly cribs about the cold, harsh and dark 'environment outside and how she wishes to avoid it at all costs, as revealed in the following lines of the play; "It's very cold out. I can tell you. It's murder" (Pinter 90) and about her existential need to always remain within her safe confines, she says, "No this room is alright for me. I mean, you know where you are. When it's cold for instance" (Pinter 91). In *The Homecoming*, as Ruth and Teddy come to Teddy's family home in London from America, Ruth keeps complaining of the arid urban landscape, the harsh weather conditions and the inhospitable sterile environment there as if the American landscape is unsuitable for living altogether, but in this cramped London flat with Teddy's family members, complicated power dynamics along with sexually charged encounters, Ruth strangely feels like home. The way these characters show desperation towards belonging to the 'home' and cling onto the possibility of a homecoming, represents the human struggle of either not being able to survive in the urban landscape or forcibly trying to fit into it, aimlessly looking for their identity as if the home would hand it to them on a platter. This feature of Pinter's theatrical universe echoes with the ideas of homecoming and dwelling which dominated much of ecocritical writing. According to Carl Lavery:

The inside/outside opposition that Pinter postulates is, therefore, something more than a binary; the inside and outside are combined, part of an impossible whole that demands to be written to be examined. These imaginative expressions of environmental agency in his work foreground the disruptive and differential agency of the oikos in the relationships he investigates, as well as suggesting the dissidence against orthodoxy that is to emerge within the characters. (Lavery 227)

The French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard's famous text *Domus and the Megalopolis* published in 1988, highlights how humans have this tendency to control, tame and metabolize nature for humongous urban structures, so-called modernization and development to further capitalism's agenda which is the root cause of the ecological crisis that humans have landed themselves in; he further states that this mechanical endeavour has resulted in the abandonment and perhaps the destruction of the simple peasant life and the countryside. Lyotard suggests that it is not possible to separate the human from the non-human i.e. nature, they are strongly tied to each other in such a way that the existence of the human depends on the non-human. This anthropological binary intimately ties the human to the destiny and struggle of the planet. Lyotard's idea steers away from the romanticized vision of his predecessors as he states that it is impossible to find any harmony with nature or a stable origin within this natural world. In the context of theatre, this would mean a representation of this detachment or distance that man experiences from the natural world where the stage becomes a space for expressing this strange disorder and chaos that humans find themselves in. This is what one can observe in the works of Pinter as well, where humans make all efforts to tame their environment, the 'home' remains untameable and cannot belong to a single entity—it is everyone's and yet nobody's.

Pinter's understanding of home or homecoming also involves the idea of invasion; one can often see a troublesome element, an unwelcome guest who tries to take control, who tries to disturb the escapist safe space that the characters have created for themselves such as Ruth in *The Homecoming*, who seems to be taking control within a household full of men, Goldberg and McCann from *The Birthday Party* who come to the Inn and aggressively try to dominate and almost threaten Stanley and ultimately drag him out stating that he needs to be 'reintegrated', then Riley in *The Room* who tries to take control over the house that is not his own and finally Davies who invades the uncomfortable silence between the two brothers Mike and Aston in *The Caretaker* and he shows no sign of humility to be given a space that is not his own.

Furthermore, Pinter also represents such characters on stage who are non-natives in the play such as Riley from *The Room*, who is black and rises from the basement of the house. A black

character walks up from the underground as if breaking a societal barrier, disrupting the power structure before him and challenging or rather disturbing the people who claim ownership over a landscape. For a character like Riley, the act of finding a home or feeling at home in an urban landscape holds an entirely different meaning than the other characters. Riley is an outsider in his social environment. His struggle for identity is not the same as others because his battle also involves survival against acts of racial aggression and derogatory remarks or insults from people who claim ownership over the same urban landscape where he is trying to find a strong foothold. Thus, Pinter makes his audience critically think and question what exactly ‘homecoming’ means to an ‘outsider’ like Riley. The fact that he lives in the basement, an underground space, signifies that he does not have a place on the ground, in the heart of the environment, but only somewhere underneath it. Riley constantly persuades Rose to get away from her space and come back ‘home,’ he repeatedly refers to her by a different name ‘Sal’ which seems like an identity abandoned by Rose. One cannot exactly comprehend what Riley means by the term ‘home’ when he wants Rose to return and what role he plays in Rose’s past, a past that Rose does not want to uncover again; Rose is a different being now, she is not Sal as Riley keeps calling her. So Riley is a character who is not only trying hard to establish his own identity and, subsequently his power but also puts Rose and her identity in an extremely vulnerable position while disturbing the little safe space that she has built for herself away from the punishing cold outside. Thus, Pinter also takes into account the loss, displacement, and racial discrimination that builds the idea of ‘home’ for a character and subsequently shapes their identity.

There are only a handful of dramatists who have received the kind of admiration and popularity as Samuel Beckett. Beckett’s name is traditionally associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, but his sensibility has influenced post-war drama beyond this movement and brought revolutionary changes to theatre and its relationship with the audience. His plays loudly echo with existential thoughts, man’s helplessness in a meaningless life and a mechanical world— “Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! (Looking wildly about him.) Look at this muckheap! . . . You and your landscapes!” (Beckett

39). The lines are from *Waiting for Godot*, a play that established Samuel Beckett as one of the most significant figures of post-war theatre; someone who quickly grabbed the attention of theatregoers, critics and scholars alike with his unique stage aesthetics and his commentary on the human condition. Beckett's works not only set an important benchmark for Absurdist Theatre but also changed the face of contemporary theatre forever. It is interesting to observe that Beckett spent most part of his career and life away from Ireland but the Irishness of his writing and sensibility reaches out to his readers and audiences- whether it was the country road with the leafless tree in *Waiting for Godot*, the post-apocalyptic desert-like setting of *Happy Days*, the desert lit up by 'dazzling light' in *Act Without Words*, all show glimpses of the Irish landscape. Also, Beckett's settings mirror the state of mind of the characters and the post-war society. The Irish landscape finds a place in his works, sometimes as a mental space or as a window to the scary urban landscape or perhaps Beckett uses the Irish homeland to reinforce his idea of being nowhere, the inability to find firm ground in this society.

The audience is always aware that stage settings are artificial and all the props are made up but in Beckett's plays, the stage setting is as integral to the plot and theme as any other character. Stage settings depicting nature may appear weather-less, resistant to any and every change but Beckett's landscape undergoes its own arc through the course of the play. A huge part of the impact that *Waiting for Godot* creates on the audience comes from the country road and the leafless tree; the growth of the few leaves on that tree towards the second half of the play shows that Beckett's landscape is not stagnant and weather-less, it is as realistic as the characters and their plight. If one thinks of this landscape in the current social context, perhaps the country road would not be so empty. One never knows if the tree (even though leafless) would find a place in the current urban landscape or not. Perhaps it would be a road where someone or the other is always coming or going, a never-ending string of people, but the larger existential question would remain the same- will Godot ever come? Vladimir and Estragon of the twenty-first century would be full of the same angst and purposelessness as the Gogo and Didi of the 1950s, and the fast-paced life of the current times would leave no scope for contemplation about the aim or purpose of life. This situation says a lot about the

environmental changes or, rather the environmental crisis that looms large in the current times. This section will critically analyze two of Beckett's most popular plays: *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. The play *Waiting for Godot* takes place on an isolated road with a lifeless tree with the two central characters Vladimir and Estragon, who are later joined by Lucky and Pozzo. Here, Godot is a symbol of some higher power, and the two central characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for him, hoping that he would bring meaning to their lives and answer their existential crisis; he would probably help them find an identity of their own. The tree on the lonely road is the only organic element of an urban setting, but it is shown as dormant and dead; the second act even shows a few leaves on the tree when Vladimir and Estragon are engaged in at least some substantial action in the play even if it is meaningless banter. The lifelessness of the tree not just mirrors but also empathizes with the purposelessness and meaninglessness of life, which the characters constantly struggle to cope with. *Waiting for Godot* has largely been understood as a play with a tone of complete hopelessness which it very rightly is, but every now and then there is either a distraction or a make-believe element that saves the characters from slipping into a state of absolute nothingness as depicted in the following lines from the play: "But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! [...] We should turn resolutely towards Nature" (Beckett 71).

The setting of *Endgame* is a small room located at the very 'end of all civilization' often described as an apocalyptic wasteland. Here, Beckett has deliberately used the setting of a room, a place where nature is absent, perhaps to show how unrepresentable the urban landscape has become; some critics suggest that it represents the anticipation of a gloomy future tormented by extreme global warming and irreversible environmental damage. Thus, the urban landscape comprising just a room gives an insight into the dying relationship between humans and the environment. The characters Nagg and Nell are depicted to be trapped inside waste baskets where sawdust seems to be their sole comfort, highlighting the ill effects of rapid technological advancement, industrial development, and increased production of waste. Through this play, Beckett shows us what it means to live in a world

without nature, where the environment is in ruins. Perhaps this setting represents Beckett's concern and prediction for the future of the planet where there is no nature to offer a sense of comfort, peace, or tranquillity, just a lifeless, damaged post-catastrophe society.

The process of coping with a modern urban life resulted in the abandonment of nature, as if the only world that matters is the human world. This indicates the way humans have somewhat forgotten the significance of nature or perhaps ignored its cries for too long. The urban landscape is as broken, as deformed, as damaged, and as barren as human life and their identity. According to Carl Lavery:

In Beckett's hands, theatre is no longer a space where the essence of the human appears; on the contrary, it is a site where the human dis-appears [...] To be a spectator at a Beckett play is to find oneself overwhelmed by the shimmering presence of a strange and estranging world, a world that no longer makes linguistic sense, and where the dangerous binary between 'nature' and culture is troubled, without, for all that, ever being dissolved completely. (3)

Conclusion

On one hand, Beckett makes direct references to the natural environment and even makes nature part of his stage setup as if nature itself is a character in the play while Harold Pinter understands ecology as an act of homecoming, both geographical and emotional; he connects this constant desire of belongingness in a home to the urban social environment. However, the most significant similarity between their concerns is the issue of identity faced by their subjects placed in the urban landscape and a sense of hope. The characters are in a constant state of helplessness, struggle, insecurity, and fear as they grapple with the question of their identity. Practitioners and critics of Theatre of the Absurd initially stated that the movement is strictly apolitical and even the playwrights did not directly indulge in any political commentary in their plays, even though the movement was a product of one of the biggest political events of history i.e. the Second World War. However, as one analyses the ecological concerns of Absurdist drama in Beckett and Pinter's works, it becomes interesting to observe that the urban landscape of which these characters are a part, cannot be looked at in isolation

without considering the politics of it. It is this same landscape, along with its politics, that shapes the lives of these individuals and affects their relationships with society.

In the case of Pinter's body of work, it will not be wrong to say that there is a recurring battle over the possibility of what a home means, and he brilliantly delves deeper into the way ecology can also be a threat which troubles the characters when they are forcibly denied the comfort of a home or try to unnaturally or unethically fit into a home. Ultimately, it is the individual whose position within society is a complex riddle that these characters attempt to solve. To say that the angst, dilemma, aimlessness and lack of harmony that Beckett and Pinter's characters face is only because of issues like class, financial crunch, or social status would oversimplify their condition; what reaches out to the readers and the audiences is a very deep sense of inferiority and powerlessness against everything because of which survival within the society and the act of holding onto their identity, becomes a challenge to them.

Beckett and Pinter's works are rooted in the urban city life set in the heart of the urban landscape, a locale that has traditionally been understood as a sight for emotional bareness, crime, mechanized lifestyle, immorality, and a draining struggle to fit in. All these issues are experienced by Beckett and Pinter's subjects in full force. Thus, the urban landscape is not presented as a world of modernity, progress, or advancement but a place of constant identity crisis where individuals fail to cope, communicate, form meaningful relationships, or find meaning within their lives. The idea of ecology is understood and expressed by both these playwrights in very different ways. An important argument that arises out of Beckett and Pinter's depiction of nature is whether nature is a place where the human appears or is it a place where the human disappears. It is in this estranged world which is devoid of any linguistic sense, that the relationship between nature and humans is problematized.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Almaarroof, Ansam Riyadh Abdullah. "Fragmented Landscape in Harold Pinter's *The Room: A Postmodern Study*." *Journal of Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, Dec. 2023, p. 470-478. DOI: 10.25130/lang.7.4.25.
- Beckett, Samuel. "Endgame." *Internet Archive*, 1988.
https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/3346220/mod_resource/content/1/ENDGAME%20B%20SAMUEL%20BECKETT.pdf
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Edited by GJV Prasad. Pearson, 2017.
- Brater, Enoch. "Talk about Landscapes: What There Is to Recognize." *Modern Drama*, vol. 49, no. 4, *Project MUSE*, 2006, p. 501-513. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2007.0004>.
- Campbell, Sam Nicole. "Blend it Like Beckett: Samuel Beckett and Experimental Contemporary Creative Writing." *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, paper 3769, 2020.
<https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3769>
- Correa, Graca. "*Synthetic Landscapes in Harold Pinter's Theatre: A Symbolist Legacy*." City U of New York Academic Works, 2010.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2665&context=gc_etds
- Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." Vintage Books, 2004.
- Garrard, Greg. "Endgame: Beckett's Ecological Thought." *Samuel Beckett Today*, vol. 23, 2011, p. 383-97. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/41699046. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.
- Lavery, Carl and Clare Finburgh, editors. *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- Lyotard, Jean Francois. "Domus and the Megalopolis." Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Cambridge Polity P, 1991, p. 191-204.
- Pandya, Dipal. "From Absurd to Ecosophy: An Ecocritical Observation in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*." *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, vol.7, no. 3, 2018.
<https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v7i3/ART20181018.pdf>

Pinter, Harold. *The Room*. Internet Archive, 1960.

---. "Interview with Kenneth Tynan." BBC Home Service. Oct. 1960.

---. *The Homecoming*. Grove Press, 1965.

---. *The Caretaker*. Internet Archive, 1982.