

INTERROGATING GLOBAL AND REGIONAL 'ABSURDITY': BRINGING TOGETHER HAROLD PINTER AND CHANDRASHEKHARA KAMBARA

Mahima Raj C

Research Scholar

Dept. of Comparative Literature and India Studies

The English and Foreign Languages University

Hyderabad – 500007

Abstract

The paper intends to bring together two great playwrights of the modernist era – Harold Pinter and Chandrashekar Kambar of the European and Kannada (language widely spoken in the state of Karnataka) literary arenas respectively. The attempt is to study these two authors on a same platform devoid of any hierarchical structures, wherein, the comparison intends not to place value judgements about which writer is the best among the two. Since the European literary scenario usually gains an upper hand in relation to regional literatures of other literary zones, the paper aims to dismantle such notions of disparity between the global and the regional by way of comparison and exploring the literary richness of both the texts produced at different times. A comparative study could be either between the Thematic content of the text that unravels the story or between their Genological similarities/differences. However, its Morphological aspects also form a significant constitutive of an entirety called 'text' is something that does not figure majorly in textual analysis. The paper focuses on a comparative analysis of several important formal elements that are present in both the texts of the modernist era wherein, they render their helping hands in understanding the authors' approaches to the concept of modernism and absurdity. Though, Pinter's and Kambar's socio-cultural, political and literary atmospheres were different in every possible dimension, their approach to modernism, even with following different paths, show signs of similarities in their aim of coming to terms with the past and the presentness of the past, which will be investigated with the use of analysing the formal aspects inscribed by each writers in their texts. Nevertheless, the greater purpose of the paper is to look at how different writers placed in very dissimilar social and cultural contexts could employ similar morphological ingredients to make their work radiate an absurdity characteristic of the modernist era. When

such is the case, one is pushed to question the very notion of globalization wherein translation is believed to have made regional texts reach the global forum, while only a selected number of texts reach the global forte. Though the regional text also confirms to the global criteria of modern absurdity as Pinter's, the Kannada play has remained almost unaware to readers even within India. The paper focuses on this particular issue of global and regional disparity.

Keywords: Modernism, Absurdity, Morphology, Comparative Inquiry, Regional and Global Literatures.

COMPLETE MANUSCRIPT:

To begin the desired morphological comparative inquiry of Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* and Chandrashekar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* belonging to the modern period European and Kannada literary cultures respectively, it is interesting to mention in the initial stage that these two plays mark their distinctive nature by breaking certain norms of the literary form set by the writers preceding their respective literary traditions. In other words, it could be conjectured that they also mark their uniqueness by craftily deviating from the classic traditions of both producing and perceiving drama.

The Birthday Party is a play enacted in three acts without formal scene divisions. *Jokumaraswami* is a play in nine scenes and interestingly, the scenes are not numbered but are titled, like in a novel. A strikingly similar formal aspects in both these plays is the manner in which the readers or the audience is initially introduced to a traditional characteristic of a play and how either a shift or a transition is artfully interspersed with the generally non-traditional/unconventional units of form. For instance in *The Birthday Party*, the beginning of all the three acts introduces the reader to a European 'domesticity' that is strikingly traditional in nature. The space of the husband and wife starting their day with the routine of having breakfast, along with reading the newspaper. The newspaper is the only object that connects the couple Petey and Meg to the outside world. This traditional domestic scene is further domesticized by exploring the monotony that is embedded and the lack of affectations shown in every day conversations between the wife and the husband.

In the everyday conversations between Meg and Petey, be it about the weather condition or about their breakfast, most of which is wearily evaluated either in terms of being 'nice' or 'good'. Their passing by of things as either just nice or good enhances the aspect of domestic monotony that stands as a representative of the traditional picture of husband and wife. To illustrate:

Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. Here's your cornflakes.

(He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door)

Are they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I thought they'd be nice. You got your paper?

Petey: Yes

Meg: Is it good?

Petey: Not bad

...

Meg: Is it nice out?

Petey: very nice.

...

Petey: I have finished my cornflakes.

Meg: Were they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Then Meg gives Petey fried bread and he once again expresses himself with a 'nice'. It marks their life with a monotony that highlights the traditional picture of the life of a sexagenarian couple. At the same time, this serves only as an opening door to the wide content of non-traditional avenues of the characters' lives that will be explored in the later stages of the inquiry. By charting such a traditional picture of a family, Pinter is superficially sticking to the conventional approach to the plot. The situations that follow with the plan of celebrating Stanley's birthday and the entry of Goldberg and McCann, two strange characters from nowhere, become the embodiments of an absurdity that is ensued upon the common life picture of Meg, Petey and especially Stanley.

From the surface, the plot of the play appears to be simple and quotidian with the celebration of Stanley's birthday. However, the complexity of one's being is rather problematized through initially introducing the reader to the mundane and simplistic aspects of life such as the everyday breakfasts, newspaper reading, cooking, and shopping. In spite of the excitement hatched in throwing a surprise birthday party to Stanley similarly lines up in this list of commonalities of everyday life of a man. At some point, this commonality is thrown upside down from within this monotonous picture by the ingenious insertion of strange components into the plot, here being Goldberg and McCann. To an extent, it is not just the absurdity of mundane life activities that is put forward, but also an occasional event like the celebration of birthday that is brought within the realms of absurdity. Thus, Pinter is categorizing Birthday Party under a

conventional/traditional life picture on the one hand, while on the other, with the use of the same pictures, escorting their meanings from meaningfulness to an unexpected dead ends, Pinter achieves the point wherein the existence of such traditional life pictures are shook at its base, exposing their pointlessness.

Jokumaraswami, is not brushed against Pinter's play looking for the exact prototype, but the wider premise of basing or introducing the reader with the traditional picture stands as a primary aspect to be taken into consideration. In the traditional construct of vernacular plays in India, it is widely understood that the presence of a *Suthradhara*, the *Himmela*, whose function is similar to a chorus in the English dramas and such other formal aspects are part of the traditionalist construct of Indian drama. In addition, worshipping the Lord and to seek blessings for the successful performance of the play is indeed a significant feature of the traditional drama form. However, in *Jokumaraswami*, Chandrashekar Kambar has incorporated all the conventional elements into its formal construction but employs them in a way different from the traditionalists. It is the worship of Lord Ganesha that agrees with the general notion of the play's opening that has been replaced by the worship of Lord Jokumaraswami. Kambar's choice is not merely an arbitrary act of replacement, instead he presents an argumentation that aims to establish the rationality of Kambar's choice of worshipping Jokumaraswami. The move towards imbibing an element of unconventionality into the wider framework of the traditional form of the drama highlights Kambar's approach towards the construction of modernity. Kambar achieves his own conception of modernity, which on the one hand is the incorporation of the unconventional while on the other hand; the unconventional element serves as a tool to question the traditional drama form.

The deconstruction of the traditional form becomes crucial to both Pinter and Kambar, with their seemingly identical disposition towards the conventional construct of the drama. For Pinter, exploring the absurdity of the traditional picture of a couple's everyday life and Kambar's questioning and replacing the traditional notion with the folk mythic lord Jokumaraswami becomes the point of departure. However, the rupture from the tradition and a leap into the unconventional, in both the cases takes place within the formal aspects of the play itself. The purpose is not entirely to undermine the tradition, rather the presence of traditional aspects remains elementary to the projection of the desired formal departures. Besides the above discussed formal aspects, both Pinter and Kambar imbibe elements of 'supra-lingualism' to explore the absurdity and meaninglessness of the supposed meaningful articulations of language. In other words, the assumption that a

meaningful articulation is possible only within the confines of verbal expressions has been called into question or rather rendered useless.

In view of such manifestations in the chosen plays, once again, it must be remembered that finding the exact prototype is not the intention here, rather its varied applications and approaches to the proposed end matters. To begin with, Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, provides an exuberant space for silences and pauses that strikingly functions better than verbal articulations of meanings. However, the inquiry does not concern itself with what they exactly convey as a silence or a pause has the possibility of proliferation of meanings that might differ from one reader to another. The primary concern here is to look at the way Pinter diffuses the meaningfulness of language itself.

Pursuing in the proposed direction, in the first act of Pinter's play that has already been demonstrated for its monotony, could also be employed to represent the already mentioned proposition. The use of pauses starts to gain its significance from the beginning of the play itself. A minor demonstration:

Meg and Petey, having a morning conversation-

Meg: Will you tell me when you come to something good?

Petey: Yes

Pause

Meg: Have you been working hard this morning?

Petey: No. Just stacked a few of the old chairs. Cleaned up a bit.

Meg: Is it nice out?

Petey: Very nice.

Pause

Meg: Is Stanley up yet?

The conversation continues with many pauses such as this and the pauses are more evident when the plot reaches the point where Stanley turns mute due to the disillusionment that comes as the result of a series of questions posed by Stanley's tormentors Goldberg and McCann. Despite some questions which Stanley must answer has also been carried on with other characters' intervention in the dialog and thus not necessitating Stanley's participation in the conversation. This aspect of the play could be seen in the light of modernism wherein, the previously believed notion that meaning lies only in the articulations of language has been placed under threat by the use of pauses and muting characters, who only become passive participants. In some situations, pauses and silences become a tool in undermining the domination that language hold over other supra-lingual expressions. In addition, the pauses and silences, considered in a modern space,

unveils the language's inadequacy for human expressions. Repeatedly, it also symbolic of the monotonous living that sometimes needs no language.

Such propositions of meaninglessness and inadequacy are represented not just through pauses and silences but also through a slight infiltration of gibberish utterances that becomes utterly difficult to extract meanings. For instance, the tormenting of Stanley by Goldberg and McCann starting from unearthing Stanley's supposed treacherous endeavours to a dead end wherein the very existence of Stanley is questioned, he finds himself incapable of replying in a meaningful language. He manages to produce gibberish noises that lie beyond anybody's understanding. Intrinsically, the meaningless utterances also point to the earlier proposition of the language failing to cater to the demands of particular absurd situations and the modern prism of absurdity manifests itself in such aspects as this.

Examining the same in *Jokumaraswami*, it is apparent to some extent that silence is manifested as a characteristic of a few personas. For instance, the servants of Gowda, who carry the gun and other docile characters who owe their lands to the feudal lord are most often mute in the sense that they do not speak their minds. The servants' utterances are similar to chants in favour of the feudal lord and this seems rather fixed and their entire job is to not to speak their minds. Since they are forbidden to do so, the servants are mute in a different sense. Their docility to the feudal lord and the lack of opportunities to represent their minds in their own words could be seen as symbolizing the monopoly of language. From this point of view, Kambar is essaying to reveal the conditionality of language that must abide to those ruling or in this case the feudal authorities. In other words, this also reveals the restrictive boundaries that a language imposes on the dispossessed.

In another instance, the supra-lingual element in both the plays also constitute the laugh or a giggle. In *The Birthday Party*, when the lights go off and Stanley is seen crouching over the unconscious Lulu on the table, and when the light is shown on Stanley, he giggles and starts to move away. This giggling is also something that lies beyond normal comprehension of things. On the one hand, this could be seen as the laugh over the entire situation that is absurd, while on the other, the giggle is also representative of the persona's inability to perform anything else other than giggling. Giggling stands symbolic of the level of absurdity of the given situation in which meaningful articulations is rendered impossible. The giggle is the ultimate resort.

Similarly, in *Jokumaraswami*, a mockery at the authority, which Kambar has been doing since the beginning of the play, also employs the same tool that turns Gowda's existence itself as pointless. Gowda's encounter with Gurya and Ningi,

who according to Gowda are lesser beings, mock and look down upon Gowda and they begin to converse through laughs. This laugh-conversation is something that only Gurya and Ningi can comprehend and this lies beyond Gowda's understanding. On the one hand, Kambar's use of laugh as a conveyable language is something that functions as a tool of resistance against the feudal authority while on the other hand; it is also rendering meaningless, the traditionally used language that does have the potential for powerful resistance. In this manner, by the use of laughs, Gowda is thrown off his comfortable, authoritative, traditional sphere and the absurdity and the inadequacy of the dominant traditional usage of language has been effectively exposed for serious investigation. In simple terms, the unveiling of the traditional use of language in both the plays, show striking similarity in their modern approaches to the form and content.

The final aspect that I would like to discuss is the significant role of the 'past' in both the plays, although having varied dimensions. In *The Birthday Party*, the unearthing of Stanley's past by Goldberg and McCann for a purpose that is strange is also the time it is made to realise that Stanley has difficulty in coming to terms with his own past. His past lingers like a ghost that threatens to destroy his present existence and which ironically does take place by the end of the play. Stanley attempts throughout to ignore the ghostly appearance of the past and hence the entry of Goldberg and McCann stand as agents negotiating from the past. While in *Jokumaraswami*, the importance of the past is perceived not in the lives of the characters, but in their cultural history. The reign of modernity contributed much to the evasion of the essence of the native folk cultures. The native folk cultures had started to appear as a distant reality from the past which has minimal significance in the present modern context. However, what Kambar does is to resurrect his native folk culture, by incorporating the myth of Jokumaraswami into the modern form of drama and reconstruct the same within a modern sphere. This acts as Kambar's way of approaching the concept of modernism, putting across a strident proposition that demonstrates the containment of modernity in tandem with the native/folk cultures that underlines on the modern use of nativity. In the modern space, both Pinter and Kambar suggest a grounded negotiation of the past, or in other words the 'presentness' of the past. The negotiation between the traditional and the modern, for Kambar, provides opportunity to stay rooted to his soil or nativity while in Pinter's play, the characters merely grapple with its loss as well as the presence of the past. By way of partly concluding, it could be said that a morphological approach to Kambar and Pinter explores the possibility of a comparative study in terms of the formal aspects of the genre which need not always be in terms of the content of the texts. However, sometimes and most often,

the content also merges to become part of the form. Hegel recognized a reciprocal relation between the form and the content in his work, *The Philosophy of Fine Art* (original 1835) wherein he says that- “Every definite content determines a form suitable to it.” “Defectiveness of form arises from defectiveness of content.” “Content is nothing but the transformation of form into content, and form is nothing but the transformation of content into form.” Georg Lukacs writes in his *The Sociology of Modern Drama*- “... truly social element in literature is the form”.

From the above comparative study, I have attempted to bring both the European and the regional playwrights on the same platform without abiding to any set hierarchies. From the same, we also see that both the writers have their own distinct approach towards portraying absurdity meanwhile having major similarities in the deployment of formal aspects to render the content of the text absurd. We could derive that the Kannada modernist play is no less absurd than the English play and that if canonization is tentatively dismissed, they both could be placed side-by-side on a same shelf categorised as absurd plays. However egalitarian this image might appear, the probability of it actually existing is a rare possibility due to numerous issues in the project of globalization. Globalization is believed to shrink the space of the world and make the distant seem close while it also ideally fosters a multidirectional traversing of ideas, notions, and in this particular case, of migration of texts. To perceive it within the aspect of migration, it is an unquestionable fact that Pinter’s, in general, the European notion of absurdity and modernity has easily gathered audience and acceptance in other parts of the world channelled through texts while at the same time, similar notions and its textual representations of Kannada literature, for that matter any regional literatures have barely passed its state borders, except for few chosen translated works. For this being the situation, one can see the hegemony in the transportation of the dominant notions and texts powered by the dominant language. On the one hand, they hinder the commutation of regional texts into different literary zones along with the process of placing the regional at the lower strata of the hierarchical set up topped by Eurocentric or U.S-centric texts and ideas. While Globalization was believed to shatter every possible boundary to create a ‘Glocal’ world, it has rather become a one-way or a one-sided project wherein, instead of bringing out the regional into the global scenario, the European and the American works, ideas and ideologies have gained wider globality, setting itself to be the standard, while the regional have remained local. The regional gains global audience only when it confirms to the standardized norms of writing and narrating. The idealization of the project of Globalization as erasing borders have created other borders of the kind wherein the entry of several regional and local texts into the global zone depends

on certain criteria set by the dominant literary cultures. It has unintentionally resulted in the creation of superior and inferior literary zones and only those confirming to the superior one could be globally acclaimed. Nevertheless, this particular comparison of the global and the regional writer is only an attempt in bridging this hegemonic space existing between the texts of English and other vernacular languages. In other words, to place Pinter and Kambar in the same shelf.

Bibliography:

Hegel, G W F. *Philosophy of Fine Art*. S.l., Forgotten Books, 2015.

Kambar, Chandrasekhar. *Siri Sampige & Jokumaraswamy*. Place of publication not identified, Peakpublish, 2013.

Lukács, György. *The Sociology of Modern Drama*: Oshkosh, WI, Green Mountain Editions, 1965.

Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. London, Faber and Faber, 2009.