INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)
A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
http://www.ijelr.in (Impact Factor: 5.9745) (ICI)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 2. 2026 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A Comparative Study of Existential Notion: Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Party*

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doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.2.45

Article information
Article Received:22/03/2026
Article Accepted:01/05/2026
Published online:08/05/2026

Abstract

Comparative study of Harold Pinter's play "*The Birthday Party" and* Mahesh Elkunchwar's play "*Party"* will be made on the basis of the two distinct theatres namely the theatre of absurd (western) and Theatre of Absurd (Indian). How an idea such as "carnivalesque" can be so void and obscure at the same time will be analyzed at the same time the use of "theatre of menace" will be employed. The article will also seek to examine the similarities between the two plays situated across two different cultures. There will be discursive and analytical research methodology employed in this article.

Keywords: Pinteresque, Menace, Carnivalesque, Theatre of Absurd, Existentialism, Alienation, Canon.

Introduction

The global resonance of mid-twentieth-century dramatic movements ensured that the "Theatre of the Absurd", pioneered by European playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, transcended geographical boundaries, offering new metaphors for existential crisis in a post-war world. While Harold Pinter's 1958 play, "*The Birthday Party*", stands as a canonical monument to the Absurdist interrogation of identity, language, and inexplicable menace, Mahesh Elkunchwar's 1976 Marathi play, *Party*, represents a profound adaptation of this absurdist framework within the context of post-colonial India. Both plays utilize the seemingly innocuous social gathering 'party' to expose a terrifying void, yet the nature of the crisis they reveal is fundamentally different. However, as Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed about the carnivalesque as it becomes a prerequisite to the discussion of the central theme of this play which is 'party'.

> Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participat**es** because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bhaktin 7)

Pinter employs the mechanics of "Absurdism", namely claustrophobia, ambiguous threat, and linguistic disintegration, to stage a universal, metaphysical crisis of identity that culminates in total anarchy. Elkunchwar, on the other hand, channels these absurdist forms into a targeted socio-

intellectual dialectics, arguing that the greatest menace to the Indian urban elite is not external, but internal: a paralyzing hollowness born of intellectual pretense, moral failure, and spiritual stagnation.

The concept of 'menace' serves as the primary engine driving both narratives, yet its source and function diverge sharply between the two plays. Pinter's theatre is famously characterized by the "Pinteresque" pause and the sense of inexplicable threat. In "*The Birthday Party*", the menace is, abstract, and utterly uncompromising, materialized in the sudden arrival of the two enigmatic figures, Goldberg and McCann. Their presence immediately destabilizes Stanley Webber, the reclusive resident of the seaside boarding house. Stanley's terror stems not from a specific crime he has committed, but from the realization that his tenuous, self-created identity cannot withstand the scrutiny of an external, authoritative force. The climax of this menace is the interrogation scene, where Goldberg and McCann torture Stanley not through physical violence, but through pure linguistic terror: a throw down of non sequiturs, contradictory accusations, and nonsensical questions about his past, politics, and hygiene.

> "What about the Albigensenist heresy? / Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?" (Pinter 40)

Stanley's subsequent descent into gibberish and eventual catatonia symbolizes the universal human vulnerability to arbitrary, external pressures that breaks the illusion of selfhood. Stanley is desolated by the other, becoming a compliant, well-dressed corpse taken away by his destroyers.

In stark contrast, Mahesh Elkunchwar's "*The Party*" presents a menace that is fundamentally internal, self-imposed, and rooted in intellectual and moral stagnation. The play is set during a usual social gathering hosted by "Damayanti" for the urban elite: writers, critics, and activists. There are no menacing strangers who arrive to destroy the protagonist; rather, the party *itself* is the menacing stage upon which the characters expose their own spiritual decay. The intellectuals attending—like the pompous writer "Barwe" and the insecure poet "Bharat" are revealed to be their own torturers. "Barwe" confesses his lack of originality and his success being built on discouraging others, while Mohini, Barwe's partner, seeks refuge from her inner void in alcoholism. (Elkunchwar 55). The threat here is not psychological abduction, but intellectual and moral bankruptcy; the 'menace' is the mirror held up to the elite's superficiality.

As critics suggest, Elkunchwar utilizes the absurdity of their situation to satirize the "pseudo-elite, the patrons of the arts and literature who nevertheless lived hypocritical lifestyles". While Pinter's Stanley **i**s a victim of a pervasive, nameless dread, Elkunchwar's characters are perpetrators of their own emptiness, trapped by the unfulfilled promises of post-independence intellectual life.

Theoretical Framework

In both plays, the breakdown of meaningful communication is crucial to the absurdist aesthetic, but the nature of the linguistic failure differs due to the respective playwrights' intents.

> Pinter's dramatic language is characterized by the celebrated 'Pinter pause,' silence, and dialogue that circles aggressively without progressing (Esslin 28).

Language in "*The Birthday Party*" is primarily a weapon used to assert dominance or mask insecurity. The non-sequiturs of Goldberg and McCann are not simply random; they are deliberately employed to destabilize Stanley's sense of reality, creating a verbal landscape where logic is irrelevant and only power matters. Stanley's final response to their verbal onslaught is silence, followed by his inability to speak beyond an inarticulate croak, signifying the total triumph of the oppressive linguistic structure over individual expression. This linguistic failure suggests a universal, post-war crisis in which received language and ideological structures have become meaningless tools of manipulation.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's approach critiques language not as a universally broken tool, but as a vehicle for social pretense and intellectual hypocrisy.

> The conversations at Damayanti's party are replete with high-flown intellectual jargon discussions of Marxist theory, existential philosophy, and literary movements. (Elkunchwar 37).

However, this sophisticated discourse is perpetually divorced from authentic feeling or action. Characters like Bharat and Barwe use their linguistic ability to construct and defend their hollow artistic reputations. Elkunchwar shows that these "pseudo-intellectuals" use complex language to fill the *vacuum* of their lives, rather than to genuinely communicate or connect. This contrast is stark: Pinter shows language failing because of ambiguity; Elkunchwar shows language succeeding as a tool of deception, leading to hollowness.

Furthermore, Elkunchwar introduces a fascinating contrast through the character of Amrit, the writer-activist who chooses to reside and fight among the tribal people. Amrit is the only voice of authentic social engagement, and significantly, he remains absent from the stage of the party (Elkunchwar 62). His existence outside the drawing-room signifies that meaningful discourse and genuine connection lie beyond the insulated world of the urban elite, effectively turning the intellectual dialogue of the party guests into a performative, empty exercise.

The dramatic roles assigned to women further highlight the difference in the plays central concerns. In '*The Birthday Party*', Meg and Lulu primarily function in relation to Stanley and the invaders. Meg, with her childish devotion to Stanley and her distorted perception of the world, is an agent of the static, oppressive setting. Lulu is a fleeting object of desire and a temporary resistor to the menace, ultimately being objectified and subdued by Goldberg (Pinter 58). The women, while vital to the action, are largely defined by their subservience or unwitting complicity in the masculine world of threat and power dynamics as in:

> Elkunchwar places the experience of existential hollowness and moral crisis squarely on the shoulders of the female characters, making their alienation a central feature of his socio-cultural critique (Kaur 12).

The mentioned analysis highlights Elkunchwar's ability to comprehend the struggle that any woman in Indian society goes through. The identity of a women is always compromised. She is always a secondary character even in her own stories. The silent struggles are not appreciated by the society and much like Sisyphus in the end accepts her fate of infinite and cyclic struggle. This is a kind of absurdity in Indian theatre of absurd and another dimension of Indian theatre of Absurd. The theatre of absurd as Martin Esslin asserts;

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. (Esslin 26).

Another figure who is an emblem of the absurd feature in Indian culture is Damyanti Rane who is mindlessly living. She feeds her ego by throwing lavish parties in order to gain the sympathies of other elite friends. The understanding that will have a sense of gratitude towards her is quite pathetic in a way. The only agenda that lies behind that use of kind of hefty amount is to seek popularity on the expense of the so called popular figures be it Barve, Amrit or even the young Bharat and shine both as a generous and sophisticated figure in an elite crowd. The game of vanity hence goes on in this way for which a critic Dattaraya explains this situation of her;

> Damayanti the hostess, is a wealthy, educated woman whose life nevertheless characterized by profound emptiness and an unfulfilled desire for love, masked by her role as a social and intellectual individual. Mohini, the actress, however is torn from inside, finding solace only in alcohol and the delusional belief in Barwe's love, representing the purposelessness of her life. (Dattaraya 2)

The conflict between Damayanti and her daughter, Sona, highlights the generational and moral decay Elkunchwar seeks to expose. Sona, an unwed mother, is portrayed by critics as perhaps the "only genuine person at the party," acting as a radical foil to her mother's superficial world. Sona's honesty, her confrontation of her mother's hypocrisy, and her rejection of the elite's sexual and moral compromises reflect Elkunchwar's focus on class pathology. Her "alienation" is not a purely metaphysical condition like Stanley's, but a specific response to the failure of the post-colonial bourgeoisie to find authentic values beyond western-inflected intellectual pretense. Elkunchwar thus localizes the absurdist theme of alienation by grounding it in specific social, familial, and gendered realities.

Conclusion

Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Elkunchwar's "*Party*" are strong testament to the global reach and adaptability of the "Absurdist" aesthetic. Pinter's masterpiece remains a terrifying, timeless parable of universal human vulnerability, where an individual's identity is abnormally destroyed by an unnamed, monolithic external authority, echoing the deepest anxieties of the twentieth century. Situation like the 'broken eyeglass' in Pinter's "*The Birthday Party*" or use of mirror to show the conflict with the symbolic order. Jacques Lacan defines symbolic order as: the "constituent of the subject" and is the medium in which " man's relationship to law and language is established" (Lacan, The play is an exercise in pure psychological and linguistic terror, culminating in the chilling submission of Stanley Webber. Elkunchwar, on the other hand, borrows Pinter's theatrical machinery—the claustrophobic setting, the repetitive, dialogue, and the ironic use of the social gathering—but redirects its energy toward a pointed critique of the intellectual class in post-colonial India. Girish Karnad a famous playwright also distinguishes the use of living room in a Wester house to that of an Indian house. He remarks;

In the West, the living room has come to represent the last refuge of the individual, the safe and sure center from which he can confront the sociopolitical processes of the outside world. The living room in an Indian home serves exactly the opposite purpose: it is the deliberately neutral space in which, in a show of formal cordiality the family keeps at bay people from the outside world. Nothing is meant to happen in an Indian room. Most people, giving tea in the Indian room, know that they are not to venture further into the house (Karnad 341)

By replacing Pinter's abstract, faceless Goldberg and McCann with the self-appointed intellectuals of the urban elite, Elkunchwar makes the crisis not one of being, but of pretending to be. The hollowness and moral decay experienced by Damayanti, Barwe, and Mohini is a self-inflicted wound, a failure of conviction that resonates with the broader social critique of Indian theatre's evolution. In both plays, the "party" ends not in joyful memory, but in silence and emptiness; for Pinter, it is the silence of death, and for Elkunchwar, it is the profound silence of the soul (Dattatraya 3). The enduring significance of this comparative study lies in charting how a theatrical movement born of Western existential anxiety can be transformed into a potent tool for diagnosing the specific cultural and intellectual pathologies of a society caught between tradition and the unfulfilled promises of modernity.

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