

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY: CRITICISM ON HAROLD PINTER

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The question – what do Harold Pinter’s plays want to convey – was a constant puzzle to Pinter himself. It seems that Pinter tried his best to explain it to himself but failed. “I only formulate conclusion after I have written the plays”, he said, “I’ve no idea what I am obsessed with – just so pleased to see the words on paper”. (*Sunday Times*)

To analyse such a writer’s writing, to solve the riddle of his situations, to dissolve the enigma of his character’s identity, to find the truth in his drama is a very difficult task for the trivial readers like us. Pinter himself obfuscates the reader by a famous remark in his Nobel Prize winning speech:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost. (‘Harold Pinter: Art, Truth and Politics’).

So I have to go through the works of some wise critics who have the sympathy and understanding of Pinter. They not only know all the words and expressions that appear to mean something in his works, but they also use them in an inspired and vigorous way to give rise to some new thought. I have chosen: Martin Esslin, Mark Batty, Michael Billington, Harold Hobson.

I think Martin Esslin is the best person to have all the virtues. Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* tries to categorise the convention that has come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd avoiding any rigid definition and interpretation. He suggested certain techniques in the handling of exposition, delineation of character, use of dream and hallucination and above all the expressing of absurdity of their present situation in the work of some of the major exponent of this genre – Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter. To define the term Absurd Esslin

refers to an essay on Kafka where Ionesco defined the term as: “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin 23). This is further reinstated in the philosophical concepts of Existentialism. So he also mentions some remarks of Albert Camus in his book. Camus, in this regard, explains in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

... in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile ... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (28)

Esslin’s book provides an analysis and elucidation of the meaning and intention of some of the most important plays. While talking about the basic themes of Pinter Esslin points out the key of his personal style-

... the uncannily cruel accuracy of his reproduction of the inflections and rambling irrelevancy of everyday speech, the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation of an action.(235)

The concept of room, that is, one’s place in this world and the Oedipal desire are the leit motifs of Pinter’s plays. Esslin notices here the infusion of tragedy and farce. To reveal Pinter’s problem of identity and politics Esslin gives a comparison of *The Birthday Party* with *The Room* and *Dumb Waiter*. In doing so Esslin tries to discern Pinter’s concern of verifying the past and interprets Pinter’s revelation of horror and absurdity of man’s uncertain existence. Esslin sees Pinter confronted with the basic problem of being and so he heralds him as a more ruthless realist than the champions of ‘social realism’ as Pinter deals with the basic problems of our being – isolation, the unknown mystery of the universe, lurking of death. In such a short space it is a wonderful survey of Pinter’s theatrical works. Esslin here does not delve into the deep of playwright’s mind and it is also impossible to do in such a little space. But the unsaid words of this book are all written in his next book about only Pinter, that is, *Pinter the Playwright* where he has a great deal with Pinter’s problems: the problem of identity, of verification, of communication.

The first chapter of this book deals with a biographical details of Pinter. He was the grandson of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and during his formative years in Hackney, he was evacuated to the country several times during the blitz. He faced the anti-Semitism of fascist gangs, became a conscientious objector and studied acting before touring Ireland performing Shakespeare. Pinter wrote his first play *The Room* and then his most animadverted play *The Birthday Party* the first performance of which was unanimously rejected by the reviewers of the daily papers except Harold Hobson who came to stand by the playwright declaring that the play would be revived upon the stage again. Finally it came to be true. Not only that a series of plays of high literary value like *The Caretaker*, *Homecoming*, *Dumb Waiter*, *No Man’s Land*, *Betrayal* came succeeding on the stage and the contemporary critics began to appreciate him. But as far as my reading is concerned, in this chapter there is not sufficient illumination on Pinter’s screenplays and it might have said many more things about his personal and love life which had a great impact on his creation.

Then the book goes so far to present us with a very readable and accessible survey of Pinter’s early poetry, important plays, sketches and screenplays in their time sequence, so that the section describing and analyzing Pinter’s output becomes a full account of his development

of a powerful writer. Despite Pinter's objection to seeking meaning from his work, Esslin's sincere attempt to interpret the situation and the character's identity with terse synopses of plots and themes deserves mention. According to Esslin, Pinter is an 'obsessive observer' of life with a penetrating insight as well as a great poet. So in his plays there is an excellent synthesis of utter realism of an external action and the poetical metaphor, the dream image of eternal archetypes. So the dim areas of the identity of Pinter's characters get lighted when we analyse what is unsaid in his plays. In this context we get some ideas that in *The Room*, the blind Negro may be a deceased man, a messenger of death or perhaps Rose's own dead father; in *The Birthday Party*, if Meg is a mother figure, then Goldberg with his excessive Jewish family feelings may be a father figure –an avenging agent –come to punish Stanley's subconscious incestuous yearning ; in *The Caretaker* Aston who was castrated in a mental hospital for his Oedipal desire with the consent and connivance of his mother might take revenge on a father figure-Davies who also had treated Aston as a mental patient. But in *The Homecoming* we get Pinter's most enigmatic character Ruth who is the elder brother's – a father substitute's –wife, also a mother figure, reincarnation of Jessie. The last scene of the play is a wish fulfillment oedipal dream where their mother – young and beautiful – has returned home as their sexual partner –a whore while the defeated father grovels on the floor pleading some sexual favour. Sam perhaps may be the family's conscience, superego as he collapses at the end when the situation for which he regretted all his life are restored. So we enter the world of Pinter's problem: identity and politics. I think it shows a new horizon for the innovative researchers to brood on. However, the book contains the theoretical approach of existential anxiety and absurdity and also the approach of realism. So the conception of the room comes again and again. Finally in the last chapter the book emphasizes what is said before but in a different way - by analysing the language and silence in his drama and gives a detailed comparison between the communicative techniques of Pinter and Chekhov. Yet this book should have dealt more with the menace, the tragedies of isolation, the gender issues which are latent in Pinter's plays.

A slight different type of analysis can be found in the book *Harold Pinter* by Mark Batty which is not based on the appreciation of the textuality of the script but on the theatricality of the play in performance. In the introduction of the book first Batty shows the appearance of 'directionless youths or rebel figures in the naturalistic settings' (5) and then the presentation of them 'out of harmony' (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 23) with their world. So he placed Pinter alongside the so-called 'angry young men' and the dramatists of the 'theatre of the absurd'. Then Batty starts from where Esslin ends. In the first chapter there is a discussion about Pinter's perpetrating act of menace which is consolidated by the violating presence of an intruding force. It is very much representative of all humanity, fearful of a world that conspires against the individual's need for stability and assured personal identity. The plays involve negotiations for supremacy between occupants and invaders of territory. Rose, by constantly affirming her contentment with the room, reveals her ingrained fear of eviction. Davies, similarly, was expelled from his regained paradise. Another type of menace evolves from the political issues like the conflict between individualism and conformism. It is essentially a humanitarian concern. In *The Birthday Party*, it seems, Goldberg and McCan's job is to make Stanley account for his guilt and to re-assimilate him into some system or organization from which he has escaped. Likewise *The Hothouse* deals directly with the abuse of the individual at the hands of the state. In accordance with Batty, Pinter was also concerned with the sexual rivalry or gendered invasions. *A Night Out*, *The Lover* and *Tea Party* demonstrate the masculine urges to categorise women as

mothers, wives and whores. This triumvirate reaches its apotheosis in the character of Ruth in *The Homecoming*. Another perpetrator of menace is 'Pinter pause' whose incarnations are 'pause', silence' and 'three trail dots'. Rubbishing textual analysis, Pinter puts his emphasis on silence and the unsaid words:

“What was not said often spoke as forcefully as the words themselves”. (190)

However, this useful book of Batty talks about Pinter's use of menace, identity, language, silence and politics and in its last and very short chapter, the subconscious origin and the creative process of his drama. The criticism involved here is written from a very post-modern point of view. Yet it has some limitations too. It should illuminate more the social and cultural contexts from which the menace grows and also the structures of rituals which determine man's identity without his own consent.

If we want to get the answers of these questions, we shall have to read Michael Billington's *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* which is not a biography, rather a highly subjective interpretation of Pinter's work as seen in the context of his life though, apparently it seems, Pinter's plays originate from his imagination and are largely divorced from private circumstances. The book even deals with the trifling matters of his life. The chief goal of Pinter's artistic process is to reproduce in some tangible form the responses to experience that are made by the artist's consciousness. Billington explores it by drawing a parallel between Pinter's 'efficient idea' and T.S. Eliot's notion of 'objective correlative'¹. Billington finds some leit motifs in Pinter's oeuvre, such as the threat to a secure space, language and silence as control, the subjectivity of memory, distress over lost Edens and also male camaraderie and homoeroticism. He reveals the playwright's strong autobiographical connection with some works like *The Caretaker*, *Betrayal* and *Monologue*. In this book, Pinter has been situated also as a feminist dramatist whose women characters are resilient and unpossessable and can call the shots in sexual relationships. Billington here attempts to negate the primary notion that Pinter's political commitment is either belated or aesthetically detrimental. To conclude it should be said that the book brings a new light for the ardent readers and theatre-goers of Harold Pinter.

NOTES

1. A term popularized by poet and critic T.S. Eliot in his famous essay “Hamlet and His Problems” to refer to actions, objects or situations that correspond with and thus implicitly evoke a particular emotion from the audience or reader.

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