

POSTMODERN VIOLENCE IN THE NARRATIVES OF HAROLD PINTER

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The term postmodernism is generally reflective of a skeptic attitude adopted towards the high-sounding liberating claims made by the enlightenment theories and an upright attitude of modernism; both of which were rendered fruitless in the aftermaths of two World Wars that ragged the world and resulted in unprecedented violence and atrocities like Holocaust and Hiroshima. Instead of representing a narrative that is marked by any linear progression, postmodern works shift its attention towards the depiction of unflinching pessimism. In order to cast doubt on the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life it often foregrounds the hideous side of it by demonstrating the curses such as violence. In that gloomy atmosphere post war genius made its way through some avant garde forms and one prominent voice was articulated through 'The Theatre of the Absurd', a term coined by Martin Esslin (1961) in which he categorizes Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter as absurdist. Harold Pinter, the Noble Laureate of 2005 confronted the atrocities of World War and ostensibly it is his personal experience with violence which seeped into his text and this is what he displays at the platform of literary world.

The plays of Pinter present either a "metaphorically critical" relation to violence or an aesthetically stylized legitimization of violence as a dramatic form of ambiguity. Violence in Pinter's work could be traced back to numerous roots, ranging from patriarchal violence to sexual aggression, and from a verbal attack to the denser psychological fragmentation of an individual. Critics after critics have tried to unravel Pinter's enigmatic plays. Eminent critics have labeled his plays with certain developing metaphors as "Comedy of Menace" (Irving Wardle), "Plays of Language", (Kennedy, *Six Dramatists*), "Plays of Impasse" (Rosen), "Dramas of Inquiry" (Quigley, *MSOW*), "Drama of Uncertainty" (Fuegi), "Theatre of Discord" (Mayberry), and "Comedy of Manners" (Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play*) (qtd. in Merritt, 9). Certainly it has turn out to be a trendy stratagem of critics to decode the riddles of Pinter, moreover, the baffling and enigmatic plays enthusiastically require the craving, "to plumb the depths of the subtext and expose the hidden secrets of motive, continuity and intended meaning" (Carpenter, 489). Sharing the same craving, the object of this research is to analyze those aspects where Pinter has transcended the traditional treatment of violence and has touched the heart of the matter.

"The world is a pretty violent place; it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me essential and inevitable factor", Pinter himself acknowledges in an interview. "The violence", he explains, "is really only an expression of the

question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays” (Bensky, 15). He further says, “Violence has always been in my plays; from the very beginning (. . .) we are brought up every day of our lives in this world of violence” (Smith, 93). Martin Esslin has rightly argued that “recurring figures of terrorists, tortures, and executioners’ are located at the centre of Pinter’s work, making him a playwright who has a particular resonance for the modern age, in an era of the Holocaust, genocide, and the nuclear bomb” (359). Even in the plays which don’t directly represent torture and interrogation, Pinter is persistently intrigued by the role of cruelty and power in familial and erotic relationships. Pinter’s obsession for power politics, cruelty and violence is apparent in his earliest plays: *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Room* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), and *The Hothouse* (1958), all of which bear the narratives of violence. Pinter has employed various kinds of violence: physical, verbal, patriarchal and psychological etc. Whereas the physical violence mostly remains off stage, the psychological violence is employed in abundance. Interrogations, counter questions and brainwashing horrify the psyche of victim as well as of the onlookers. In a claustrophobic and coffin like setting, the characters in Pinter’s plays remain under nameless terror of some outside minatory forces either it is verbal and psychological violence in comedy of menace *The Birthday Party*, patriarchal violence in family play *The Homecoming* (1965), the symbolic and physical violence (off- stage) in *The Dumb Waiter*, sexual violence in the political play *One for the Road* (1984) or linguistic violence in *Mountain Language* (1988). This paper explores the three plays of Pinter and reveals how textual violence justifies the post holocaust and post nuclear experiences of Pinter.

In world of Harold Pinter, violence originates comically but leads to torture, abuses, and even to death finally, thus truly justifying the term ‘Comedy of Menace’. Whatever the means and modes of violence are, the upshot is annihilation of individuality of a self. *The Birthday Party* is first full length comedy of menace where the protagonist Stanley is snatched from the cozy womb life of Boles family and is being taken for integration and some “special treatment” by two death men McCann and Goldberg (85). In *The Birthday Party* Stanley is terribly victimized verbally and psychologically. This play is the best example of psychological violence. Apparently there are no physical assaults, no direct atrocities but violence is inflicted upon the psyche of Stanley through a torrent of interrogation, weird accusation and brainwashing. Linguistic horror is unleashed by flood of malicious words and ruthless jargons to demoralize Stanley. A series of questions is asked from him and he is accused in various facets **from spiritual to** philosophical and from communal to personal: slaughterer, sacrilegious, dirty, and anti-social, conspirator etc. Finally he is brainwashed to the extent that he reduces to a virtual dumb making bubbling sounds only. His speech degenerates in the following questionnaire:

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted to-he wanted to-he wanted to....

MCCANN. He doesn’t know.

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted to-he wanted to....

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted

MCCANN. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know which came first!

GOLDBERG. Which came first?

MCCANN. Chicken? Egg? Which came first? Which came first?

GOLDBERG and MCCANN. Which came first? Which came first?
Which came first? Stanley *screams*. (51-52)

The origin of the play is also related to contemporary violent society. About the source of *The Birthday Party* Pinter in an interview reveals:

The Birthday Party had . . . been in my mind for a long time. It was sparked off from a very distinct situation in digs when I was on tour... I was in those digs and this woman was Meg in the play and there was a fellow staying there in Eastbourne, on the coast. The whole thing remained with me, and three years later I wrote the play. (qtd. in Bold,8)

Thus he has represented a real life situation on the altar of drama, treating it as a raw stuff. In fact references of holocaust can be sensed through various hints. The ‘integration’ and ‘special treatment’ of Stanley suggests Nazi’s authoritarian integration process.

The Dumb Waiter is a single- act comedy of menace where two hired hit men Ben and Gus are waiting for some instructions from a mysterious Wilson and ironically the instruction finally revealed is the murder of Gus by Ben. The play opens in a claustrophobic basement with two beds separated by a dumb waiter. The typical newspaper reading is performed which apparently seems realistic but in fact it renders a symbolic meaning to the theme of the play. There are three newspaper reading accounts in which Ben reads aloud only the violent and cruel news as if to foreground the violence entrenched in the play. These news of far-away cruelty transpired in an unknown place ingeniously hints at the existing wicked ambiance underneath the perceptibly safe basement. The first narration of newspaper is:

BEN. Kaw! What about this? Listen to this!

He refers to the paper.

A man of eighty -seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see?

He couldn’t see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS. He what?

Ben He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS. No?

BEN. The lorry started and ran over him.

GUS. Go on!

BEN. That’s what it says here. (130)

And the second narrative tells of a boy who killed a cat and blamed this on his sister. And in the third newspaper reading, amazingly, there are no concrete details but the stock reactions of the characters:

BEN. Kaw!

He picks up the newspaper and looks at it.

Listen to this!

Pause.

What about that, eh?

Pause.

Kaw!

Pause.

Have you ever heard such a thing?

GUS (*dully*). Go on!

BEN. It's true.
GUS. Get away.
BEN. It's down here in black and white.
GUS (*very low*). Is that a fact?
BEN. Can you imagine it?
GUS. It's unbelievable.
BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?
GUS (*almost inaudible*). Incredible. (163)

Degeneration in Gus's reaction, if detected, from 'dully' to 'very low' to 'almost inaudible' and his immediate visit to lavatory implies his awareness of the imminent danger. Although signs of violence can be sensed very early when Ben gets enraged and tries to attack Gus just because of the incorrect usage of the phrase:

Ben: 'Light the Kettle! It's common usage!'
Gus: I think you've got it wrong... They say put on the kettle.
Ben: (grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length)
'THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL' (142)

And finally it becomes evident that the awaited victim is no other than Gus and the play is concluded with Ben's gun aimed at Gus. Of course the murder doesn't take place on stage but it is likely to be happened as per the instructions of the upstairs authorities. Varun Begley says, "The tension of this unspent bullet reverberates across Pinter's dramatic universe" (12). Certainly the dramatic cliffhanger proves more violent than the real physical violence on the stage.

The Homecoming is another battling ground for portrayal of violence. Throughout the play, Ruth, the only female in all male family, is tried to be dominated by the family members. Patriarchal violence is established through the subtexts and narratives. Sometimes there is a bit physical violence as at times Max, the father beats his grown up sons with sticks to exert power but the dominant violence in the play is patriarchal violence. Characters in a Pinter play hardly reveal their motives, so the politics of violence to get power positions is not actualized directly, rather it occurs in subtexts. And this subtext seeks recourse in the narratives conveyed to Ruth by Lenny. There are narratives of violence (imaginary or true) which are purportedly placed for the power politics. It is noteworthy how strategically Lenny tries to exert his power and sexuality over Ruth by narrating a violent encounter with a lady:

Lenny. And there she was up against this wall-well just sliding down the wall, following the blow I'd given her. Well, to sum up everything was in my favour, for killing...but.... In the end I thought... Aah, why go to all the bother...you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that, getting yourself into a state of tension. So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it that. (31)

This negotiation on part of Lenny undoubtedly shows how he struggles for supremacy within the discourse space. As per reliability of this account, it can't be taken true as Esslin suggests, "He is showing off to Ruth and telling her something about himself. And as we . . . can't be sure whether these stories are true or merely invented on the spur of the moment" (Esslin, 141).

Whatsoever strategies are employed on Ruth, she finally dismantles oppressive andocentric torturous system and takes hold of whole family. But if probed deeply, she too seems to be a victim of male subjugation. As Mark Batty says, "Arguably, Ruth might be

considered as a victim of male obsession as, from male perspective, she is transformed and degraded from a wife, to a sexual object, to a whore” (45). Besides the suppression of Ruth, the text also contains the insulting gendered slangs which Max uses for his late wife.

The delineation of violence in these post nuclear plays can be justified as Literature is not immune from the contemporary Socio-political scenario and in fact resonate it being a mirror of the society. The depiction of violence is suggestive of dehumanization of an individual. It reveals the nexus between an individual and a totalitarian system which demands for conformity. Whether it is Stanley, Ruth or Gus, all had to succumb at the altar of authoritarian organization. Pinter, it seems, indirectly urges for a balanced egalitarian society through the depiction of these wriggling existences.

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