

Theme of Interpersonal – Violence in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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ABSTRACT

The name of Harold Pinter is a milestone in the realm of contemporary British drama. His plays offer a new kind of situational and individual interpretations of his themes and issues. His plays demand a deeper perusal and study of his written text, unspoken words and even dots and dashes. My purpose through this paper is to propagate Harold Pinter's theme in his play *The Birthday Party* not only as a manifestation of existential dilemma and projection of postmodernist thoughts but to explore the subtle texture of several tissues of interpersonal violence. Violence is not only physical as basically we understand but for me it is all the more dangerous and can prove a catastrophe in its verbal, emotional, psychological and organised form. Interpersonal violence dwells in interpersonal relations of human beings that comes out from time to time with changing human psyche and circumstances as well. Therefore, in this paper I have tried to decipher sincerely the hidden face of violence crawling in the private and personal affairs of men and women. Menace and trepidation are regular features of Pinter's plays but how they can be used as a vehicle to excavate the innermost state and dimensions of violence, has been tried to study in this paper. Relationships among selves matter, on which only large buildings of any institution can stand and sustain about which Pinter is very well aware and beware us.

Key-words: violence, interpersonal, verbal-violence, psychological violence, menace.

Unexpected emergence of trepidation and violence at regular interval is a significant signature of Harold Pinter's dramatic articulation. Sometimes it seems a justification of the meaningless and futile human existence and sometimes it seems a powerful projection of man's agonised psyche in search of identity in the humdrum of life. In *The Dumb Waiter* Ben faces Gus to kill him, *The Birthday Party* is fully saturated with all kinds of unprecedented violence and in *The Caretaker* Davies' behavior with Aston – all exhibit a disturbed scenario with compulsive fluidity of violence on the stage. Does Pinter points his finger that violence has become a characteristic of modern life where there is no other option of violence and is it the final solution to practice power?

What catch our eyes in Harold Pinter's dramatic world is a peculiar kind of violence.

Most of the violent act happens during encounter of characters. Human relationships matter on which only large buildings of any institution can stand. Pinter concentrates primarily on individuals in their personal relationship. He has tried to show interpersonal violence crawling in the personal affairs of the people. What I mean by the term 'Interpersonal violence' is, when a person uses power and control over others through physical, sexual, emotional, action, verbal or intentional or through other kinds of strange human behavior. Not only this but this kind of violence may be against one's own self--disclosed in psychological form or it may be metaphysical violence as well where man feels choked as a puppet in the hands of a 'Supreme Metaphysical Power'.

"Interpersonal violence is divided into two subcategories: Family and intimate partner violence – that is, violence largely between family members and intimate partners, usually, though not exclusively, taking place in the home. Community violence – violence between individuals who are unrelated, and who may or may not know each other, generally taking place outside the

home. The former group includes forms of violence such as Child abuse, intimate partner violence and abuse of the elderly. The latter includes youth violence, random acts of violence, rape or sexual assault by strangers, and violence in institutional settings such as schools, workplaces, prisons and nursing homes. When interpersonal violence occurs in families, its psychological consequences can affect parents, children, and their relationship in the short – and long-terms.” (Wikipedia)

All form of interpersonal violence is serious, weird and expensive at large. It is not only deplorable when there is unlawful exercise of such kind of violence occurs, it is equally condemnable when it comes out in its judicial form and organised violence of war. Such kind of interpersonal violence tries to gain control and command over another person by hurting that person and inducing a feeling of fear and anxiety, nervousness and insecurity, guilt, helplessness and worthlessness. Man has developed a feeling to dominate and subjugate others to prove his superiority and prowess. Every person needs attention and they wish respect in their life-due to lack of these emotional longings they start behaving in a violent way that affects their interpersonal relationships.

Harold Pinter is the author of a special dramatic term popularly labeled as ‘the pinteresque’. His plays are not only ‘comedy of menace’ or absurd in theme but they show a grotesque kind of situation where characters are embroiled and innocent victims of some external and mutual powers. His language always play with meaning and meanings. His character say something, they intend something else and they communicate something else. He is known as a master of language and in his dramatic compositions he plays with language like football. His pauses, his commas, his dots all intensify the degree of interpersonal violence. Even silence speaks loudly in his plays wonderfully. Ronal Hayman writes,

“Most drama is built up out of addition. Points are planted one by one until they add up to a plot. Pinter’s method often works by subtraction. He plants a point only to uproot it, without ever going into the character’s motivations for misrepresenting the reality. So the impossibility of verifying reality becomes not only a source of suspense but one of the fundamental subjects of his plays”(Hayman, p.9)

Physical violence, psychological torture and sex images involved with cruelty are prominently delineated in Harold Pinter’s first full play *The Birthday Party*. Pinter has contrived terror and violence on the stage with various literary significance. In fact, *The Birthday Party* is a perfect projection of disillusionment of man who has faced the hefty blows of two World Wars and is cut off his transcendental roots, and his self, his identity and his aim of life and living are in a crisis.

The play begins with the conversation of a husband and wife. Their conversation consist only very ordinary and normal things of daily routinised life. There is no smell of love, affection or any interest. But several pauses during their conversation give a sense of fragmented communication between the relationship of a husband and wife. Meg asks Petey about his breakfast, his job and the newspaper which he is reading but Petey does not show any interest in her questions, he simply does not bother for them. He seems to be closed in the inverted commas of his own self. Through their talk we come to know that both run a boarding house in which Stanley is the present guest and two men are about to come. When Stanley is informed about the expected arrival of two visitors he becomes fearful and nervous. Like him Meg too seems to be horrified by the outside world when she comes to know that they are coming in a van with a ‘wheelbarrow’. She is a victim of psychological violence which is stimulated and exploited by Stanley time and again. Strangely, Stanley himself is a victim of oppressive social system and he drags Meg too in a psychological state of violence. Here violence is intensified with menace and trepidation. We can clearly notice

that Stanley is playing with this menacing violence into hammering psychological form. Let's have a glimpse of his action and the way he speaks,

"Stanley: (advancing upon her) a big wheelbarrow and when the van stops they wheel it out and they wheel it up the garden path and then they knock at the front door.

Meg: They don't.

Stanley: They're looking for someone. A certain person.

Meg: (hoarsely) No, They're not!

Stanley: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?" (Pinter, p.24)

The two men MacCann and Goldberg appear who enter through the back door. Goldberg like a typical modern man laments over the past and becomes nostalgic. We come to know that it is Stanley's birthday and Meg is arranging a surprise party for him. He tries to get more information about both the outsiders. He has been given a drum – a boy's drum by Meg but he regrets that it is his birthday. He plays on the drum irregularly in a violent way. He beats on it like anything until it breaks. When Goldberg and MacCann encounter Stanley he forces them to leave but gradually they begin to force him. They begin to interrogate Stanley with their irregular, illogical and irrelevant questions. By and by Stanley reaches to a state where he is helpless to answer and feels a strong grip of their shower of questions which give birth to many questions in the mind of the audience too. Their questions or we may call it verbal violence damage his psychological state of mind. Further, it is not important that the questions are fragmented or false but it is important that Stanley himself is already too fragmented from within that he could not bear the pressure of words. The intruders in his life crush him with false (perhaps) accusation and smash his spectacle which is a symbol of his self and perception as well. Stanley who is in their grip, screams and cries and kicks Goldberg in his stomach. Verbal and psychological violence is now visual on the stage in physical form and degree of violence is magnified here. During the blind man's bluff game

in the birthday party the two men try to tease Stanley in one way or other.

“The tension is wound up tighter and tighter until it breaks, as it’s bound to, into violence. But it isn’t the violence we expect. Instead of attacking Stanley, Goldberg is attacked by him, kicked in the stomach, and from the floor he tries to restrain MacCann from avenging the blow with a chair he’s picked up.....the conflict is forced back out of the open and the menace of impending violence is concealed under the surface of conviviality, as the oddly assorted characters celebrate the birthday party – a typical Pinter ambiguity.” (Hayman, P. 25)

The two men-Goldberg and MacCann are also not on good terms. Goldberg too seems to be frustrated and depressed, he becomes aggressive and violent when MacCann calls him Simmy. He seizes MacCann’s throat. Goldberg is busy in recollecting his memory from the past every now and then. He goes back to his childhood. His recollection of past arrows towards his escape from the present. His personality too is not strong enough to hold the present firmly and face his present world. He takes shelter under the wings of the past. His unwillingness to be in the present displays his existential dilemma and futile human existence where the chaos in his psyche leads him to be a victim of metaphysical violence where he is as helpless as other characters are. But it has also been shown that he needs some relationship for his identity and entity as well. He is dependent on MacCann, it is quite obvious when he asks him to breath in his mouth that he desperately needs. Often we see him lost in exploring and solving the mystery of this universe. He is not sure what this world is all about. He cannot define this world in his words. He does not get any meaning of man’s life and living in this whole world.

Lulu, another woman character in the play is also seduced and sexually being tried to be violated by male characters in the play. But we are not sure whether she intentionally provokes Stanely or not. In Goldberg’ case too she accuses him for her

seduction but it is also evident that she gave him advances. Throughout the play tension is heightened so much until it burst in to some kind of violence. Either the characters do not involve themselves in any kind of conversation or they act violently. At each point of physical violence or near violence, it's a woman who becomes a victim. It may be a feminist reading and not an honest reading from many perspective but degree of honesty varies as degree of violence.

"Harold Pinter has been writing long enough for the shape of his plays, their mechanism, to be easily recognised: a small group of characters in a complex situation; at first both characters and situations are presented obscurely but through a number of surprises or shocks-often contrived with an obvious ingenuity-the audience is led to a clearer and deeper knowledge of the characters." (Brown, P. 122)

The game of blind man's bluff is transformed into a crazy hunt with an attempt to murder punctuated in the darkness with dots of violence intensified by the beating of drum. The whole birthday party becomes a kind of procession of isolation, conflict and violence where every character seems to command and practice power in their own way. "Menace the play implies, is a matter of situation: it does not come from extraordinary, sinister people, but from ordinary people like you and me; it is all a matter of circumstances whether at some point I suddenly become the menace in your life or you the menace in mine," (Taylor,p.328)

The Birthday Party is a superb panorama of absurd situation where even comedy evokes menace; hence it is comedy of menace. It serves, as little narrative in Lyotardian sense against the metanarrative civilisation and culture. In this play Harold Pinter plays with language like football where he is free to kick. It seems, instead of communicating characters do not want real communication to their own selves but rather they fail. They masquerade to communicate but that too is a fiasco. They embroil or are embroiled in the web of fragmented

communication. Let's take instance of Meg's account of Stanley's earlier life in Act I, we find just a hopelessly garbled vision of Stanley's words. She totally fails to understand or remember what Stanley actually said. With fallible language memory too is fallible and the characters stop talking. Their selves seems to be so violated by the undercurrent flames of violence that does not allow them to be involved in any kind of interaction. Inadequacy of communication cannot provide a structure or the characters have lost their command over language. Much of the hidden violence has been evoked through a special kind of language and every aspect of language through verbal effect has been used by Pinter to debunk interpersonal violence in his play.

Effective use of language can do wonders. Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear* has all the love for her father but not language and she fails. Iago in *Othello* can shatter Othello's whole world by merely using words. Stanley is destroyed by a torrent of words mingled with serious accusation, may be false or perhaps false, but powerful enough but it is not important what Stanley has done, it is important that he himself is so fragmented that he cannot bear the pressure of language. The relation between dialogues and their tone and intended meaning is very interesting which creates an atmosphere to disclose the inner sub-conscious havoc of interpersonal violence. A man has three kinds of relations in his life-relation with his own self, relation with his companions and relations with his society at large. If violence is damaging his self it is matter of great concern about which Harold Pinter is very well aware and beware us.

Like modernist character seem to lament over their past. But often we are sure of their fictionality. It might be that it is their longing for security that they search in their childhood memories or false childhood and family life. They create an imaginary world of their own by replacing the reality. The characters in this play whether it is Stanley or Meg or Goldberg – they all try to chart their own fictional ideal world either to hide

their present identity or to explore and reconstruct their identity from a new point. Stanely gives an account of his concert but it is not clear if he has ever performed or not or it may be possible that he dreamt of performance which failed. It is a subconscious and hidden interpersonal violence which is crawling in the mind which may be a product of his frustration and chaotic state of psyche.

Goldberg and MacCann, the two intruder, who seem to be very stable and strong, too are on the verge of breakdown. Goldberg is a typical hypocrite. He pretends to lament over his so-called 'golden days' but fails to give any true account of his past. We can argue that they are compelled to create a fictional truth as they expect it to stabilise them. Not only memory but deeds too show his contradictory behavior and hypocrisy. How Goldberg remembers his old girlfriend friend,

"I never took liberties... We weren't like the young men these days in those days. We knew the meaning of respect. So I'd give her a peck and I'd bowl back home. Humming away I'd be, past the children's playground. I'd tip my hat to the toddlers, I'd give a helping hand to a couple of stray dogs, and everything came natural. I can see it like yesterday. " (Pinter, p.43)

We find a split between what Goldberg idealises (perhaps he wanted to be like that but could not be so) and what he does in his actual life. He presents his past as benevolent and kind young man but later he carefully and knowingly destroys the psyche of Stanley. He also tries to seduce Lulu. He is caught in the web of ideological state apparatus. Though Goldberg has this realisation that he is a mere tool in the hands of oppressive state and he cannot maintain his separate self from the power structure of the state and thus he is firmly caught in the employed violence of oppressive social system.

We find in Act-I of the play that Stanley trying to recreate a family unit in the boarding house with Meg, a substitute mother (perhaps beloved too) though it does not work. Meg too is

looking for a substitute family in Stanley to make up the loss of her own,

“Meg: “My father was going to take me to Ireland once. But then he went away by himself.

Meg: My little room was pink. I had a pink carpet and pink curtains, and I had musical boxes all over the room. And they played me to sleep. And my father was a very big doctor. That’s why I never had any complaints. I was cared for, and I had little sisters and brothers in other rooms, all different colours.”

(Pinter, p.59-60)

Meg’s attempt fails as does Stanley’s. Stanley plays multiple role of a father (as she wants to make up her loss), a lover (because of incapability of Petey), and a son, as she herself is incapable of bearing a child. Stanley though fails to fulfill any of these roles yet he plays all in fragments. Violence comes between their relationship and does not allow them to build any meaningful relation, sometimes their feeling of insecurity overshadows, sometimes it is due to fear of outside world and sometimes it comes from their own desire to dominate and to stand superior to each other.

Each and every character in this play tries to hold his or her personality (fake) but the center cannot hold and things fall apart. They are not sure of their genuine personality. Stanley is shattered; Goldberg and MacCann to shrink from breaking up of their personalities. Doubts are picked up about the personality of Lulu whether she is a prostitute or something else. She provokes Stanley first and then Goldberg. Meg assumes herself the role of mother though believes herself beautiful enough to be attractive sexually. Their fragmented selves interfere in constructing any actual identity of their selves and hence make them fail in building any substantial relationship which is a violation through interpersonal violence hidden in their psyche. Their perception is crushed. They are compelled to be an ideal citizen in the oppressive society of modern milieu. They are bound to act according to the society’s demand: unthinkable obedience

and lack of any individuality. They seems to be victims of 'interpolated violence' of oppressive social system and its organised rules. In this dramatic articulation Harold Pinter could dare to give eloquence to this unthinkable kinds of violence which has become a part and parcel of our life in the world of scientific advancement and materialistic growth. Harold Pinter is very well aware of the importance of interpersonal relationships in human life that is why he beware us in this way, "Always bid good morning to the neighbours. Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core!" (Pinter, P. 78)

NOTES

1. Wikipedia, ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence# Interpersonal_violence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence#Interpersonal_violence), on 23Nov. 2014)
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