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GRT THE MENACE OF THE UNKNOWN: RE-READING HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

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Abstract:- After the two world wars men were unable to come out of its horrors and disillusionment. The war which was glorified sooner brings forth total confusion and disorderly situation which none can avoid. This era therefore gives birth to a number of dramatists who constructs The Theatre of Absurd. Pinter's early plays are often been attributed as 'comedy of menace' due to their superficial fun, inherent menacing, verbal violence, erotic fantasy, obsession jealousy, family hatred and mental disturbance in terms of wordless language. Language plays an important role in constructing the meaning of any text; it simultaneously can voice or silence any issues that it is dealing with. Pinter, in his several plays has problematised the use of language. His dramas often involve strong conflicts among ambivalent characters who struggle for verbal and territorial dominance and for their own versions of the past. My intention in this paper is to identify how the motif of menace is actualized through verbal violence, uncertain past of characters and sudden unexpected drop from a comic surface to an underlying seriousness and uncanny.

Keywords: Disillusionment, comedy of menace, Theatre of Absurd, verbal violence.

INTRODUCTION:

After the two world wars men were unable to come out of its horrors and disillusionment. The war which was glorified sooner brings forth total confusion and disorderly situation which none can avoid. This era therefore gives birth to a number of dramatists who constructs The Theatre of Absurd. Playwrights commonly associated with this theatre generally include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Edward Albee. These dramatists express human existence without any meaning or purpose where every attempt for communication fails. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and which finally dissolves into silence.

In 1957 David Campton first coined the term 'comedy of menace' as a terminological definition of a group of one act plays written by him. These one act plays are collectively called *The Lunatic View*. In 1958 Irving Wardle applied the term to *The Birthday Party*. Pinter's early plays are often been attributed as 'comedy of menace' due to their superficial fun, inherent menacing, verbal violence, erotic fantasy, obsession jealousy, family hatred and mental disturbance in terms of wordless language.

Language plays an important part in constructing the meaning of any text; it simultaneously can voice or silence any issues it is dealing with. Pinter problematizes the use of language in his several plays. His dramas often involve strong conflicts among ambivalent characters who struggle for verbal and territorial dominance and for their own versions of the past. Stylistically, his works are marked by irony, theatrical pauses, silences and menace. As a classic of the modern theatre, *The Birthday Party* simultaneously amuses and shocks the audience. It leaves them puzzled for the final consequence. The depiction of the nameless danger and menace always haunts the characters in this play. The portrayal of the characters leaving their past in anonymity automatically creates in itself an ambience which breaks the security of their life. Symbolically the dilapidated boarding-house in which Stanley is living symbolizes fragile self-security and outer invasion. With the news of the two visitors from Meg, Stanley immediately grows apprehensive, sensing an imminent danger. His fears are realized with the arrival of Goldberg and McCann.

The fear of the unknown is one of the major traits that categorize *The Birthday Party* as comedy of menace. Pinter has hardly ever tried to set these characters in any particular time or place. Stanley, Goldberg and McCann without their past could be anyone, this anonymity of their existence creates a menace. Pinter's play does not evolve along a linear sequence of 'beginning' and 'closure'. It has much more an existential void like quality where the identities of these characters are formulated by the menace of some external force. The play generates several questions but hardly ever tries to give any satisfactory answers. The questions like: Who is Stanley? Who are Goldberg and McCann? Are Goldberg and McCann belongs to some secret organization that Stanley has betrayed? Or are they male nurses sent out to bring him back to an asylum from which he has escaped? Or are they agents from secret world? These questions were never answered.

Verbal violence:

Pinter in his *The Birthday Party* experiments boldly with language and theatricality. His originality as a playwright can be traced in his unexpected blend of brutality in comedy. Here the humour that entices the audience is deceptive. The dialogue of the characters heightens the menace to its zenith. The use of cryptic language between Goldberg and McCann creates suspense in this play. Throughout the whole play the only information that we ever get from them about their intrusion into the boarding-house is that they are here to do a 'job'. The nature of their job is later understood when the pair encounters with Stanley Weber. Their nature of interrogating Stanley exemplifies the

blend of menace and violence in their act. The individuality of Stanley's being has been ripped off through the verbal abuse and apparent absurdity. This verbal torture reaches its height when the interrogation goes to absurdity:

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?

Goldberg: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

Stanley Screams.

(Pinter, *The Birthday Party*)

Pinter's elliptical style leaves the audience guessing about the motivations, thoughts, feelings and inner workings of the characters. This absurdist drama develops between the lines and in the audience's imagination. Pinter deliberately departs from the conventional theatrical dialogue and speech pattern to make a communication gap between the characters and the audience. The colloquial speech of his characters consists in disjointed and ambivalent conversations, punctuated with resonant silence. The characters with their speech, hesitation, pauses not only depict their own alienation but also bring our several under-layers of meanings. Dialogue is of central importance in Pinter's plays and is perhaps the key to his originality. Self-consciously, Pinter invents his own language for the stage. His remark about the kind of theatrical language close to everyday speech-idiom and least infected with the wordiness of English stage, say the Shavian drama, is apposite here:

One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.....I think we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves, communication is too alarming.

(Harold Pinter in *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's...* By Steven H. Gale p. 66)

Martin Esslin, while commenting on Pinter's use of language remarks "Pinter's dialogue is as tightly – perhaps more tightly – controlled than verse." He further mentions in *The People Wound*:

Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences, is calculated to nicety. And precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech are here used as formal elements with which the poet can compose his linguistic ballet.

(*Harold Pinter in 20th Century Writer* by Archana Srinivasan p.34)

Pinter's plays are noted for their use of silence, understatement, cryptic small talk to

increase tension. At points the language takes on the significance of music in its suggestiveness and resonance:

I don't know how music can influence writing, but has very important for me, both jazz and classical music. I feel a sense of music continually in writing, which is different matter from having been influenced by it.

(Harold Pinter in *Playwright at Work*, ed. By George Plimpton, 2000)

Creation of the atmosphere of menace in Pinter:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines menace as “A declaration or indication of hostile intention, or of a probable evil or catastrophe; a threat.” or “The action of threatening.” The atmosphere of threatening is the most recurrent motif in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. With the brilliant use of symbolism Pinter creates an atmosphere of menace through petty everyday objects, therefore, apparently trivial objects appears strange and threatening. The toy drum thus in this play is not a mere musical instrument; it symbolizes the interpellation of Stanley according to social demand. The society therefore becomes the sacrificial alter where individual creativity is negated for the social demand.

The atmosphere of menace is created by sudden, unexpected drop from a comic surface to an underlying seriousness and uncanny. The comedy remains the surface layer of the play whereas strong current of menace goes underneath it. The sudden outbreak of verbal or physical violence confirms this underneath menace and leaves the audience unsure of what follows. The general settings of the play though naturalistic and mundane, sometimes represent the menace of the unknown. The room or the boarding-house which represents a fragile sense of security from outside world finally becomes the place of intrusion by Goldberg and McCann. The two apparently opposite modes, such as terror and amusement are combined to give both frightening and funny atmosphere. The identity of Stanley is destroyed by a torrent of verbal abuse from Goldberg. Such serious accusations like “He killed his wife” are put against trivial and ludicrous one like “Why do you pick your nose?”—these create a combined effect of bathos and comedy simultaneously. Pinter effectively blends the comic overtones with latent brutality in this play; therefore, comedy and menace coalesce at the level of dramatic situation. To Pinter:

Everything is funny until the horror of the human situation rises to the surface! Life is funny because it is based on illusions and self-deceptions, like Stanley's dream of a world tour as a pianist, because it is built out of pretence. In our present-day world, everything is uncertain, there is no fixed point, we are surrounded by the unknown. This unknown occurs in my plays. There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity (comedy) go together.¹

Pinter refuses to give any rational justification for the actions of Goldberg and McCann but he himself provides a clue to the mechanics of power and menace embedded in their actions. He says in an interview:

I believe that there are extremely powerful people in apartments in capital cities in all countries who are actually controlling events that are happening on the street in a number of very subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. But they don't really bother to talk about it, because they know it's happening and they know they have powers.²

(Harold Pinter in an interview with Mireia Aragay and Ramon Simo, 1996.)

Pinter refuses to give any rational justification for the actions of Goldberg and McCann but he himself provides a clue to the mechanics of power and menace embedded in their actions. He says in an interview:

To join an organization whose main purpose is mass-murder, whose conception of the true human values is absolutely nil, spreading on the utter degeneration of the prematurely fatigued man, and whose result and indeed ambition is to destroy the world's very precious life, is completely beyond my human understanding and moral conception.

(Pinter's *Conscientious Objector Speech* written in the late 1940s.)

CONCLUSION:

Many of Pinter's plays are about a room – and what happens outside is unknown and threatening. The outer world is always ready to break inside the room which stands for the refuge of an individual from the unknown danger of outside world in its warmth, comfort, security and togetherness forming the basis of an individual's identity. The paramount question of personal insecurity of threatened privacy puts up a mist of mystery around his characters. His individual character achieves a universal dimension as a nameless entity lost in the post-war actualities of life and its defacements. Therefore, this menace can be understood as a leitmotif of post-war actualities of life.

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