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Living in a no Man's Land: Space, Identity and Human Dilemma in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract

After the two World Wars there was total confusion and disorder. Man was unable to come out of the horrors of war. In an effort to come out of the horror, man found the loss of his space and identity. He is throttled by his own existence. This era gave birth to a host of dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter and many others. They gave birth to the Theatre of the Absurd and focused on the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence. Pinter's play The Birthday Party is a presentation of the predicament of the post war generation. My paper focuses on the dilemma of this generation who futilely wastes their life for a space of their own and is in quest for identity.

Keywords: *Theatre of the Absurd, Space, Paranoia, Identity, dilemma.*

I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground… I've never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory. (Naismith 4)

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In the above observation from *Various Voices*, quoted in *A Faber Critical Guide: Harold Pinter*, edited by Bill Naismith, Harold Pinter makes clear that he begins his plays with an image he has experienced, that his characters do the work and he is an observer. Writing at a time when man was totally exhausted by the trauma of the two World Wars, Pinter presents the human dilemma; man trying to come out of the horrors of war and accommodate himself in the domestic space. 'Space' is crucial – it is the area either side of the borderline. The dilemma happens when man tries to jump from one space to the other and falls somewhere in between. This paper shall endeavour to explore how Pinter treats this dilemma in his play *The Birthday Party* (1957).

The two World Wars were crushing blows upon humanity. The aftermath was terrible and unforgettable. Man's illusions of a dream world were completely destroyed and everything became a veritable dystopia. It was a world of man desperately and vacantly echoing like Hamlet "to be or not to be" or like Prufrock moving through "half deserted streets" and hearing the "muttering retreats", confused regarding his identity like "a patient etherized upon a table". It was an era of confusion and disillusionment; Great Britain was gradually shrinking into "Little England". The horrors of the post war world had its impact in the arena of literature and John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, which opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London on 8 May 1956, "marked either a 'revolution' or a 'watershed' in the history of the modern British theatre"(Sanders 587). This was followed by a bunch of playwrights writing about the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence like Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. Pinter's plays opened up a world of "seeming inconsequentiality, tangential communication, dislocated relationships, and undefined threats" (Sanders 621).

In *The Birthday Party*, the human dilemma is evident from the very beginning. The shrinking of a once great world is intentionally pointed out by the playwrights of this period by the limited use of settings and stage props and Pinter is no exception. Just as Osborne could paint the dilemma of the Angry Young Man by placing his characters in one small room(*Look Back in Anger*) and Beckett with a roadside and a tree serving his purpose(*Waiting for Godot*), Pinter

also stages his play within the limited space of a single room. His characters do not suffer because of any flaw in their characters as in the ancient Greek dramas; it is their existence itself in a fragmented and torn world that defines their defeat. Pinter's play begins with the old couple Meg and Petey uttering broken sentences. This is not what we may call conversation or interaction; it is rather disruption of communication. Simon O. Lesser observes in "Reflections on Pinter's The Birthday Party" that:

> The setting of The Birthday Party is a shabby living room in a seaside town in England, a room too appallingly real to question. Both the shabby woman who takes care of this establishment, Meg, a woman in her sixties, and her husband, Petey, a deck chair attendant, seem firmly, indeed inescapably, moored in the world of everyday being. Both speak about commonplaces in dreary, flat, usually hackneyed way. Despite these reassuring indications, before long we find that we are in a strange world, a world where there are no signposts, where nothing is clearly defined. (*Contemporary Literature* 13.1 36)

Here originates the feeling of nothingness or absurdity and Pinter's play The Birthday Party is a major play in the genre Theatre of the Absurd. M. H. Abrams records Albert Camus' observation in the *Myth of Sisyphus*(1942) in the "Literature of the Absurd" entry of his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

> 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. (Abrams 1)

In *Waiting for Godot*, the dilemma consists in the futile waiting – "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (*Waiting for Godot* Act I 34). But in Pinter's play the dilemma occurs as McCann and Goldberg encroach upon the private space of Stanley. In *Godot* there is lack of communication, but in Pinter's play communication fails. Meg and Petey talk about nothing, there is lack of coherence in their utterances.

> MEG. Is that you, Petey?
>
> *Pause*

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Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. Yes, its me.

MEG. What? (*Her face appears at the hatch*.) Are you back?

PETEY. Yes.

(*The Birthday Party*, henceforth *TBP* Act I 9)

The beginning shocks us. It starts with a disruption of language as a means of expression. The very phrase "birthday party" evokes the image of liveliness, vibrant energy, jubilance and above all happy domesticity, but the beginning of Pinter's play hints at the reverse. This reversal of the world order becomes more prominent as the play proceeds and more characters are introduced. We may here recollect Wilfred Owen's famous observation – "My subject is war, the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity". Over the ages litterateurs have talked about the hollowness of war and its aftermaths; the "Unreal City" (*The Waste Land*) it thrusts us into. Pinter takes up this dilemma of existence of modern man mutilated after the war. Pinter does not particularly declare that it is a world after the war, but very subtly projects the difference between the past, present and future. As the characters attempt to jump from the past to the present he is dismayed. The glory is somewhere in the past and the characters ignore their immediate present space to indulge in a nostalgic revisiting of the past; the Past which is gone and shall never return. Meg always fantasises about her lovely room, a space where she can thrive. But as she puts her leg in the present, she finds the room turned into a 'pigsty'; it becomes an encroached space:

> STANLEY (*violently*). Look, why don't you get this place cleared up! It's a pigsty….
>
> …
>
> MEG (*sensual, stroking his arm*). Oh, Stan, that's a lovely room. I've had some lovely afternoons in that room. (*TBP* Act I 19)

Similar are the cases of Stanley, McCann and Goldberg. They too are victims of a changed world order. While Stanley remembers a grand piano concert he had performed in the past, Goldberg reminiscences experiences of adolescence and his happy married life. In a situation of crisis it is the past which often provides relief as we also observe in Eugene O' Neill's existential play *Thirst*. The victims of a shipwreck remember the past as they try to accommodate with the present. But the dilemma chases and the past could hardly offer solace. Stanley remembers the concert:

> STANLEY. Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country. (*Pause.*) I once gave a concert.
>
> MEG. A concert?
>
> STANLEY (*reflectively*). Yes. It was a good one too. They were all there that night. Every single one of them. It was a great success. Yes. A concert. At Lower Edmonton.
>
> MEG. What did you wear?
>
> STANLEY (*to himself*). I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. (*Pause.*) My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it. No, I – I lost the address, that was it. (*Pause.*) Yes. Lower Edmonton. Then after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was locked, the place was shuttered up, not even a

> caretaker. They'd locked it up. (*Takes off his glasses and wipes them on his pyjama jacket*.) … (23)

We get a similar reflection in Thirst when the Gentleman remembers his days of fame and glory:

> GENTLEMAN: …. This is a souvenir menu of a banquet given in my honour by this club. [Reading.] "Martini cocktails, soup, sherry, fish, Bergundy, chicken, champagne" – and here we are dying for a crust of bread, for a drink of water. *[His mad gesture suddenly ceases and in a frenzy he shakes his fist at the sky and screams.]*... ("*Thirst*" [www.theatrehistory.com, Web; Aug 26 2013])

It is not only their speeches, their gestures also carry notes of desperation. Stanley while remembering the past becomes confused; a sense of fear seems to grip him. The jumbled absurdity gradually moves towards blurring of the borderline – it begins the acute state of paranoia. Just as in a paranoid suspicion the Gentleman in *Thirst* suspects that the Sailor has water, so Stanley also begins to feel sinister suspicions in *The Birthday Party*. Sometimes when we reconsider Stanley's present state, his sense of absurd fear that arises again when he learns that two more boarders would be accommodated in the house he lives in, his past fear also raises questions in our mind.

In "The Paranoid Pseudo Community in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*", E. T. Kirby observes:

> When Stanley is told that two men are coming to the boarding house he at first shows agitation and suspicion suggestive of paranoia. Then, strangely, he is positive they are not coming. "Why didn't they come last night if they were coming? ... Forget all about it? It's a false alarm. A false alarm". This can only be understood within his own frame of reference. Like the patient cited, he had lain

> awake all "last night", daydreaming as he says, which we can take to mean participating in a paranoid fantasy. There was apparently no "reference" to the men in his fantasy so it is only "a false alarm". (*Educational Theatre Journal* 30.2 158)

We therefore see whenever there is an encroachment upon one's space, he rises in alarm. In an effort to accommodate, the characters enter a puzzled state of fear and suspicion. Even the two sinister characters in the play also fear an invisible force, perhaps the institution. Goldberg becomes agitated and disturbed, perhaps he knows what he is doing is wrong. His outburst comes out in the form of rebukes and reproaches against McCann who sits idly tearing newspapers into strips:

> GOLDBERG. Why do you do this all the time? It's childish, it's pointless. It's without a solitary point.
>
> MCCANN. What's the matter with you today?
>
> GOLDBERG. Questions, questions. Stop asking me so many questions. What do you think I am? (Act III 75)

Space is related to identity and the problem of space is closely associated with crisis in identity. Man is in a constant quest for identity and in a situation when man is divided and confused, when he belongs to a no man's land, and man is in a dilemma constantly swaying somewhere in between the past, present and future, when everything is relegated to insignificance and nothingness, man is a stranger to his own self. All the characters in Pinter's play search for an identity in a confused and muddled state. But what is identity? The confusion lies in our inability to establish "identity for whom?" Simply stating, identity is recognition, understanding oneself. But interestingly, recognition and understanding are self contradictory. While recognition requires the certificate of the society we live in, understanding oneself is absolutely individualistic. The crux of the problem lies in the confusion whether identity consists in social recognition or self understanding, and herein lies the dilemma. This same confusion is evident in the characters of *The Birthday Party*. They are constantly searching something; an identity of their own. In their futile search they are sometimes dismayed, sometimes aggressive,

or become permanently neurotic. Ruby Cohn in "The World of Harold Pinter" excellently portrays the dramatist Harold Pinter:

> … Pinter is not only Beckett's spiritual son. He is at least a cousin of the Angry Young Englishmen of his generation, for Pinter's anger, like theirs, is directed vitriolically against the System.… it is by his bitter dramas of dehumanization that he implies 'the importance of humanity'….
>
> Like Osborne, Pinter looks back in anger; like Beckett, Pinter looks forward to nothing, (not even Godot). Pinter has created his own and dramatic version of Man vs. the System. Situating him between Beckett and the Angries is only a first approximation of his achievement. (*The Tulana Drama Review* 6.3 55-56)

In a campaign against the System, Pinter quite questions the very concept of identity. Identity becomes a social construct and it is society which defines the characters. Meg, Stanley, Goldberg, McCann are all in constant search for recognition. Meg is a failed character. But what defines her failure is her inability in becoming a good wife or a caring mother. 'Wife', 'mother' is constructs of society and it becomes the seed of identity. Meg is self sufficient, she could be creative. She runs a household, goes to the market to do shopping, and she can also do knitting. That she could knit is evident from the stage direction but it deliberately escapes our attention:

> *She looks round the room, stands, goes to the sideboard and takes a pair of socks from a drawer, collects wool and a needle and goes back to the table.* (Act I 10)

Instead we focus and read out loud her inability to provide tea to her husband. She is concerned about her husband – "Your tea! You haven't had your tea!", anxious regarding Stanley – "Is Stanley up yet?... Haven't you seen him down? … He must be still asleep" (10), and in her effort to perform all the roles she is somewhere lost. In fact she is confused about her relation with

Stanley – towards him she is a caring mother, a benevolent landlady and even a seductive temptress:

MEG. …

Was it nice?

STANLEY. What?

MEG. The fried bread.

STANLEY. Succulent.

MEG. You should not say that word.

…

MEG. You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.

…

STANLEY. Well if I can't say it to a married woman who can I say it to?

MEG. You're bad.

…

She takes his plate and ruffles his hair as she passes….

…

STANLEY. I don't know what I'd do without you.

MEG. You don't deserve it though.

STANLEY. Why not?

MEG. (*pouring the tea, coyly*). Go on. Calling me that. (Act I 17-18)

Thus Meg here plays the role of a seductress towards Stanley. Again in Stanley's birthday party the same woman plays the genuine, caring, mother-like character to Stanley. Through Meg,

Pinter shows how people fail and loose oneself under the crushing burden of relationships in a society. In her effort to accommodate everyone in her space, she loses her own space. She, in her confused state even forgets the terrible mishap at the birthday party and becomes a mechanical and unperturbed character in the end. In a letter to the director of *The Birthday Party*, Peter Wood, Pinter defines his play:

> The first image of this play, the first thing that about a year ago was put on paper was a kitchen, Meg, Stanley, corn flakes and sour milk. There they were, they sat, they stood, they bent, they turned, they were incontravertible, or perhaps I should say incontrovertible. Not long before Goldberg and McCann turned up. They had come with a purpose, a job in hand – to take Stanley away. This they did, Meg unknowing, Peter helpless, Stanley sucked in. Play over…. (*Casebook* 79)

Goldberg and McCann we see are the two 'evil' characters in the play. They are made instruments of menace by the society, the institution they work for. They are not villains by nature, but men with a purpose, who are to discharge the orders of the institution. In an effort to obey the institution, their real selves are somewhere lost. When Goldberg thinks about his past days, his mother and wife mingle somewhere and disappear, he could not separate them as two individuals and gets confused and loses his identity. McCann is also an agent of the institution, but he is more crippled and dismayed than Goldberg. He even has no self, requires a Goldberg to discharge the orders and becomes a man of nothingness. If Goldberg molests Lulu, it is his way of getting recognition, the only way of triumph against the repressive social structure, the institution he works for. In his "Introduction" to the *Casebook* on the three plays of Harold Pinter – *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming*, Michael Scott makes the following observation:

> When there is no centre of stability, no foundation for one's existence, a victim can be an aggressor, an aggressor a victim, and words such as 'good', 'evil'

> become meaningless – as Pinter has implied in answering a question about his not considering his characters to be villainous:
>
> It's rather ridiculous to try to understand people in those kinds of terms. Evil people. What the hell does that mean? Or bad people. And who are you then if you say that, and what are you? (*Casebook* 18)

The most potent victim of identity crisis in the play is Stanley. The other characters like Meg or Goldberg could retreat, but Stanley becomes dumbfounded. He is the only character in the play who despite being the most effortful, fails to carve a space of his own. He gets trapped in the rigmarole and the outcome is evident – nervous breakdown. When Goldberg and McCann put Stanley in the machine of verbal torture, he is lost. His life has been a pursuit of stability, he had tried to create his own world of identity, but the instruments of menace forcibly take that identity from him leaving him in a state of permanent delirium. As Goldberg and McCann take him away from his space (the household of Meg was a secure place for him), he is thrust into a world of uncertainty and complete destitution.

In analyzing Stanley's recollection of his experience at a concert in the past, Michael Scott observes:

> The 'concert', 'they', 'Lower Edmonton', 'champagne', 'my father', are elements of stability. Each is positive. 'They', by being linked with 'champagne', are beneficent, friendly. His father 'nearly came'. He would have come, if he could have come; if he had known about it. His absence was not his fault, but due rather to a lost address. As the story continues the credibility of the acceptance of him by others wanes. The language stutters: 'I – I lost the address'. The pause halts the flow. The use of the word 'Yes' and the return to the reference to the specific place 'Lower Edmonton' indicates a grasping for stability, for foundation, for some kind of roots…. (*Casebook* 18)

This grasp is violently taken away and what remains of Stanley is a soulless corporeal body without any power of resistance. His voice and his existence is silenced and all he could utter in the end is some incoherent groaning.

The only character in the play who does not suffer change is Petey. Passive from the beginning, he remains the same in the end also. He is the only character who does not search for an identity and therefore does not suffer identity crisis. He remains sane and stable. Though he could not stop Stanley's destruction, tries hard to communicate to Stanley as not to be dictated by the instruments of menace. Petey survives as the only unaltered character who must now protect Meg and prevent her from passing to delirious state. The play ends with a circular orbit and returns where it began after a terrible tempest that changed everyone's life without their ever being aware of the fact. Its an unresolved and irresolvable quest for identity, a futile quest of the modern man. Life is nothingness, a tale of absurdity.

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