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Chaos: Analysis of Harold Pinter's “The Birthday Party”

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author MAM designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author VM managed the analyses of the study. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The play “*The Birthday Party*” delineates the predicaments faced by the people in the second half of the 20th century. It represents the existential problems among the post-war generations who have given up life and stuck in utter seclusion. The elderly class have been living life by a normal means; however, they are made to suffer by younger class in ample ways. Life in post-war period is seen as a dark-phase in the history of England. The circumstances were completely unfavourable to sustain and lead a life in the certain optimistic mood. Pinter has portrayed this sense of being and existence in dramatic approach through his narratives giving the image of menace and suffering in post-war period. The research paper is an original work to present the humanistic-existential approach of Pinter towards post-war societies. It is an effort to study the ontological dilemma that has compelled these humans to resort to absolute isolation, dragging their life toward chaos, anxiety, distress, fear, threat, and vis-à-vis utter absurdism.

Keywords: Absurd; dilemma; existence; ontological; post-war; suffering.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The play "*The Birthday Party*" represents the youth who have given up the external hostile world. So, the characters presented in the play are idle, sleepy, and dirty most of the time. Stanley, the protagonist is given refuge by the elderly couple in the boarding house. He usually wakes up late in the day and reflects upon the post-war young London generation. Such individuals are filthy, messy and a blot on family and society. These individuals have dragged families towards terror and anxiety. The personal and family dignity of such individuals is devalued and lost. The play portrays the hard work done by elder generation in society, who leave their homes at dawn and work throughout the day until dusk. Such individuals strive a lot to keep their house running. The elderly couple Petey and Meg give the impression of being firmly moored in their daily life. Their poor meals represent the turmoil in their day-to-day life. This paper consequently highlights the following as contained in the play: Pinter's bird-eye view, a mystery play, paranoid protagonist, hopelessness and weirdness, aggression—an existential tool, identity and isolation, existential lingo, and strive to survive.

2. PINTER'S BIRD-EYE VIEW

Harold Pinter's plays still puzzle audience and critics after almost fifty years of acquaintance with his work. Pinter in his play *The Birthday Party* expresses his own vision of looking at the milieu of the modern age. He employs psychological devices to present melancholic post-war human affliction. In this play, he uses six individuals to narrate the plight and vicissitudes of life. Among these six, Goldberg and McCann are the antagonists who exploit other characters. They treat Stanley badly, who gets lost in thoughts, makes vigorous efforts to think, imagine and speak but is powerless to do so. Lesser submits:

In the play, there are six characters and they constitute a microcosm of society. They mirror the economic division of the society and the division between exploiters and exploited. Goldberg and McCann are exploiters, managers, operators, and control the life as well as decision makers (37).

3. A MYSTERY PLAY

The Birthday Party is a mysterious play because we are ignorant of Stanley's purpose of anguish

and apprehension; and Goldberg—McCann's mission. The audience, as well as McCann remain unaware of their intention to visit the boarding house. The pair brings an aura of suspense and menace to the audience (Naismith 49) [1]. Goldberg and McCann ironically represent Jews and Irish respectively, two of the most oppressed, persecuted communities that become tormentors (Naismith 50) [1]. The play is labelled as 'Comedy of Menace' due to its hilarious and tormenting terror going through its scenes and episodes. In most events, the audience is amused at the ambiguous menace of Stanley. Pinter regarding Goldberg and McCann declares, "the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility" (Qtd. in Weales 605) [2].

4. PARANOIAC PROTAGONIST

Kirby, one of the renowned critics states: "*The Birthday Party* enacts with precision a textbook case of mental breakdown" (164) [3]. The play depicts mental and nervous breakdown of post-war individuals and their ontological predicaments that human society profusely experienced. The threat that has colonized the hearts of post-war individuals has disabled them both physically and mentally. Absurd individuals do not want to get exposed to external world and experience fear of strangers. (Pinter 29) [4]. Stanley feels the extreme fear from the world outside and, so he chooses to put himself in isolation. Stanley finds refuge in Meg and Petey at the boarding house and the moment he is informed by Meg about the visit of two gentlemen he loses his temper and begins to act strangely in a violent manner (Pinter 19) [5]. He turns violent and begins to behave in an ominous way that displays his sense of threat. His behaviour and gestures reflect that he has committed certain sin and so he feels guilty. Stanley remains comfortable till the two gentlemen arrive at the boarding house. The moment they enter the house, the irrationality and trouble begin to hang on Stanley and their entrance rapidly alters the whole environment of the house by causing terror among the characters. Like Kafka, Pinter is preoccupied with fear, anxiety and terror of the members in the society. Megged writes:

[Pinter] catches his characters in extreme situations of nervous sensitivity to what goes on inside them or around them, to bring them together on the brink of some disaster or

some pathological outburst of psychic forces which has been slumbering until the moment of this meeting (Qtd. in Pfefferkorn 198) [6].

5. HOPELESSNESS AND WEIRDNESS

In the words of Naismith: "During the twentieth century the individual has become increasingly alienated and distanced from the centres of power" (39) [1]. The play reflects the state of mid-20th century youth—lost and hopeless. The idle and unpleasant life that Stanley lives is noticed by Meg's next-door neighbour Lulu who considers him to be busy. Lulu appears an uncomplicated character and a girl of little depth (Naismith 47) [1]. She seems a dull girl through her activities but dares to revive Stanley's inert soul. She notices the absurd attitude of Stanley and desires him to feel calm and relaxed, and abandon all worries and miseries. She knocks down Stanley for being grimy and filthy, "Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible"; "Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me looking like that" (Pinter 26) [5].

However, Meg feels joyous and extreme pleasure due to the party organised by Goldberg and McCann and shares happiness, "I'll put on my party dress"; "I hope I look nice in my dress" (Pinter 33) [5]. Meg presents Stanley the drum as a birthday gift because he has not played the piano for a long time. Stanley begins to beat the drum gently, rhythmically with music that pleased both Meg and the audience; but all of a sudden, he thrashed the drum bitterly, violently and wildly. It appears like the worst experience of past has struck to his mind and he could not hold his temper and loses consciousness. Pinter as a psychiatrist detected Stanley's paranoia. From Stanley's non-sensible activities, we observe that he has been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder that repeatedly overwhelms him in the course of the play.

6. AGGRESSION — AN EXISTENTIAL TOOL

The modern individuals struggle for dominance over one another, and initiate their interaction in an aggressive fashion. This we detect in Stanley's first encounter with Goldberg and McCann where he strives to achieve supremacy. Goldberg has been the dominating figure in all events since his arrival into the house. He scolds Stanley many times for his foolish behaviour; and later he scolds McCann for continuing his childish activities, "Why do you do that all the time? It's childish, it's pointless. It's without a

solitary point"; and McCann responds by asking questions and enrages him, "Questions, questions. Stop asking me so many questions. What do you think I am?" (Pinter 76) [5], and is badly rebuked and severely attacked while he calls him "Simey" (Pinter 76) [5]. Kerr expresses:

[So] no one in the play understands the pattern through which he is moving. . . . Because they exist, they act. They do not act out of prior definition; they are on the way to discovering themselves . . . (Qtd. in Sahai 23-24) [7].

Depressed Stanley behaves in a rude way with Goldberg, "Don't mess me about!" (Pinter 44) [5]. He gets puzzled with their stay at the house and asserts himself, "I run the house. I'm afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation" (Pinter 44) [5].

7. IDENTITY AND ISOLATION

From the psychological point of view, Pinter declares the play to be a process of growth toward maturity from the warm and cosy world of childhood (Esslin 84) [8]. Pinter's plays begin with laughter, use the comic element and turn to psychological and physical violence rapidly. Throughout these stages, the play revolves round the identity crisis so crucial to existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd. Pinter's plays are more puzzling to the audience and more problematic at the end (Rusinko 283) [9].

The play shows, how a man in the course of others' entertainment is ignored and abandoned completely. The individual identity is relegated to the background. Both Lulu and Meg enjoy the party with Goldberg and McCann respectively, while Stanley, all alone, suffers during their celebration. Stanley is deeply lost in his thoughts in isolation and none pays attention to his despair. They decided to play the game of blind man's buff and while Stanley is blindfolded, McCann crushes down his glasses and puts the drum in his way to let him collapse down in disgrace (Pinter 63) [5]. Audience feel his gloomy mood and distorted physique that is almost crippled. Pinter has observed and shown to the world the identity crisis that damaged the human society and put humans into eternal absurdity. Gale submits:

It is evident that the terrors undergone by the participants in the drama are representative

rather than the portrayal of a single individual's plight. Perhaps because the horror is intensified, by contrast the characters' dialogue sounds much more realistic and the horror comes through much more strongly (183) [10].

8. EXISTENTIAL LINGO

In the words of Almansi and Henderson: "Pinter has systematically forced his characters to use a perverse, deviant language specialized in concealing reality" (12) [11]. Pinter shows the aggressive attitude of individuals whose torment may lead anyone towards affliction and devastation. Stanley is tormented by irrational questions which annihilate his thoughts and senses. He is reduced to an inarticulate victim; and accused of certain guilt. The crimes attributed to him are mostly anti-social—murder, failure to keep a clean house, refusal to marry, etc (Gale 184) [10]. He is unable to defend against them although he tried a lot to answer their nonsensical questions which they posed to him. Goldberg and McCann's attacks are so furious that arouses insanity in him and turns him into a living corpse. Almansi and Henderson remark:

Communication between human beings is difficult and often dangerous; that family ties are loose and often harmful; that social connections are untrustworthy and often deadly; that memory is unreliable and often treacherous; that others are always a mystery to us as we are to them (and as we are even to ourselves); that man is alone in this miserable world (15) [11].

One form of loss of identity is the breakdown of communication. Communication breakdown takes place when an individual is rudely tortured in the society. He is deprived of thinking power, ideas, and imagination, hence cannot gossip. Rosenfield comments:

Pinter, of course, is the acknowledged master of the unsaid, the echoing silence that brings a shiver to the soul. There are rumours that after its short initial run, the play is to be restaged, though nobody knows where. If it is, as it should be, it is a combination of two great talents that should not be missed (21) [12].

Pinter, as we know, has made an in-depth study of human psychology to understand the most internal state of the human mind. So, he should be called the dramatic psychologist because at

all stages he investigated the human mind. The psycho-analytical approach helps in understanding the play and its impact and effect on audience (Esslin 8) [13].

Pinter has been directly involved in the absurd life of his society. His characters are inarticulate and he himself as a dramatist is more colloquial than other absurd playwrights (Lesser 34) [14]. His characters suffer from psychological imbalance and are seen performing unexpected activities. The ideological stance or philosophical mode of thinking i.e. existentialism with which his works are associated contain the clarity and soundness of his ideas, grandeur of thoughts and glittering eloquence with proper diction. The dramatic techniques connect his plays with the modern theatrical movement i.e. The Theatre of the Absurd. His plays reflect psychological thought that depends on, "what the characters say, wish to say, ought to say or don't say, trusting the author's power to breathe life into his dramatis personae and create characters who are consonant with his own ideas" (Almansi and Henderson 14) [11]. Esslin regarding the play argues:

A play like *The Birthday Party* can only be understood as a complex poetic image. Such an image exists, simultaneously, on a multitude of levels. A complex pattern of association and allusion is assembled to express a complex emotional state; what the poet tries to communicate by such an image is, ultimately, the totality of his own existential anxiety (43) [8].

9. STRIVE TO SURVIVE

The problem with the modern youth is that they lack the power and confidence; and cannot defend against tormenters though awfully oppressed. So they are badly tormented and are unable to perceive their strength. Such people find it difficult to survive and strive to free themselves from tormenting anxieties. Stanley's peace of mind at the boarding house comes to its conclusion the moment intruders enter in the house, and worsens in the course of their stay. Initially, Pinter's antagonists appear to be victims but as the play proceeds, they reveal their identity through skilful dialogues on the stage e.g. Goldberg and McCann express their plight at first sight but later we judge them both as antagonists because they disturbed and tortured Stanley mentally and physically, throughout the play.

Stanley appears to have lost his sense since Goldberg and McCann entered the house, but after analysing the play it is noticed that they had actually tried to put Stanley out of the absurd, terror, and anxiety from which he was suffering. They want to put a live soul in his body to let him live a free and responsible life which he has given up. At last Stanley has become a wretched figure, alive corpse, unable to utter a single word and is ultimately dragged out of boarding house by Goldberg and McCann. So Stanley is kidnapped, tortured and taken away in a car by them.

10. CONCLUSION

Thus, the play reflects the ridiculous state of the individuals in the second half of the 20th century. It presents the grimness and despair in man's life. Pinter's characters are bewildered. They have put themselves in utter darkness and are unable to recognise their true nature and purpose. The modern life at each and every instance shocked the general folk in the post-war Western society. The play declares the multi-dimensional chaos, arbitrariness and illogical episodes at their virtual facades. It reinforces the idea of discreet solution to the existing human predicaments that have ailed and crippled the societies. The socio-political factors render the individuals meaningless. Existence is questioned and yearning to seek self-identity remains unsatisfied as the search for identity remains inconclusive and elusive.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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