

Stanley, the Non-Conformist in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

S.M. Abu Hanifa Asstt. Professor

Dalgoma Anchalik College Dalgoma, Matia, Goalpara (Assam)

Abstract

Like in other absurd dramas, Stanley the hero of the play *The Birthday Party* is in the world of alienation for the preservation of self-identity. He wants to be in his own world but could not as the state agents Goldberg and McCann capture him to take the unknown person, Dr. Monty. If we compare Pinter and Beckett, we find that they seemed to be different from each other. In Pinter the intensity of the metaphysical theme was not as apparent as in Beckett's work. Man for Beckett was being contemplated in relation to a void. He seemed to be a 'tragic joke in a context of total cosmic absurdity. In plays such as *Waiting for Godot* metaphysical concerns seemed to be involved with the dilemma of man's existence. Pinter's vision, however, centred largely on man without reference to the spiritual void. In this respect it was possibly easier to associate Pinter with Ionesco who had quickly regarded as the spokesman for absurdist theatre. Menace, fear, the clutter of daily living, the concentration on trivial possessions, the focus on the banality of language were elements which seemed to form a common denominator between the two absurd dramatists.

Keywords: Absurd, Alienation, Agents, Theatre, Trivial.

From a great revolutionary movement which delivered the 19th century from God liberated it neither from judgement nor from necessity. Courts of justice is everywhere; the innocent accused themselves publicly. 'There are no more friends, there are only accomplices,' victims and executioners, and as before masters and selves. Power is no longer sought after as a remedy for boredom as Pascal suggested, but because it saves one from being judged. And henceforth the judgement itself has no foundation. Like Camus himself, the modern world has "the sense of the sacred" but no faith in a future life. One ought to include from this that sentences are relative, since "a day will come when the guilty person, too quickly executed, will not seem quite so black," since our civilization "has lost the only values which justify in a certain way the suppression of human life."¹

For years Harold Pinter like Camus had done his utmost to preserve a certain innocence. Yet he had not escaped from misfortune that punished without judgement and his work *The Birthday Party* protested against the form of traditional injustice. But his protest through the hero Stanley has no effect and he is not able to preserve his individual freedom and has to submit in front of the two prevailing giants, Goldberg and McCann:

"Once many years ago, I found myself engaged uneasily in public discussion on theatre. Someone asked me what my work was 'about.' I replied with no thought at all and merely to frustrate this line of enquiry: 'The weasel under the cocktail cabinet.' That was a great mistake over the years I have seen that remark quoted in a number of learned columns. It has now seemingly acquired a profound significance, and is seen to be a highly relevant and meaningful observation about my own work. But for me the remark meant precisely nothing."²

Pinter is the product of dilapidated post war generation that has attempted to reject the evils of the 20th century and presented a new outlook on society. That is not to say that Pinter is consciously experienced of man in transition, not in terms of the angry young man in frustration or revolt, not of the vacuity of man faced with metaphysical absurdity he expressed man in his fear, joy, humour, stupidity, ambition. He is concerned with the human condition as it is today. We should not ask what his plays 'mean' but rather see them as theatrical experiences engaging and provoking an emotional and intellectual response from his audience. He writes:

"I am not concerned with making general statement. I am not interested in theatre used simply as a means of self expression on the part of people engaged in it. I find in so much group theatre, and the sweat and assault

and noise, nothing but valueless generations, naive and quite truthful. I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say, that is what happened. That is what they say. That is what they did."³

Dramatic criticism has often become obsessed with defining the meaning of plays but for a playwright like Pinter the meaning of the play itself. To theorise the subject of the drama is for him to go against the experiences and the emotions he wishes to communicate.

The plays communicate feelings, emotions, experiences with the playwright sees and which he then mediates for perception as an audience. His plays in this respect have an affinity with the nature of poetry. When asked in the interview in 1970 about other playwrights, he shows his admiration for dramatists of a different school—Edward Bond, Heathcote Williams—and reacts firmly to questions implying a lack of political interest. He says that he is not a prophet, nor is he a theorist but a playwright and that 'A play has to speak for itself.'⁴

In a technological age of proof and counter proof and a sociological climate of analysis and polemic, such attitudes have caused problems for critics and audiences alike. When his first major play, *The Birthday Party*, appeared in 1958, I met almost unanimous critical hostility or dismissal. Writing two years later Kenneth Tynan admitted that he had failed to detect in it, the promise of the dramatist. *The Birthday Party* was for him "a clever fragment grown dropsical with symbolic content a piece full of those familiar

paranoid overtones that seem inseparable from much of avant garde drama."⁵

Harold Hobson, the influential critic of the *Sunday Times*, however, had run against the stream of adverse criticism in 1958, proclaiming that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London. He continued by drawing comparisons between the play and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*: a comparison put into perspective by Irving Wardle's less well known positive review of the play in July of the same year. Hobson perceptively noted further that 'one of the greatest merits' of the play is the 'fact that no one can say what precisely it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened, concluding that it is exactly in this vagueness that its spine chilling quality lies.'⁶

It was, however, precisely this vagueness to which literary London in 1958 took exception. A twin phenomenon of revolt against the dramatic conventions of the writers such as Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan had been accepted. John Osborne with *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and Samuel Beckett with *Waiting for Godot* (produced in London in 1955) had drawn the boundaries of the new theatre and new dramatists were expected by the critics at least to be follower of one of the two styles. It was clear that Pinter's work was not in the vein of Osborne. His language was far too elliptic for that school and his plots far too obscure. He was seen, therefore, in comparison with Samuel Beckett (whose works he had read) and Eugene Ionesco (whose works he had not read), as the English exponent of what Martin Esslin termed 'The theatre of the absurd.'

If we compare Pinter and Beckett we find that they seemed to be different from each other. In Pinter the intensity of the metaphysical theme was not as apparent as in Beckett's work. Man for Beckett was being contemplated in relation to a void. He seemed 'a tragic joke in a context of total cosmic absurdity. In the plays such as *Waiting for Godot* metaphysical concerns seemed to be involved with the dilemma of man's existence. Pinter's vision, however, centred largely on man without reference to the spiritual void. In this respect it was possibly easier to associate Pinter with Ionesco, who had quickly become regarded as the spokesman for absurdist theatre. Menace, fear, the clutter of daily living, the concentration on trivial possessions, the focus on the banality of language were elements which seemed to form a common denominator between these two dramatists. Cultural and social contexts naturally affect dramatic performance and criticism. Views and interpretations change according to the predictions, social and linguistic conditioning of the critic or interpretation. The perception of the critic or the director depends not merely on Pinter's play but on the cultural context of the readers or audience concentration on the language

employed is one way favoured by some critics evaluating the work. Both Andrew Kennedy and Austin Quigley make important remarks through contrasting contributions to Pinter. Criticism in this respect, Andrew Kennedy sees the dramatist's linguistic development within the wider context of a search by the 20th century playwright for a new theatrical language. Katharine Worth considers Pinter in the tradition of

T. S. Eliot. Pinter has created a poetic structure. Austin Quigley is more sceptical, in his introduction to "The

Pinter's problem, he bemoans the rut into which Pinter criticism has fallen and in particular questions notions of a 'poetic or metaphoric' Pinter.

'When forced to confront the recalcitrant details of the text, critics find it very hard to assimilate them

to any precise interpretation. The resort to metaphor and analogy like that to symbol and subtext, still leaves, the problems of synthesising the details unresolved. The very attempt to abstract technical brilliance from some other 'end' of the work is to oppose two things which cannot be usually opposed.'⁷

Quigley, therefore, holds that it is far too easy to offer vague terms such as Pinter's play pose. His solution is to break the boundaries of conventional Pinter's criticism by providing a detailed linguistic study of the work.

Stanley is found in every society in every country. Though the establishment of the democratic social welfare states are most welcomed after the 2nd World War, but this type of democracy is only for the gratification of the giant powers of the world. Individual freedom and self identity have no more value in the pseudo-democratic country. Though a person is right, yet he has to conform with the society. Goldberg and McCann are the representatives of the powerful traditional race Christianity and Jews. Like them now the

U.S.A. and the U.K. are two traditional so-called democratic countries which are trying to conform the small, less powerful states. These two big powers are using their powers to ally other states or face the consequences.

After the Second World War, the 20th century men expected a happy and equalised society based on democracy, fraternity and fellow feelings, a society of individual freedom but that had not happened only due to prevailing principles of the traditional and bias attitudes of the existing social, political and religious norms. Freedom of expression had been expected but it has become null and void. The impact of the Second World War was proved to be negative as the inner burning desire by the suffering classes were still beyond the touch of the general. Universal sorrow and suffering, pathos of the have nots and listener to the voice of the voiceless were not open to the world. People who advocated in favour of the universal brotherhood were vehemently punished and slaughtered by the imperialistic power by every possible means even by exercising their unseen hands. Till today the people of 21st century are not able to enjoy the freedom of expression and freedom of individual growth. Pinter has expressed that his art is neither didactic nor political. In this respect his plays are theatrical experiences provoking audience response, but doing this they are naturally fulfilling a social and some would say a political role. Denial of a political role implies one's silence is as powerful as political act as eloquence or as Pinter's own refusal as young man to be conscripted into the army. His art form does not have to be overtly didactic or moralistic since such elements are implicit within the dramatic experiences that the works provide, though the complexity of his theatrical forms his plays express moments of existence, catching life as it passes. To talk of his theatricality as the focus of his achievement is not to deny his drama's social conduct and in that expression lie their strength or their weakness as we accept or reject them. There is salvation neither outside this world nor within it. It can be appropriate in case of Stanley the hero of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* as he is neither protected in the inside world i.e. the home of Meq and Pety nor in the outside world.

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