

POLITICAL IDENTITY IN PINTER'S *THE CARETAKER*

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Abstract

*Pinter's characters for the most part of their action are engaged in power games. The game is concerned with the relationship of the identities of people who have power with those who don't. Pinter represents a drama of silencing dissidence and oppositions. From the beginning of his career as a dramatist Pinter has chosen to demonstrate situations where the underprivileged, the subaltern is denied access to power being robbed of his right to speak. The subjective self of the victim is subjected to brutal torture so as to render him as an object, his identity reduced to a mere corporeal entity. These situations in his early plays like *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* were analyzed by critics as metaphysical stuff rather than political metaphors. But reconsidered in the light of the plays written by Pinter during the last phase of his writing (after 1980), these plays have come to be discussed with more visibility.*

Key words: dissidence and oppositions, demonstrate, underprivileged, subaltern, corporeal, metaphysical reconsideration.

Introduction:

The unknown assailants and intruders of the early plays have reappeared as holders of absolute political power, and so have the peace activists, the masked monsters in plays like *One of the Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Party Time*, *Celebration* and *The New World Order*. Enforcement of dominance through coercion, threat, and brain-washing run through most of his plays spread over a span of half a century baring the postcolonial world order.

While killers like Goldberg, McCann, Ben, Nicolas, Douglas and Terry represent the forces that attack freedom and suppress identity politics, the victims like Stanley, Davies, Aston, Lamb Victor and Jimmy are left to their post traumatic conditions. Except silent ruminations and occasional attempts at articulating the experience inside confinement or torture chamber the oppressed are hardly able to identify with a cause, let alone form groups on identification basis.

But Pinter's works are informed by a politics of identity. Lack of adequate

background information and antecedents about the characters and the resultant ambiguity shrouding their identities in all his plays is a strategy he has employed to make the plays open ended. The plays refer to themselves as aesthetic structures but persuade the audience for a social engagement.

The Caretaker explores intersection of dominance and subjugation and can be seen as a site of contestation implicated with the concerns of social justice. Davies, a homeless and oppressed old man struggling for survival is given shelter by Aston and Mick in their house is again shown the door at the end of the play. The process of bothering is dramatized through his lived experience, his perception of himself complicated by his relationship with the two brothers.

First performed on stage of Arts Theater, London on 27th April, 1960, *The Caretaker* was Pinter's first commercial success. Pinter plays with the idea of identity in this play. When Davies is asked the question "Where do you come from" he replies "Oh, I've been around". Brigitte Gauthier comments: "The first impression we get as we are confronted with this erosion of signs of identity is a disturbing sense of terror" (Gauthier.5). But Davies confronts the terror with resourcefulness. Brigitte feels that "such characters are gifted with an existential strength which throws us into the arena of politics . In contrast to the ambiguity shrouding the identities of the character we find meticulously prepared list of stage properties on the stage direction.

A fetid atmosphere is created in staging a room filled with boxes, coal buckets, a lawn mower, a shopping trolley, an iron bed, an unused gas stove in the corner, a statue of the Buddha on the stove, furniture, planks of wood, a clothes horse, pile of newspapers, and other things. A bucket hangs from the ceiling to collect raindrops leaking through the roof with a sack screen on the window.

The well defined stage props expose the material conditions and their implications on the performative experience of the characters. Davies is brought to this junk-filled house by Aston rescued from a fight and is given the job of a caretaker. He connects the two brothers Mick and Aston through his dialogue and wants to convince them that he deserves human dignity and has right to live. Davies goes under an assumed name.

His desperate attempt at showing his insurance card to prove his identity and his reference to papers that he has left with a bloke at Sidcup make him more unfamiliar and untrustworthy. He seems to have spent long years on the road and been subjected to be distanced from his cultural origins. His multiple names, vague references to good days of his life, his elusive promise to go to Sidcup pre-suppose a consistent opposition to his identity by a process of disintegration. Critics find from 'Sidcup' clues to his identity.

Sidcup, a Royal Artillery Head Quarters of the past used to be source of records and permission. Davies's repeated reference to Sidcup is a camouflage to project a public identity connoting dignity and order. Davies is afraid of a possible leakage from the gas stove. He is afraid of muffled voices, machines, strangers and darkness. This fear can be

related to the vision of the Holocaust he is carrying in his subconscious..

The vagrant Davies could be an embodiment of Jewish presence. Elizabeth Angel Perez examines: *The Caretaker* contains a vast range of allusion to the concentration camps: Davies won't sleep with his head towards the gas stove, he is constantly staring. Allusion to soap (Always slipped me a little bit of soap), to draughts, to cold put the spectator on the alert: gradually, the paradigms of deportation are being built up.

His refusing to acknowledge that sleeping in bed is not a familiar exercise, his obsession with shoes, his refusal to "take out buckets" (bucket being a clear enough allusion to the buckets of excrement that had to be emptied by the prisoners. The concentration-camp like space is at the back of many of Pinter's plays. Through vision and memory of trauma the self builds up for itself the identity of the displaced and the oppressed in a social space. In hotel, hospital, prison and other rooms victims are interrogated, their identities questioned.

The political reality of the contemporary world is represented on the stage. The institutional, social and political pressure prevents free thinking and examining self-images, coercive assimilation to the mainstream power logic is a leitmotif in Pinter. If Davies is a Jewish presence and presented through his lies and survival strategies, Aston reminds one of the socially excluded and the mentally challenged. Pinter does not produce types but we construct their images abstracted from the cultural references occurring in the process of their experience.

Aston's monologue at the end of Act Two is a vivid account of his nervous breakdown and ECT reminding one of Soviet Government's systematic brutalities to political prisoners in psychiatric hospitals. What is described in the monologue of Aston is dramatized in another play *The Hothouse*. From Aston's speech we get the information that prior to this electric shock therapy he used to visit cafes where he used to talk to people who would listen to him. "I talked too much. That was my mistake."(Pinter.63), he says. Maybe the potential to construct a subjective self was chosen for subjection. Davis, who has been treated 'like dirt', does not find the house a comfortable place.

He hides his Welsh identity. He is not happy to be the caretaker since visitors would come to know of his fake identity and he would be in trouble. His ingratitude to the monks in the monastery, his conspiracy against Aston to take over the charge of the house, his racial hatred against the Blacks can be seen as his politics in a miniature world. But the family ties prove to be stronger and both Mick and Aston steer clear of the tangle of charity and ingratitude.

The question of identity emerges as most significant aspect of the play. The three characters project illusory identities. Mick, through his official jargon, terrorizes Davies. Davies terrorizes Aston with the possibility of another shock therapy; Aston's generosity gets mixed up with post traumatic stress disorder. The Beckettian game of passing the bag from one to the other among the three actors on the stage is symbolic of going after and

yet escaping their ‘wounded attachments’.

Pinter has constructed the identities of these three characters on the basis of a sustained conflict between each one’s public identity and subjectivity, the external and the interior (one’s own sense of himself) to show the pathological effects. If we analyze his later political plays resistance to American colonial tactics and totalitarianism of any form becomes clear. But Pinter does not name a specific country or a politician even in these plays. He is involved in a realistic identity politics where one comes to recognize the dynamic character of identity, the topical variables of ontological entities.

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