



The Birthday Party: Problematising the Communication

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Abstract:

If we probe into the contemporary art and literature, we notice unmistakably ceaseless experimentations with the art of communication. In case of the Absurd Theatre as practised by the great stalwarts like Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, dramatic communication assumed enigmatic proportions, so much so the readers and audience feel helpless while going through their masterpieces. Harold Pinter is one of those Absurd playwrights whose writings have merited considerable attention from the viewers on account of their intrinsic variety and complexity as regards thematic strain and stylistic innovations. Like Beckett, Albee and Ionesco, Pinter remained engrossed in sorting out the problematics of communication. The present paper is a critical endeavour to elucidate *The Birthday Party* as the case of Pinter's powerful exercise in the complex designs of communication. It would seem that the characters in the play are overpowered by the mysterious web of non-verbal communications to the extent of Problematising the communication itself. A critical probing of the Pinter makes us aware of the complex situations implying multiple layers of meanings. The enigmatic characters and contradictory situations add to the mystery and a absurdity of the entire dramas.

KEYWORDS: CONTEMPORARY, PROBLEMATISING, ENIGMATIC, COMMUNICATION,, ABSURD, MYSTERIOUS, VARIETY, COMPLEXITY, NON-VERBAL , EXPERIMENTS.

The writers and critics of the contemporary literature are of the opinion that the deviation/innovation in the communication has arisen largely from the abnormality or savagery or hollowness which has eaten into the vitals of the normal responses towards situations around. Martin Esslin in his magnum opus, *The Theatre of the Absurd* dwells on the complexities of the dramatic communication by the Absurd playwrights owing to the existential ordeals/ enigmas. Bakhtin, one of the most representative critics of our times talks about the 'multi-styled' or the 'Dialogic Imagination'. Pinter is well conversant with the kind of the communication which he had already evolved in order to adequately reveal the mysterious world of menace lurking around his characters. He himself admitted that he was concerned with the treatment of unique realism quite opposed to the traditional realism. His observations on his typical art and design of dramatic language for communication of intense emotions and feelings suggest it:

What goes on in my plays is realistic but what I'm doing is not realism.(16)

You and I , the characters which grow on a page , most of the time, we are inexpressive, giving little way, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it is out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said. (9)



The more acute the experience, the less articulate it's expression.(11)

The Birthday Party seems to be a distinctive play in so far as the exploration of the dislocated existence of the protagonist is concerned. However hard Stanley (the Protagonist) tried to evade from his surroundings and the past, he fails finally. Top secretly he took refuge in a seaside hotel, but then his inescapable past overtakes him in the form of the intruders--- Goldberg and McCann who suddenly appeared to him to remind him of his birthday, as if from the blue. That Stanley started feeling embarrassed by their dramatic arrival and enigmatic announcement to him: " If we hadn't come today w'd have come tomorrow"(TBP, 2, 52). It seems that Stanley is a victim of the uncontrollable forces. He could neither know nor conjecture existential ordeals to which he was being subjected. T S Eliot, a leading poet of Modern Age aptly says in '*The Waste Land*':

Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, or you know only
A heap of broken images. (42)

The way the two outsiders subjects Stanley to the brainstorming questions is really puzzling. The nature of their interrogation shows the deep- seated menace in all of them pointing to the absurdity of existence. The Act 2 of the play bristles with such queries:

1. Why did you kill your wife?
Why did you never get married?
2. Which came first?-- Chicken or egg?
3. We'll make a man of you
And a woman.
4. We'll watch over you.
Give you proper care and treatment.
(TBP, Act 3)

In fact, this sort of ferocious cross-examination regarding the existence is the underlying feature of the Absurd playwrights. In '*Waiting for Godot*', too, we come across illogical questionings regarding the human life on the parts of both Vladimir and Estragon. Although they have been physically together, yet their mounting doubts/ dilemma towards each other bring out the aimlessness of their existence. They glare at each other angrily:

Vladimir: Ceremonious ape!
Estragon: Punctilious pig?
Vladimir: Finish your phrase ,I tell you!
Estragon: Finish your own!

Silence. They draw closer ,halt.



Vladimir: Moron!
Estragon: Let's abuse. Each other.
.....
Vladimir: Question of temperament.
Estragon: Of character.
Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.
Estragon: No use struggling.
Vladimir: One is what one is.
Estragon: No use wriggling.
Vladimir: The Essential doesn't change.
Estragon: Nothing to be done.

(WFG, 1)

Hence, in Harold Pinter' dramas, there is inter-penetration of text and subtext, latent and patent, visible and invisible elements thereby demonstrating the original genius of the playwright. It's something that comes very close to the Post-structuralist rather than structuralist mode of communication. For Adamov, a stage play is " to be a point of intersection between the visible and invisible worlds,or, in other words,the displays, the manifestation of the hidden, latent contents that form the shell around the seeds of drama"(100)

Pinter, like Beckett, seeks to communicate the basic Absurdity of human life.They talk about endless enigmas and mysterious questions of existence. The existential dilemma informs the heart of Pinter's plays where different types of questions regarding existence remain unanswered thereby puzzling the audience from first to finish. It seems to be the crux of the contemporary literature as well. O' Neill, a powerful dramatist, poignantly states in his masterpiece,' The Iceman Cometh':

I was forced to admit, at the end of thirty years' devotion to the Cause,that
I was never made for it. I was born
condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you're
damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it's all question and
no answer.(31-32).

The Existentialists and the Absurd playwrights had common sensitivity to the existential dilemma and they felt desperate towards recognizing the meaning of humanity. Camus, the well-known Existentialist, depicts this sense of chaos and confusion so well:
in his masterpiece ' *The Myth of Sisyphus*':

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. This is an irremediable exile.....This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (18)

Ever since the beginning of the Modern Verse Drama, we've witnessed the dissatisfaction of the writers towards the conventional mode of communication as it doesn't adequately express the inner world of characters. The Expressionistic playwrights like O' Neill and Miller had



the similar contention regarding the traditional and modern media of communication. This explains why the contemporary writers take recourse to the non- verbal devices(Pause, Silence, Gap, Light, Sound, Stage setting etc) during dialogues and performance. The ending of ' *The Birthday Party*' is the acme of such an innovative exercise. Having been bulldozed by the intruders, Stanley becomes a poor sufferer and helpless individual. Physically dislocated, mentally broken and spiritually disillusioned, he finds his life totally a mess. His too much realization of the burden of existence has played havoc with his vocal and behavioural responses. All this results in the inadequate, non- intelligible and illogical gurgling sound coming out of him. However hard he tried to object/ protest against the bloody outsiders, he couldn't . Pinter achieves the height of the non- verbal communication for representing the utter desperation of the protagonist:

Uh- hug.....uh....hug....caahhh-cag....Caahh.....Caahh.....(TBP, 3)

The plight and victimization of the sensitive soul(like Stanley) in the hands of the unseen forces is a recurrent theme of the Absurd literature. Sartre, Heidegger, Camus have extensively depicted this essential suffering of mankind. Kafka, one of the representative Absurd writers of our times delineates it so vividly in his famous book, ' The Trial':

Somebody must have made a false accusation against Joseph K, for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.(35)

Hence Harold Pinter achieves a dramatic paean in *The Birthday Party* towards establishing a novel dramatic communication marked by deeper and more complex connotations than generally meet the eye. The multidimensionality of such communications mostly shocks and struts the readers/ viewers. The readers continue to experience awe-struck because of the evasive or ' polyphonic' mode of communication, to use Bakhtin's term.Hence audience and the readers of these Absurd playwrights have to jostle their mind to make anything out of the mess or menace that the characters have represented almost throughout. The endless paradox which keeps overtaking the readers of Pinter's plays is the problematics of the human life leading to the Problematising of the communication.

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