



VERBAL VIOLENCE AND SUPPRESSION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAY *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter, a Nobel Prize winning British dramatist began to write after experiencing the horror of two World Wars. After observing the huge loss of life and property caused by these two World Wars Pinter was greatly moved by it and it seemed to him as if the world has transformed into a heap of broken images. And here lies the root of writing absurd drama. He made his debut in the absurd dramatic world with the brought out of the absurd drama *The Room* in 1957 and in the same year he wrote his masterpiece *The Birthday Party*. This paper strives to explore the delineation of verbal violence and the suppression of the female characters in the play *The Birthday Party*, which is replete with verbal violence. Verbal violence has become one of the most important tools for the post modern dramatists to make the people understand the condition of the people after the two successive great World Wars. This paper also highlights the affect of verbal violence on the victim of verbal violence. Apart from it, this paper also focuses light on the craftsmanship of Harold Pinter in whose hand women are still playing the role like a puppet.



KEY WORDS : Verbal violence, purpose of verbal violence, tool of verbal violence, *The Birthday Party*, suppression of women.

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter (1930-2008), one of the well-known absurd dramatists of the twentieth century, deals with anxiety, threat, absurdities, violence and meaninglessness of life. After the publication of his first play *The Room* (1957), one act absurd drama, he wrote one of his masterpieces *The Birthday Party* (1957). It is also an absurd drama which very finely portrays the absurdities, anxieties, violence and meaninglessness of life. This paper basically zeros in verbal violence and the affect of it. Besides it, this paper is also an attempt to highlight the suppression of the female characters in the play *The Birthday Party*. As *The Birthday Party* is an absurd drama therefore, the terms like absurd drama, verbal violence etc. are necessary terms to be discussed before focusing light on the locus-classicus of the paper.

ABSURD DRAMA:

Martin Esslin, an eminent critic, used the phrase "Theatre of Absurd", to describe the plays of the 1950s and 1960s. It has been derived from an essay by the French philosopher, Albert Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus" written in 1942, who defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. (Fateme Azizmohammadi, Hamedreza Kohzadi, The Language of Absurd Theatre, 2011). It is a new type of drama which endeavours to create something new by subverting the traditional ideas and concepts. This type of drama basically tries to portray the meaninglessness of life. Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Arthur Adamov and many others share the same view that life in this world is meaningless. Eugene Ionesco, regarding the theatre of absurd, says: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots,

man is lost; all his actions become senseless, useless.”(Abrams, Literary Terms, P-1) It focuses on the incomprehensibility of the world and makes a presentation of an orderless world. According to Ionesco, “Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objectives”.(Martin Esslin, The Theatre of Absurd, P-4, 2013) Apparently the speeches of this kind of drama seem meaningless. Repetition after repetition only took place.

VERBAL VIOLENCE:

Whenever we think of violence, it often occurs that only physical violence comes to our mind. It comes probably as we are closely connected to physical violence. But the question is- what is verbal violence? In case of physical violence one attacks other physically, but it does not happen in case of verbal violence. In verbal violence one humiliates the other with sarcastic speech or words, destroys his/her self-confidence, manipulates, confuses and forces him/her, thus bringing him/ her under his control. In a discussion all can share their opinions freely and try to know the other person’s point of view in an equal measure, but in the process of verbal violence one is not interested in the others opinion, only in the enforcement of his own superiority. In case of discussion the members of discussion come to a conclusion. But in verbal violence one not only sticks to his point but also tries to suppress other so that the other can lost his power of speaking.

PURPOSE OF VERBAL VIOLENCE:

Now the question that automatically comes to our mind is- what is the purpose of using such kind of verbal violence in drama or why does the dramatist use verbal violence in their plays? The dramatists use verbal violence in drama purposefully. The purpose of verbal violence is to obtain and maintain the power of one above the other person or to revenge its loss. Men using verbal violence do not regard the other as equal; their purpose is not the solution of a conflict or developing a common viewpoint, but the control over the other.

The Influence of Verbal Violence on the Victim:

After discussing the purposes of verbal violence, it is necessary to look on the influence or affect of verbal violence on the victim. Under the influence of verbal violence victims get confused, they may surrender to the other using violence. Their self-confidence decreases, they lose their enthusiasm, they have more and more doubts in themselves. They do not believe that they are able to have a new relationship, they are even afraid to get crazy. Thus the impact of verbal violence on the victim is no less than the physical violence. It can also be said that the affect of verbal violence on the victim is longer than the physical violence.

Tool of Verbal Violence:

A tool is necessary to expose violence. And to express verbal violence language is the best tool. But what kind of language is required to express it? Does it express better through the traditional language or does the language require anything else? Of course to express verbal violence traditional language is not appropriate. Therefore the dramatists employ a number of recurring verbal devices through which language domination operates. The three broadest and the most significant are: the ritualization of language and a resultant verbal hypnotism; the use of extended clichés and jargons as forms of coercion; and verbal mechanization in which language speaks through man without recourse to the speaker’s intent or control.(Jeanette R. Malkin, Verbal Violence,p-40)

Verbal violence and *The Birthday Party*:

After discussing all the necessary topics briefly now I am going to zero in into the main topic of my discussion i.e. how Harold Pinter has used verbal violence in *The Birthday Party* and how it affects the victim.

The Birthday Party is the first full length play of Harold Pinter. In this play Pinter's central dramatic device is the extensive use of verbal violence. But up to the first act we do not find such kind of verbal violence. It becomes prominent in the Act II. When the play opens we find Meg and Petey, wife and husband respectively, who are running in their sixties, are in their kitchen room. Petey is reading a news paper and Meg is asking to know whether it was Petey or not. Meg is repeating the same words to become confirm.

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. Yes, it's me.(P-9)

Such kind of repetition one after another seems to suggest the existentialism angst which becomes prominent after the Second World War. After the Second World War the people were living in a death in life condition. They became spiritually hollow. Their condition becomes such that they can neither die nor can think of dying. Meg is also living in the same condition and therefore she is suffering from existentialism angst. And so she repeatedly asking the same question to become secure. Thus from the beginning of the play it seems to us as if the play deals with the existentialism. But the more the play progresses the more we can see the extensive use of verbal violence which is one of the dominant themes in this play. Stanley Webber, a slovenly, unemployed pianist, "a bit of washout", as Lulu puts it, who for some years has been living in idle seclusion as lodger and substitute son at the seaside boarding house of Meg and Petey Boles. We know little about him and what we learn is ambiguous. He claims to have once been a concert pianist whose career ended due to bad reviews; "They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all work out." From these words of Stanley it becomes apparent that he had one time lived in a very different type of life, but we cannot be the certain of the details. What is certain is Stanley's current idleness and indifferent squalor. Unshaven, unwashed, perpetually dressed in his pyjama jacket, he no longer even bothers leaving the house. Stanley's relationship with the Boles is one of the easy familiarity. But the cosy domesticity is shattered by the arrival of the two strangers namely Goldberg and McCann. Up to the end of the first act it goes casually without any intervention of verbal violence. (Jeanette R. Malkin, *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama*).

The Act II starts with a meeting between Stanley and McCann during which Stanley tries to convince the unresponsive McCann of his "innocence". His reference to his past is, typically for Pinter, elliptic, and does more to mystify than to clarify. Stanley speaks of his home town, of his quite life he had led, and his plans to return there: "I'll stay there too, this time. No place like home". (P-40) McCann makes no accusations and we are never told of what crime Stanley thinks himself accused; but obviously he feels endangered. "I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really... I mean, not really, that I was the sort of bloke to –to cause any trouble, would you? (P-40). McCann's indifference enrages him and he grows more aggressive.

STANLEY: It's a mistake! Do you understand?

McCANN: You are in a bad state, man.

STANLEY (whispering and advancing): Has he told you anything?

Do you know what you are here for? Tell me. You needn't be frightened of me. Or has he not told you?

McCann: Told me what?

STANLEY (hissing): I've explained to you, damn you, that all those years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door.

McCANN: You know, I'm flabbergasted with you. (P- 42)

The tone and mysterious hints belong to the genre of the detective or mystery story. At that time Goldberg enters and he and McCann surround Stanley and using gangster tactics force Stanley to sit down, taking up position either side of his chair.

And from here six pages of massive, totally unrealistic verbal violence begins. There is an abrupt switch from conversation to interrogation. There is not only a shift from conversation to interrogation but also a shift in genre: we are now in a Kafkaesque world of secret, incomprehensible mental torture. Goldberg and McCann speak in a quick, gapless rhythm, a totalitarian style which allows no space for response and no option for self-defence. (Jeanette R. Malkin, Verbal Violence, p-57):

GOLDBERG: Webber, what were you doing yesterday?

STANLEY: Yesterday?

GOLDBERG: and the day before. What did you do the day before that?

STANLEY: What do you mean?

GOLDBERG: Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?

STANLEY: Me? What are you-?

GOLDBERG: I'm telling you, Webber. You're a washout. (P-47)

This is the trailer of their verbal violence on Stanley. This interrogation simply resembles the opening ploy of an almost stereotyped police interrogation of the where-were-you-on-the-night-of-the-crime sort. The more the play progress the more the verbal assault continues. The question retains their familiar tone and the assault become more and more tormenting. (Ibid)

McCANN: Why did you leave the organization?

GOLDBERG: What would your old mum say, Webber?

McCANN: Why did you betray us?

GOLDBERG: You hurt me, Webber. You're playing a dirty game .

McCANN: That's a Black and Tan fact.[...]

GOLDBERG: You stink of sin.

McCANN: I can smell it.

GOLDBERG: Do you recognise an external force?

McCANN: That's the question! [...]

McCANN: You contaminate woman kind.

GOLDBERG: Why don't you pay the rent?

McCANN: Mother defiler! [...]

GOLDBERG: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

McCANN: What about the Albigensienist heresy?

GOLDBERG: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

McCANN: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett? (P-48-51)

Thus throughout the session Stanley remains silent as if Stanley has been transformed into a dumb as well as deaf. This assault becomes completely intolerable to him and as a result of which he loses the power of speaking throughout the session. His condition becomes such that he can neither talk nor think of talking. He remains like an ignorant as if he does not know anything. But in spite of his dumbness the assault does not stop rather it becomes more and more violent. The torrent of irrational, contradictory accusations grows in intensity and viciousness, climaxing in outright threats of violence as Stanley's very existence is put in question. (Ibid, p-58)

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted to – he wanted to...

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted...

McCANN: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG: Which came first?

McCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

(Stanley screams) [...]

McCANN: Wake him up stick a needle in his eye.

GOLDBERG: You're a plague, Webber. You're overthrow. [...]

McCANN: You betrayed our land.

GOLDBERG: You betray our breed.

McCANN: Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG: What makes you think you exist?

McCANN: You're dead.

GOLDBERG: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's is no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (Pp-51-2)

Stanley ends up screaming and striking out in horror.

Affect of Verbal Violence on Stanley:

Act II's torture/interrogation scene is well noted as it contains the central device i.e. the extensive use of verbal violence. Here I am going to analyse what happens to Stanley after this torture scene. In this torture/interrogation scene of Act II Stanley is squeezed empty. His condition becomes like Peter Handke's Kaspar, whose one original sentence is "exorcised" by the Prompters through a massive assault of scrambled, vaguely familiar phrases, and who is thus silenced and made ready to be reshaped by socially acceptable language. So Stanley too is emptied of his own language and became speechless. He is completely transformed and recreated in the ensuing torture/reconstruction scene of Act III (Ibid). After verbal assault, Stanley completely loses the power of speaking and he only makes sound.

GOLDBERG: Steady, McCANN.

STANLEY: Uuuuuuhhhh!

McCANN: Right, Judas.

GOLDBERG :(rising). Steady, McCANN.

McCANN: Come on.

STANLEY: Uuuuuuhhhh!

McCANN: He's sweating.

STANLEY: Uuuuuuhhhh!

GOLDBERG: Easy McCann.

McCANN: The bastard sweat pig is sweating.(P-52-53).

The condition of Stanley is prominent from the aforesaid passage. However, he is once again recreated in the ensuing torture/reconstruction scene of Act III. When Stanley finally does appear, he looks transformed. His previously derelict, pyjama-clad attire is replaced by a well cut dark suit and white collar; he is neat and clean shaven. Again he is surrounded by Goldberg and McCann But this time Stanley does not interrupt their liturgy. In fact, he "shows no reaction," as the stage directions tell us.

GOLDBERG: You've gone from bad to worse.
 McCANN: Worse than worse.
 GOLDBERG: You need a long convalescence.
 McCANN: A change of air.
 GOLDBERG: Somewhere over the rainbow.
 McCANN: Where angels fear to tread.[...]
 GOLDBERG: But we can save you.
 McCANN: From a worse fate. (p.82)

Thus we find that Stanley has been completely surrendered to Goldberg and McCann. He has been completely metamorphosed into one who can now accustom to the society in which he lives.

Suppression of the Woman Characters and *The Birthday Party*:

Women have been treated as subsidiary, marginalized, secondary and insignificant creature throughout the ages. The path of the women is not a bed full of roses rather they had to lead a very difficult life throughout the ages. Time has been changed. There is upgradation in all fields but it seems as if the portrayal of the woman characters still remains the same. They are still playing the same role designed by patriarchal society. In Pinter's play we also find the same thing. In his play he has kept always a soft corner for his male characters but so far the woman characters are concerned, they are not the apple of his eye rather they are insignificant as if their role is to please the male characters. The women in Pinter's plays perform three roles: mother, wife and whore. (Elizabeth Sakellaridou, *Pinter's Female Portraits*).

If we concentrate into the play it will be prominent to us. The two women characters in the play *The Birthday Party*- Meg, Stanley's landlady, and Lulu, a girl visitor- have subsidiary roles and are presented in an unflattering light. Though granted that *The Birthday Party* is a play full of disagreeable characters, but it is often felt that the women characters are less likeable than the men. What is more they are also ridiculous and strips them of any human dignity or respect. The portrait of Meg, the more important of the two women, is nothing but a collection of all those traits that diminish a woman in the eyes of men. She resembles Rose, a character in the play *The Room*. Like her Meg is also an oppressive wife and mother. The play opens in a similar way to that *The Room*, disclosing a conjugal scene in which a talkative, tiresome wife dotes over a bored, monosyllabic husband. Meg is presented in her serving role, like Rose, which reflect the subordination to her husband. On the other hand, however, it also implies her important position as the indispensable nourisher of the male- a mother figure- a function which gives her a sort of power over him. Meg exerts this power on Petey, the husband, by invading his privacy and pestering him with trivial questions. (Ibid)

Meg also plays dubious role with her younger lodger, Stanley. She on the one hand plays the role of a mother and on the other hand plays the role of a mistress. She takes care of Stanley as a mother and makes flirts with Stanley as a mistress. In one scene we find that Meg and Stanley enter into a childish game. At that moment Petey prepares to go out, turning a deaf year to Meg's tiresome instruction, and thus avoids her domination. Meg's failure to dominate her husband gives Stanley the opportunity to turn the game against her by teasing her about her incompetence in her wifely duties.(Ibid) Stanley senses Meg's vulnerability and he pushes the ridicule further by playing with her repressed sexuality as soon as she gives him the clue:

MEG: Was it nice?
 STANLEY: What?
 MEG: The fried bread.
 STANLEY: Succulent.
 MEG: You shouldn't say that word.

STANLEY: What word?
MEG: That word you said.
STANLEY: What, succulent-?
MEG: Don't say it!
STANLEY: What's the matter with it?
MEG: You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.
STANLEY: Is that a fact?
MEG: Yes.
STANLEY: I never knew that.
MEG: Well, it's true.
STANLEY: Who told you that?
MEG: Never you mind.
STANLEY: Well, if I can't say it to a married woman who can I say it to?
MEG: You're bad. (P-17)

In this highly amusing episode the word 'succulent', innocently used as a laudatory qualifier for fried bread, becomes a potential sign of abuse against a woman in Meg's repressed feminine consciousness. Meg again openly flirts with Stanley. Stanley also engages in this game with Meg until he senses that he is in danger of losing control. He then stops the game abruptly and rejects her. When Stanley turns down in disgust her erotic gestures he gives a decisive blow to her feminine power by exposing and then ridiculing her repressed sexuality. Thus she lives at the mercy of the two. (*Pinter's Female Portrait*, Elizabeth Sakellaridou). The more the play progresses the more unflattering features are accumulated round the person of Meg- coquetry, vanity, naive, credulity. For her vanity she is also manipulated under the hand of Goldberg. Goldberg as a man of the world puts up a show of false gallantry and employs trivial and totally unconvincing flatteries- praising her dress, calling her a tulip- to gain her confidence. The end of the play shows Meg an empty headed woman, over-credulous and easily deceived, living in a silly illusion and unable to suspect the sinister game that has been played out in her house. Maternity, in her person, is not only demystified by being stripped of authority and respect but it is also irrevocably degraded by being exposed as an utterly hollow emptiness (Ibid).

Another female character, a young girl called Lulu, is treated as unfavourably as Meg. Instead of bringing some sort of balance as a second female presence in the play, Lulu achieves exactly the opposite. She is also an insignificant character whose role is also to please the male characters. She resembles Mrs Sands in the play *The Room*. Like her Lulu also undermines further the woman's precarious position in the world of the play. She is the stereotyped of the young, provocative, empty-headed, a sex object with no personality and no sense of responsibility. From her character it becomes prominent that she was once a whore. Though she is a neighbour to Meg still she tries to seduce Stanley and does not hesitate to lend herself to Goldberg and then poses as the innocent victim of male lasciviousness and bestiality. Lulu is, indeed, Meg's double in silliness and sluttishness. Her presence in the play by the side of the older woman intensifies, if anything, the disparaged image of the feminine. Her role in the play is too insignificant to remember. (Ibid)

CONCLUSION:

Coming to the conclusion it seems that Harold Pinter is adept in the art of using verbal violence. In this play *The Birthday Party* he has very artistically used verbal violence to achieve his goal. It is verbal violence through which Goldberg and McCann ultimately succeeded not only in subjugating Stanley but also destroying the individuality of Stanley. But Pinter's main target was not only the destruction of Stanley but also reconstruction of Stanley. And it is language, the tool of verbal violence, through which Goldberg and McCann succeeded in destroying the self of Stanley and again reorienting Stanley. (Jeanette R. Malkin,

Verbal Violence). Martin Esslin describing the torture scene of Act II, writes, almost in passing: “Stanley... had been subjugated to a surrealist cross-examination by his tormentors before the party got under way...” (Ibid).

And so far the topic suppression of women characters is concerned it is a matter of great worry. Women are still performing the same role designed by patriarchal society. In Pinter’s dramatic oeuvre men are taken seriously whereas women do not count. Meg proves as redundant and useless as Lulu. Women are marginalised and secondary, never fully rounded personalities, always defined by their relation to man as mother-whore and never having any extra-domestic activities or interests whatever. (Elizabeth Sakellaridou, Pinter’s Female Portraits). Regarding Meg’s presence in the play *The Birthday Party*, Dr Franzblau, a New York practising psychiatrist, summed up Meg as ‘ the universal, clinging, infantilizing, seductive ‘ Mom’ - the kind of mother who produces the Stanleys of life. From her, Stanley gets only illicit pleasure, infinite colding, meanness and poverty of mind and emotion’. (Ibid)

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