



THE HEGEMONY AND ASSERTION OF REALITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

FARIBA SADAT SADREDDINI

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal, A.P., India



FARIBA SADAT
SADREDDINI

ABSTRACT

Reality signifies the reflection of the real life in literature context. When this word comes along absurd, it contributes to losing its color and leaving a tinge of reality in the text. Absurd Theatre dramatists try to keep reality out in their works. However, there are some writers who are interested in breaking this principal and bring together these two contradictory concepts simultaneously in order to innovate a new theatrical style. Pinter is one of the absurdist writers who is known for the fusion of absurdity and reality in his dramatic works. This prominent British dramatist has composed twenty-nine plays, twenty-seven screenplays, one novel and plenty of poems. He has transfigured the mere absurdity in the Absurd Drama by using the realistic elements in his plays. His language is not complicated or unusual as it is pure English vernacular of real life. All his works are comprised with painteresque features in their womb. *The Birthday Party* is one of his famous plays which is arranged under the Theatre of the Absurd and obviously it is supposed to be in contrast with realistic factors. Though the absurdity prevails over the play but the streaks of reality can be seen amidst the play. This paper attempts to introduce the profound layers of reality which are concealed under the absurdist elements in Pinter's play through scrutinizing the realistic factors such as setting, characters, conversation and menace in *The Birthday Party*.

Key words: *The Birthday Party*, Realism, Absurdity, Theatre of Absurd

Article Info:

Article Received:16/12/2013

Revised on:28/12/2013

Accepted for Publication:29/12/2013

INTRODUCTION

Realism is one of the important elements in realistic works but this term has no place in Absurd Drama since this theatre is influenced by its antecedents such as Commedia dell'arte (comedy of artists), nonsense literature, Dadaism, and existentialism that emphasize on dream and inner

reality than outer. In these literatures, the boundary between realism and surrealism is fused well; so in Absurd Drama, as a production of aforesaid literary works, the line between realism and surrealism turns blur. Likewise, Logical language and rational action in Absurd Theatre is superseded to babble dialogue and irrational manner in order to make the

audience laugh. Absurdist dramatists believe that the theatre should not just make the audience laugh, but express the bitter reality of this world. In this regard Esslin quoted YvanGoll's statement about the creation of something which is corresponded with human beings: "the monotony and stupidity of human beings are so enormous that they can be adequately represented only by enormities. Let the new drama be enormity."(Esslin: 2001: 372)

In *The Theatre of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin, Pinter's name comes along with other pioneers and leaders of this style. Furthermore, this critic points out to the blending of absurdity and reality in Pinter's works. He remarks "for Pinter there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him." (Esslin: 2001: 264)

In addition, many critics consider him as a dramatist who has the ability of amalgamation of absurdism and realism. Due to this criterion, they express their different visions towards Pinter's modern theatrical style. Another critic, Burkman observes this skill in Pinter's drama and cites: "its mixture of the real and the surreal, its exact portrayal of life on the surface, and its powerful evocations of that life which lies beneath the surface."(1971: 3-4) Pinter himself believes what is happening in his plays is quite realistic as he acknowledges in his essay *Writing for Myself*: "I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic." (1969: 174)

The Birthday Party is one of the momentous full length plays by Harold Pinter in the first period of his dramatic writing. In addition, this play carries the title of 'Comedy of Menace' as it deals with the real menace that hovers around the central character, Stanley. This play includes six characters with the essence of human personality that pictures the absurdity of men's life underneath the realistic elements along with one unseen character who remains unknown and mysterious to audience for good.

The play foregrounds one's struggle to elude from his real identity and his past life, but destiny takes the opportunity of his living under the shadow of his fake identity by arrival of intruders, and leads him to the unclear fate and future. In *The*

Birthday Party Pinter illustrates the internal conflict of a person who strives to hide it under the new identity and life but frequently his inner conflict emerges in the shape of diverse violence toward his entourage.

The Birthday party's language openly conveys the sense of absurdity to human beings' life. The repetitious sentences and dialogues in Meg and Pete's speech, philosophical odd and unusual questions by Goldberg and McCann in interrogation scene, and finally the piteous status of Lulu in her confrontation with her opposite sex, all are inevitable real matters which indicate the absurd situation of man in this universe. The conception of Pinter's dialogue is not complex as it originated from British people's vernacular in real life. In the same way, in some parts of *The Birthday party* where the words are incapable of expressing characters' feeling, action emerges and plays the role of language in order to elucidate the inner feeling of the characters. This issue is utterly proportionate with Stanley's action at the end of the Act I:

He hangs the drum around his neck, taps it gently with the sticks, then marches round the table, beating it regularly. MEG, pleased watches him. Still beating it regularly, he begins to go around the table a second time. Halfway round, the beat becomes erratic, uncontrolled. MEG expresses dismay. He arrives at her chair, banging the drum, his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed. (Pinter: 1960: 36)

The characteristic of Pinterian drama is obvious in *The Birthday Party*; a safe place that the victim and intruders are the hallmarks of Pinter's works. Two strangers come to take a refuge in a boarding house. But as soon as they find a shelter for themselves they demolish another one's dream house by taking him away to an unknown place. Furthermore, before carrying him off they torture him mentally and physically insofar as by the end of the play he was not only confused but he couldn't talk properly and merely some obscure sounds came from his throat.

However, the pilotless structure which is the common characteristic of Absurd Theatre is lost in *The Birthday Party* since it has the three mentioned unities fiction, place and time by Aristotle. The play

takes place within twenty-four hours in the Meg's boarding house. Moreover, the play has beginning, middle and end which is common in conventional plays. But by and large, the A-B-A structure as well as its strong absurd features, place this play on Absurd Plays category.

The Birthday Party deals with the existence of violence and menace around the people; the violence language flaunts over the play and the bizarre and philosophical questions of cross-examination scene in the play are a great testifier. Goldberg and McCann violently attack to Stanley by their words and their acts; they carry menace with themselves all around the play. In the same way, the play depicts the isolation of the individuals who strive to seclude themselves against the interlopers.

DISCUSSION

The Birthday Party is armed with all the realistic elements of one perfect play. Real characters with real feeling and emotion, real menace and fear and eventually the real setting; all these elements emphasize and determine the mixture of reality and absurdity.

The first considered reality in *The Birthday Party* is its characters. We are witness of the real human instead of nonhuman characters who form the play; these characters are clearly discernible around us. The individuals such as Stanley are many in society who attempt to escape from their real identity. They have lost their individuality in society and it will be hard for them to face with the real side of themselves. Stanley buries his past under the thick layers of his latent internal world in order to find a new position and identity in the society. He wants to be safe and secure in Meg's boarding house, he "hardly goes outside of the house ... perhaps because he is afraid of being recognized" (Esslin: 1970: 76) but unaware of sudden arrival of his hunters. He portrays the real picture of those who are hunted by unexpected people that are aware of their real past and identity through his absurd situation. By forwarding the play Stanley becomes a pathetic figure who is degraded "from a piano to a little boy's drum". (Esslin: 1970: 83)

Another two real characters are Meg and Pete Boles, the boarding house's owners. The absurd life of this couple is completely tangible. In

the following, we learn about their boring and monotonous life. They depict the image of the real individuals who suffer internally from their repetitive routine life but they play different roles in surface of life. Boles' conversation about Stanley over breakfast table in two sequential mornings in the same place indicates the A-B-A pattern of this Absurd drama. Although, Meg and Petey are wife and husband but Meg exposes her interest to her lodger Stanley. Both Stanley and Meg try to express their feeling under the indirect words. Meg's mother-son relationship turns to mother-lover relationship. In the same breath, Petey establishes his position as a protective and responsible husband when he refuses to tell the truth about Stanley to his wife.

Goldberg and McCann who are regarded as the intruders to Stanley's territory, conduct fear and menace to the audience as well as play's personages; they are considered as two real characters of *The Birthday Party*. They seem to be two respectable gentlemen but they hide their real dreadful face under the showy mask. By their arrival the menace milieu enhances over the boarding house. Again, Pinter dramatizes those who hide the true face of themselves under different masks. These people can never be themselves in the real world. They have to wear a mask from very morning and play others' roles for more respect. Such individuals never let others learn about their real job or their real intention. The audience's curiosity about Goldberg and McCann's real business and their true intent, remain in the halo of shadow. Here the chill of fear and mystery in Absurd Theatre is accumulated in Goldberg and McCann's presence.

The beauty of boarding house Lulu, adds the milieu of reality in *The Birthday Party*. She is a miserable girl who was rejected by Stanley and after that she was about to get raped by him. The night of Stanley's birthday party, she is deflowered by Goldberg because of her eroticism demeanors. In this sense she partly reveals the true face of Goldberg to the audience. When she accuses him of misusing, he coolly declares he did her desire. Goldberg as usurper not only intrudes to Stanley's territory but also intrudes to Lulu's adult world and leaves the unchastity mark on her. However, Lulu's adult world

demolishes her childhood immaculacy and subverts her memory. Lulu presents as the real people who lose their virtue for their sexual appeal behavior, though they are not prostitute in nature; their way of treatment indicates their simplicity and naivety. Her desire for security reflects the real individuals' longing for security.

Real menace is another realistic factor in *The Birthday Party*. The spirit and hegemony of menace in Pinter's dramatic works is tangible, as the critics give the name of 'Comedy of Menace' to his works. The milieu of *The Birthday Party* is accumulated by real menace as "characters are humorously horrifically menaced by mysterious outsiders". (Sharma: 2011 36) In Pinter's plays unlike Beckett's works, the real menace threatens the characters; in this regard Watson comments:

Beckett's characters are menaced by the metaphysical nothingness all around them and the struggle is not so much to exist as to prove that they exist. The feeling of Pinter's characters is quite different. It is not that there is nothing outside the room which is his favourite dramatic image; it is precisely that there is something or somebody outside, and this is a source of threat which may materialise at any moment. Beckett's 'void' is thus filled in Pinter which menacing entities. (1988: 188)

In a meticulous description, it will be quite noticeable that the exact source of menace is not completely clear, but intruders bring this menace to a safe spot. Accordingly in *The Birthday Party* menace is emerged by entrance of two interlopers or in other words and to be more exact, characters are threatened by outsiders' forces. Intruders' ironical language enhances this real menace of atmosphere. While Meg cheerfully planning party for Stanley's birthday, Goldberg states ironically "We'll bring him out of himself". (Pinter: 1960: 33) The audience don't perceive the true concept of this sentence and just in the course of the play they find out the real meaning of these menacing words and by the end of the play Goldberg and McCann really 'bring him out of himself'.

Pinter as an East End Jew grew up in the war milieu, when pessimistic view had dominated all over the world and menace had clasped the people tightly. So it can be suggested that such fear and menace were transmitted from Pinter himself to his

dramatic works as he lived in the wartime and the effect of this atmosphere appeared in the form of obscure menace in his plays such as *The Birthday Party*.

Fracture in communication and isolation are two important hallmarks in Absurd Theatre which men commonly confront with these problems in the modern civilization. Stanley the protagonist of the play is the first who faces with these problems. He keeps himself apart from society by his presence in the boarding house. Likewise in his birthday party he sits alone and separate from others. In the poem *A View of the Party* which is composed by Pinter as a poetic image of *The Birthday Party* Pinter describes Stanley's loneliness as follow:

And Stanley sat — alone,
A man he might have known,
Triumphant on his hearth,
Which never was his home. (1998: 161)

He also fails in his communication with people around him because his attempt to establish a friendship with McCann was already failed. Besides, he was unable to make a simple relationship with Lulu, not as a girl but even as one of the society members. In the same manner, Meg is in the same boat with her lodger. Her repetitive words and unnecessary questions while talking to her husband as well as her misunderstanding of others' speech, fix her position as a dim-witted woman who interpreters everything on her simplicity. Her absurd and monotonous life attracts her towards Stanley. Another side of her attraction is her isolation. By having Stanley in accompany, she tries to escape from her profound loneliness; in other words to run away from the solitariness that Petey was incapable to fill it. Katharine J. Worth in her essay under the title of *Pinter and the Realist Tradition* quotes from an anonymous critic about the realistic isolation in Pinter's works as follow: "Isolated elements in his plays are intensely realistic' say one critic, 'the combination of elements is utterly absurd'". (Scott: 1986: 33)

Realistic setting is another salient significance in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The action occurs in Boles' boarding house, a very realistic setting in twenty-four hours. All furniture, eatable stuff, and environment are projected in reality. The reality of this melancholic situation

portrays the absurdity of men in our vast universe. Here through the absurd elements, Pinter illustrates individuals' routine life. It indicates the surface of people's habitual life. Apart from these reservations, the resemblance of the first and last scene in the play not only refers to A-B-A structure in Absurd Drama but alludes to the reality of men existence and the cycle life of him.

CONCLUSION

In *The Birthday Party* the amalgam of reality and absurdity is vividly palpable. The absurdity of human status is manifested in the course of the play partly by its real characters and somewhat by its real Absurd Theatre elements. In *The Birthday Party* Pinter dramatizes the image of the routine real life through six real characters. Each of these characters has its own significance to reveal the true nature of human beings in an absurd condition. David Freeman, an American playwright admires Pinter for employing realistic mystery and confesses and emphasizes that creation of the character with both real and mystic features is not an easy task: "whenever the apparent action becomes mysterious but still retains a realistic surface. We are drawn to it. To make a character both real and mysterious is difficult, and it makes magic on the stage". (Prentice: 2000:xliv)

Isolation and broken communication as the Absurd Theatre elements are depicted in a real manner since these factors are something usual in the modern society. Furthermore, because of the status quo, individuals try to seclude themselves from the community around. Stanley's loneliness and his seclusion in his birthday party, Meg's profound solitariness, her misunderstanding and fracture in communication, Lulu's woeful encounter with opposite sex, Goldberg and McCann's latent violence towards Stanley and finally Petey's powerless position in his both private and social life cement *The Birthday Party* as the Absurd Drama with the hegemony of reality.

REFERENCES

- Burkman, Katherine H. *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*. Ohio State: Press, 1971.
- Esslin, Martin. *The People Wound: The plays of Harold Pinter*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Methuen, 2001.
- Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1960.
- Pinter, Harold. *Writing for Myself*. London: Twentieth Century, 169 (February), 1969.
- Pinter, Harold. *Various voices: prose, poetry, politics, 1948-1998*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
- Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*. New York: Garland, 2000.
- Sharma, R.N. *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party*. Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 2011.
- Watson, G. J. *Drama: An Introduction*. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Worth, Katharine J. "Pinter and the Realist Tradition." *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming: A Casebook*. Ed. Michael Scott. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972.