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Illusion as a Strategy of Survival: A Study of Harold Pinter's *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*

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Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is a Nobel Prize winning English playwright who influenced modern British drama in the latter half of twentieth century. *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978) are some of his outstanding plays. The present paper explores illusion as a strategy of survival in two of Pinter's plays – *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. Most of Pinter's plays portray a world of “a world of closed doors and shattered windows, of people hiding in boarding houses and basements, often too absorbed in their mental survival to broach the outside world” (Regal 9). Indeed people inside the room - living in a constant dread and fearing some outside force that may barge in any moment and destroy their peaceful territory aptly denotes the basic pattern in all Pinter's plays, particularly the ones written in the initial years of his career. Mrs. Rose in *The Room* is terrified with the basement and the people who live in it though she does not know who lives there below in the basement; Stanley in *The Birthday Party* is under the impression that the two men who inquired about the boarding house from his landlord Petey may come and disturb him. This way all the individuals in the the plays under study seem to be pitted against insecurity and dread. Hence a kind of struggle is found working among characters. The insiders of the room are posed challenge by the ominous outsiders - Riley in *The Room*, and Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*.

To cope with the people around, the actions and words of the otherwise socially recognisable characters of Pinter become incongruous. The dialogues become deceptive, and characters' memory moves into past and present quickly making them move like a grasshopper that shifts itself from one bough to another. These characters of Pinter seem to adopt different strategies to confront and placate reality as they ceaselessly try to escape their inner inadequacy, the external danger and the metaphysical void that surrounds them. They resort to all sorts of illusions like lies, deceptions and make-believes. Illusions for Pinter's characters are expressive of man's search for a temporary stay in the flux of life, a foothold in the shifting sands of reality, a sense of rationality in what appears as an irrational universe. Therefore characters escape into past, dream worlds, games, silences, pauses and pastimes which are all ladders leading to an illusory world.

The intruders are usually strong and master manipulators of language. They employ weapons of domination and make the insiders fight if they wish to survive against them. The insiders of the room are seen guarding social and psychological reality of their circumstances so that their opponents may not find an Achilles' heel to hit at. Therefore they weave a cocoon of illusion around themselves so that their weakness may not get revealed. Moreover the inferiority and poverty within these people is compensated by these contrived illusions. These characters seem to create illusions to dominate others, to keep their self-esteem up, to reduce one's anxiety and to fulfil one's longing for security.

In Pinter's first play *The Room*, the clouds of fear constantly hover over the protagonist Mrs. Rose. A terrible anxiety is perceptible in her world as a whole as she talks to her silent husband Bert and fears the people in the basement of the same house who may intrude into

her private territory any time and may destroy the cosiness of her room. Rather what worries Rose is the total existence: the inner inadequacy [reflected in her uneasy relationship with her husband] as well as the external danger. Through her non-stop patter Rose seems to seek to resolve chaos into order. Pinter's own comment on the play throws light on this motif:

This old woman is living in a room which she is convinced is the best in the house; and she refuses to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy and that in her warm comfortable room her security is complete. (Pinter qtd. in Esslin *The Peopled Wound* 35-36)

Rose, like other characters of Pinter, is mortally afraid of the world outside and seems to have problematic relationships with her husband. She desperately tries to contain the inner inadequacy as well as the shapeless world outside by constructing a pattern of illusions and imposing it on herself as well as others.

In the beginning of the play Rose seems to take too much care of her husband Bert, as she serves him food, and attempts to convince herself that all is fine in her relations with her husband. A complete silence, coupled with an indifference of Bert is contrasted with too much talkativeness and care of Rose, and this contrast makes Rose-Bert relationship puzzlingly uneasy in the eyes of the audience. She is fearful of the cold outside or she feels insecure in Bert's absence as it may give the people in the basement a chance to force themselves into her room, and wants Bert not to go out: "I don't know about you though. I don't know whether you ought to go out. I mean, you shouldn't [. . .] Still. Don't worry, Bert. You go" (*TR* 102) she says. Here it seems that Rose fears that Bert will not agree with her that he should not go out and hence asks him not to worry and go. Again her husband's silence seems to indicate his dislike for the tea prepared by her and she defends: "No, it's not bad. Nice weak tea. Lovely weak tea. Here you are. Drink it down" (*TR* 103). All this exposes her relationship with Bert which does not appear harmonious. And to avoid the harsh reality of this uneasy relationship, Rose endeavours to identify herself with Bert. The more she tries to escape in the illusion that the two are one the wider becomes the chasm between the two. She consoles herself:

ROSE. . . . I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right. You're happy up here. It's not far up either, when you come in from outside. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us. (*TR* 103)

Here first Rose thinks of herself: "I'm quite happy" but soon includes her husband in the pretended happiness "We're quite." Then the husband slips out of her hold as the "I" which earlier became "we" now remains mere "you" – "You're happy up here." Again she covers up by talking about the comfort of the room in not being "far up" and finally returns to associate herself with her husband Bert. But the anxiety lurking in her mind throughout is notable which she seems to escape by building her own world of make-believe. Indeed Rose seems to hide her feeling of insecurity and the resulting pain under the self-congratulatory words that she utters; and thus proves true what Pinter believes: "under what is said, another thing is being said." (Introduction *Plays: One* 14)

Moreover, Rose speaks at length about the security and cosiness of the room she lives in: "This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this" (*TR* 105) she tells Bert. Indeed it is her fear of the outside world that makes her give herself a false consolation that the room is the best in the house. To escape the dread of impending danger she weaves a web of words and thus eludes herself through the impression that she is all right where she is. Her

drifting into an illusion is indicated both by her words and her actions. She seats comfortably in a rocking-chair, rocks and prattles to persuade herself to believe that her room is the place of security, a place of refuge and well being. But in reality she knows that there is a threat to her existence as the hidden forces represented by the basement below can come out any moment and pose a challenge to her security. That what she says is perfectly in her possession is not actually under her command is proved before the play comes to an end. Three different kinds of intruders come to see her and take off the cover of her illusion. The first intruder in her cosy room is her landlord Mr. Kidd who claims the ownership of the rocking-chair something what she counters with the assertion that she has brought the chair with her. The second intruder is Mr. Sands who, along with Mrs. Sands, claims that the room number seven [where Rose lives] is vacant for letting in. The third intruder is Mr. Riley who claims her and asks her “to come home” (TR 124). Now her earlier solace that she and her husband are not bothered by others proves false as it breaks down. Finally Riley approaches Rose and her illusion that “nobody knows I’m here” (TR 124) gets knocked down with her intermittent acceptance: “It’s late. It’s late” (TR 124). The harsh reality disrupts the illusory image of the idealised self that Rose has built around herself. Rose can no longer hold her fortress of illusion before the diabolic intruder Riley and succumbs to implosion. Thus all that she believes to be true is not the reality but an illusion which is shattered in the end.

In Pinter it is very difficult to draw a line between the real and the illusory. If for someone the observable actual world is real the unknown force behind it becomes unreal. And if the former is unreal, the latter becomes real. Loneliness and terror that pervade his plays make the real appear unreal and the unreal real. In an unstable mind the border line between reality and unreality gets blurred and reality and illusion, fact and fantasy get confused. And such instability, irrationality and uncertainty are all-pervading in Pinter’s another play *The Birthday Party*. There is no definite information about the protagonist Stanley’s past. The life of pianist, that he claims to have lived, seems to have nothing to do with Goldberg and McCann. Moreover why and how Stanley came to take shelter in Meg’s house is not clear. Again there is no information about the organisation Goldberg and McCann represent or about why Stanley is persecuted. Stanley has told his landlady Meg that he was a pianist while to McCann he tells that he “started a little private business” (TBP 50). Thus no certain information is there regarding his career. So also Goldberg and McCann’s ‘Monty’ is not clear. All this irrationality and uncertainty creates an illusory world that is difficult to be perceived.

Just like the husband-wife relationship of the earlier play *The Room*, Meg-Petey relationship in *The Birthday Party* also seems to be cold and uneasy. It is further supported by the symbolic statement made by Meg towards the end of the play: “I haven’t laughed so much for years” (TBP 97). Like Rose, Meg is talkative while Petey is taciturn and evasive like Bert. Petey most of the time answers her queries in monosyllabic words. Their following talk seems to be a ritual that is carried out to maintain only a semblance of relationship and to cover up the mess that existence is:

MEG. Is that you Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. Yes, it’s me.

MEG. What? (*Her face appears at the hatch.*) Are you back?

PETEY. Yes. (*TBP 19*)

In order to contain the hollowness that issues from the coldness in the relationship Meg nurtures some illusions like she is a good cook; she is a good wife because she keeps the house clean; her house is a good boarding house and it is on the list etc.

Meg wants Petey to support her illusion that she is a very good cook. She asks Petey repeatedly how the cornflakes when tasted are: “Are they nice? (*TBP 19*), “Were they nice?” (*TBP 21*). Though Petey agrees that they are nice but Stanley finds the cornflakes “horrible” (*TBP 24*). The contradiction among Petey and Stanley’s assessment of cornflakes makes us think that Meg gets a positive answer from her husband because she presses him too hard. Again while arguing against Stanley’s belief that she does not take proper care of her husband, she gives flight to her illusion that she is a good wife and that he will not find many better wives than her. Though Stanley, her tenant, has complaints of lack of cleanliness in the house, Meg believes that she keeps her house very clean. Finally Meg’s boarding house has seen just one guest in a year or so but she is in an illusion that her house is on the list.

Living in a repelling contemporary world a sensitive human being has to avoid the grip of a feeling of inferiority to make life practicable. A deep and all-pervasive feeling of inferiority becomes a compelling force to derive an individual to illusions to neutralise the feeling of inadequacy and inferiority. Being a childless old woman Meg nurtures an illusion that Stanley is her boy. Her way of taking care of Stanley: the way she wakes him, serves him food, ruffles his hair, touches him and feels concerned with every activity that involves Stanley suggests that Meg has induced an illusion in herself that he is her child. In spite of Stanley’s denial to it to be his birthday she imposes it on him and organises a birthday party and thus gives vent to her suppressed emotions.

Stanley’s lonely existence which is reflected in his shabbiness and his dislike for everything like tea, breakfast and even for the loving landlady Meg fills his life with meaninglessness and nothingness. To avoid the inferiority and inadequacy within himself he tries to escape into thoughts that are aloud and seem to be the recollections of his past:

STANLEY. Played the piano? I’ve played the piano all over the world. All over the country. (*Pause.*) I once gave a concert [. . .] Yes. It was a good one, too. They were all there that night [. . .] it was a great success. Yes. A concert [. . .] I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. . . . (*TBP 32-33*)

But to McCann he tells that he had a small business. This sort of memory of past which is self-contradictory seems to be a mechanism of defence against some inner inadequacy, or some disturbing psychological urge. Indeed such memories are illusions which have been derived from human wishes. Jung traces the origin of fantasy to an act of repression: “We imagine that which we lack.” (*Jung 31*)

Stanley is a mysterious personality. It is an uphill task to distinguish what is real and what is pretended in him. He is afraid of free and open life yet he longs for it. Just like Rose of *The Room*, who is horrified with basement yet has a lot of interest in it, Stanley seems to nurture a nebulous desire to explore the outside world. At the same time however, he seems to be unsure of its vagaries:

STANLEY. What's like out today?
 PETEY. Very nice.
 STANLEY. Warm?
 PETEY. Well, there's good breeze blowing.
 STANLEY. Cold?
 PETEY. No, no, I wouldn't say it was cold. (*TBP 24*)

Though Stanley keeps confined to the boarding house, he pretends to be the one who goes out to enjoy. He tells lies to avoid going out with Lulu: "Me! I was in the sea at half past six" (*TBP 35*). Stanley seems to escape from Meg's possessive maternity when Meg "takes his plate and ruffles his hair as she passes," "STANLEY exclaims and throws her arm away" and tells her that "it isn't your place to come into a man's bedroom and - wake him up" (*TBP 28*). On the contrary he wonders, "I don't know what I would do without you" (*TBP 28*). Here he seems to have a desire to take shelter in the protective fold of Meg, mother and beloved. In spite of his refusal to it being his birthday, he seems to be secretly pleased when Meg presents him a drum: "Shall I put it round my neck?" (*TBP 46*). Again despite his refusal to have any interest in Lulu, Stanley makes her lie spread-eagled on the table and bends over her when the power fails and it is dark all around. All this seems to suggest that Stanley is a man with a deep desire for a life full of freedom, enjoyment and sex like any normal human being. Hence it can be said that the appearances are illusory and the reality behind these appearances is altogether different.

Towards the end of the play *The Birthday Party* the two intruders Goldberg and McCann brainwash Stanley and then take him away forcibly to some unknown 'Monty'. Now Meg returns from her shopping and asks Petey if the car is gone. Since she has considered Stanley her boy, perhaps she cannot bear the pain of his separation and that too at the hands of the cruel and ominous intruders like Goldberg and McCann. Therefore she tries to keep herself under a false impression that her Stan is still asleep upstairs when he has already been taken away by the intruders. She again escapes in the memories of the birthday party of the last night and not only dreams that it was a lovely party but also nurtures an illusion that she was the belle of the ball:

MEG. Oh.
Pause.
 It was a lovely party. I haven't laughed so much for years. We had dancing and singing. And games. You should have been there.
 PETEY. It was good, eh?
Pause.
 MEG. I was the belle of the ball.
 PETEY. Were you?
 MEG. Oh yes. They all said I was.
 PETEY. I bet you were, too.
 MEG. Oh, it's true. I was.
Pause.
 I know I was. (*TBP 97*)

All this is day dreaming. There was nothing to laugh at in the party. Secondly no one said that Meg is the belle of the ball. What she says is all chimerical and invented either to escape the harsh truth of Stanley's departure or to satisfy Meg's dream of being the belle of the ball. Here Meg is merely flattering herself in making the claim of being the belle of the ball because, though Goldberg has paid some compliments to her, nobody has expressed any

opinion about her being the belle of the ball and in any case there had been no dancing except a little by Meg herself.

In Pinter's plays there seems to be a deliberate evasion of communication for fear of the reality that such communication may reveal. Pinter himself declares that in his plays, "there is a continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship" (Pinter qtd. in Esslin 274). Critics have found failure of communication in Pinter's works but Pinter has something else to say:

We have heard many times that tired grimy phrase 'failure of communication' and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempt to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility. ("Introduction" *Plays: One* 15)

Usually Pinter's characters employ words strategically. They talk to cover up their weaknesses, to deceive others and to perpetuate their own protective illusions. They evade silence and keep the pot of talk boiling so that illusion of comfort or safety can be maintained.

Pinter's characters adopt different strategies to confront and placate harsh and horrid reality as they ceaselessly try to escape their inner inadequacy, the external danger and the metaphysical void that surrounds them. In the face of overwhelming and unavoidable circumstances they create illusions with the help of words and divert their attention as well as attention of others towards some other rosy comfort so that the harsh reality can be avoided at least for the time being. Mrs. Rose, the protagonist of *The Room*, in spite of the terror posed by the basement, comforts herself with the consolation that she and her husband are happy, warm and safe in their room and that they have nothing to do with the outside world. Again those characters of Pinter who are under the influence of feeling of inferiority and are in dire need of something that can establish their power and authority over others also fall prey to imaginations and illusions. Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, to impress his landlady Meg against his obvious inferiority, narrates tales of his success as a pianist. So also is Meg's case who is very possessive and does not want to lose her son-lover substitute Stanley. In the end of play when Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away from Meg's embrace she cannot bear the pain of his separation and hence deceives herself with an imagination that her Stan is still asleep in his room. Furthermore she imagines those qualities of one's personality to be in her possession which she lacks – she believes that she was the belle of the ball in the birthday party though she was nothing of that sort.

Indeed human psyche is a cauldron of seething urges and impulses. Every human being has an urge for a life of power, energy vitality and sexual gratification and an impulse towards restraint, order and discipline. Human impulse is often expressed through art and dream and the fair appearance of the inner world of fantasy. When he finds himself to be overpowered by a feeling of insecurity or inferiority he fabricates illusions – illusions of being powerful, clean, rich or in good relations with others. Pinter's world is an exploratory world where the individual lives out his own possibilities and potentialities. Through interplay of physical realities and mental constructs Pinter's characters try to circumvent the complexity of human life. They weave the tapestry of illusions with the yarns of reality.

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