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The Ill-fitting Robe: An Incompatible Relationship between Stanley and Society

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Abstract:

A society is created when a group of people involves in persistent social interaction by following societal norms. These established norms in society tell people what to do and what not to do. Anyone trying to go on following her/his own way – a way different from ‘the establishment’ – is always made to stick to the rules of ‘the establishment’ by putting her/his in various hazards indirectly and sometimes directly. The play *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter delineates the predicaments faced by the people in the second half of the 20th century. It represents the existential problems among the post – war generations who have given up natural flux of life and stuck in utter seclusion. The present article tries to portray a picture of such a common person who listening to the beats of his heart has derailed from the prescribed track of the society run by ‘the establishment’ and the following consequences he has to go through.

Keywords: Society; the establishment; seclusion; established norms; existentialism.

How dared he, a petty creature, to hurl questions at the face of the authority of the establishment? Didn't he dread the consequence? He must be aware of the fact how frightening and inevitable is the consequence. Men are social beings. Like man society is also a product of evolution. Any deformity in the intended uniformity has to be amputated in no time. Again, society is an endeavour to conceal man's instinctual savageries. But, still there are some people who do not believe this endeavour of the society, but are guided by their inmost savageries. Their savagery is not conventional. They are savages because they try to present themselves as they are. That is why they cannot be brought under the same umbrella with all the other members of the

society. And here lies the problem. Like the combination of oil and water, the collaboration of society and the 'off- the - track' people is grotesque. Their bond (if any) is fragile. It is bound to break anytime. The age-old conflict between them is unavoidable. Shelley could not avoid it, nor could Baudelaire. Any attempt to bridge the gulf between them is as good as building a castle in the air.

In Pinter's *The Birthday Party* the character Stanley is mutually incompatible with society. He lives in society, but he is not a social being. The problem is so grave. Stanley cannot comply with the things as prescribed by society. In fact, he does nothing to please the system prevalent in society. He follows his own course. Thus, he is an unfitting attire to the society. Society cannot put on him as he does not match it. And what do we do with a dress which is unfitting? We simply tear it off, literally or metaphorically. In the same way, the society tears ' the attire' off vehemently as it does not fit to it. But, on the other hand, Stanley to whom society is also an unfitting attire, cannot react to it so vehemently since he alone cannot 'tear off' such a gigantic attire. His reaction is mild to the repressive and authoritative dimension of the society. So, while the society takes resort to the violent act of tearing off, Stanley to futile negation.

Stanley has kept himself alienated from the outside world. There may be some reasons which lied in his past that we do not know properly. When Meg relays to him the information she has got from Petey, Stanley's concern is immediately noticeable.

MEG: Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights.

I am expecting them.

STANLEY: I don't believe it When was this?

When did he see them?

MEG: Last night.

STANLEY: Who are they?

MEG: I don't know ...

STANLEY: Here? They wanted to come here?

MEG: Yes, they did.

STANLEY: Why? (p. 86)

He at once reacts like someone in mortal dread, someone haunted and threatened. We do not know the reasons at first. Later we learn from his talks with Meg that he was a great pianist who was stopped in his career by 'them':

STANLEY: I've played the piano all over the world ... I once gave a concert ... It was a great success. At Lower Edmonton ... Then after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up ... My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up ... They pulled a fast one. (p. 87)

Stanley is sure 'they' would come and come in a van with a wheelbarrow. He also knows 'they' are looking for someone. At this very moment he hears a knock at the door. When Meg goes out, Stanley sidles to the door and listens. As he is assured that it is Lulu, he comes out to them. After entering the room Lulu finds the room stuffy, but Stanley is quite satisfied.

LULU: Why don't you open the door? It's all stuffy in here.

STANLEY: What are you talking about? I disinfected the place this morning. (p. 88)

Lulu wants Stanley to pull himself together and to move out with her. But that proposal leads to a cul-de-sac.

LULU: Why don't you ever go out?

STANLEY: How would you like to go away with me?

LULU: But where could we go?

STANLEY: Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So, we could just go. It wouldn't matter. (p. 89)

The very appearance of Stanley is queer and to some extent, menacing. It mocks at the convention of the society. Stanley comes down unshaven, in pajamas and wearing glasses. He has "lines" in his face and his eyes are muckish. His untidy look depresses Lulu.

LULU. Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible! (p.26)

Again, Stanley talks less. Eloquence is what he consciously repudiates. Hardly does he resort to dialogues as classical heroes like Macbeth, Othello or King Lear does. As a dramatic character he too is a total failure since his very existence is made of trivialities and mock -

seriousness. Grandeur and extravagance stay miles away from him. But it is quite ironical that his simpleness, paleness, silence and passivity are at the root of his being opposed to society. His tendency of surrendering without question offends the system of society. From the very beginning, it is discernible that Stanley's punishment is in the offing. Stanley is guilty of being Stanley. To live in a society man must move being led by the system. And if you feel the absurdity in many of the things that society advocates and go against it, the society has to break your limbs by hook or by crook to maintain parallelism. The establishment cannot help it.

The force of the society operates through certain agencies. All these agencies work together to attain a universalized goal. Their endeavours are directed towards oneness. One has to go by the rules and regulations as prescribed by the institutions. Anyone dares to violate these norms and beliefs are subject to suppression. In *The Birthday Party* Stanley does nothing to show his servility to the Establishment. As a result he is alienated from the mainstream of life. He has no job and never intends to have any. He plays on piano, but it is not at all systematic. He has no responsibility not only to himself but to others. In short, Stanley is busy with himself and his world. And in the eyes of the panoptic state this is a serious crime. One cannot remain so nonchalant. In fact, Stanley's nonchalance is alarming to the state.

When Lulu leaves the room, Goldberg and McCann come in – the two new guests in the boarding house of Meg. They immediately remind us of the two gunmen Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*. Like , Goldberg is the dominant partner and has the poise, vanity and reassurance of a leader. McCann, like Gus, has his qualms, his questions, his moments of uneasiness, Pinter shows definite signs of growth in perception when even Goldberg betrays fissures in his apparently monolithic surface. As Clifford Leech observes with precision: “Goldberg and McCann, squalid, uncertain, whimsical, cruel – agents of the power that Stanley has somehow disobeyed – are the more frightening because they themselves are ill at ease.”

Benard Dukore refers to them as ‘two henchmen of society ’ who bring to bear pressures on the individual and reduce him to a state of abject conformity. It is symbolically very correct, he argues, that they are representatives of the two traditional religions of western civilization, Judaism and Catholicism. McCann is an Irish Catholic and Goldberg is a Jew. “While Goldberg supplies the brains, McCann supplies the muscle (the Church Militant.)” This kind of interpretation tends to localize the menace and thus defuse the mystery of uncertainty.

The unidentified horror the two men represent have something nameless about it. They represent the pressure of the collective but they are not identifiable agents of a familiar source of authority. That is why Martin Esslin seems to deviate from truth when he tries to narrow down the range of application by asking whether Goldberg and McCann are emissaries of some secret organization like the I.R.A. But Esslin is at his perspective best when he interprets the central action of the play as the “ individual’s pathetic search of security ; of secret dreads and anxieties ; of the terrorism of our world , so often embodied in false bonhomie and bigoted brutality ; of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people of different levels of awareness. ”

Wellwarth interprets the play with queer finality suggesting that it is all about the death of Stanley Webber and describes Goldberg and McCann as just ‘killers. Clifford Leech, looking at the problem of identification from another extreme altogether, seems to gain more vital insight into the issue: “We never know the identity of what they (Goldberg and McCann) represent. Like the ‘Life-in-Death’ figure in *The Ancient Mariner*, it simply thick men’s blood with cold’. But men serve it, men disobey it, men submit to it. Like Blake’s upas tree, it grows in the human brain.”

Figuratively, Goldberg and McCann are the agencies of the Establishment which intends to curb Stanley’s meek arrogance and passive action. At first, we cannot say what the reason of their arrival in the play is. Did they meet before? Or, what forced Stanley to react so nervously when he heard of their arrival? Did he have an internal fear all the while that somebody is looking for him and would one day hunt him down? In fact, he probably got a hint of the fact that no one can go beyond that external vigil. Vladimir, too, perhaps gets the same realization “At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying

.....” (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 83) And everyone should better realize this at the very beginning of one’s journey. There is no escape. Stanley, though in a different context says to Lulu, “There is nowhere to go”. (*The Birthday Party*, p.26). Again, what Goldberg says is equally important, “If we hadn’t come today, we’d come tomorrow.” (*The Birthday Party* , p. 32). No man on earth can escape the verdict of the society in case he has done something to offend it. And the verdict will invariably come down as the elimination of the person in question, either physically or spiritually. So, Stanley is caught and victimized. He is helpless. Society is helpless too. Martin Esslin puts it in an apt way:

The Birthday Party has been interpreted as an allegory of the pressures of conformity with Stanley, the pianist, as the artist who is forced into respectability and pin – stripe trousers by the emissaries of the bourgeois world. (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.241). Stanley is unfitting attire to the bureaucracy as is Josef k. in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. All of them are virtually entangled in strife with the society somehow. The Establishment cannot help tearing off their bosoms to bring order and coherence in place of chaos and questions.

The world is too much with us ---- this might be an appropriate blazon for Stanley and his company. They find pleasure not in family, not in love and not in the place they live in. Actually, very few people can understand them. They are often misunderstood and misinterpreted because they do nothing to express their innermost thoughts. One cannot perceive their feelings and their sincerity, of course implicit. In John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter does love Alison, but never showcases it to anybody, not even to Alison. His erratic behaviour towards Alison forces the latter to leave him. In his behaviour and attitude he is often regarded as sadist. But does he always hurt others? Does he not himself bleed? In fact, he is afraid of losing Alison. He is cynical about everything, even about himself. His psychological turmoil gives rise to his inconstancy and unpredictability. Stanley has nobody to love. He has no parents, friends, relatives and beloved. He is afraid of being involved. But his relationship with Meg tells a lot. In her, he finds both a mother and a lover. He criticizes her, rebukes her only because he feels for her. Petey, on the other hand, is not at all very close to Stanley from the beginning. But at the end, when everything is set up to take Stanley away, we see in him a real father figure:

GOLDBERG : We are taking him to Monty

PETEY : He can stay here.

GOLDBERG : Don’t be silly.

PETEY : We can look after him here.

GOLDBERG : Why do you want to look after him ?

PETEY : He is my guest

GOLDBERG : He needs special treatment.

PETEY : We’ll find someone. (*The Birthday Party*, p. 85).

Petey’s love and affection towards Stanley talk a lot about Stanley’s capacity of being loved. Meg, Petey, Lulu – all of them love him, misunderstand him, hate him, and care about

him. In short, Stanley is not loved for nothing. He has a baby within him which seldom comes out and when it comes out, you just cannot but feel for him. But these are nothing in the eyes of society. Is he devoted to it? Does he respect the institution?Only these questions are important in society. And in this aspect, Stanley is a big zero. He is futile in fulfilling expectations. So, he has no role to play. He has to be removed from this stage.

The final act of *The Birthday Party* shows the completion of Stanley's retributions. The task imposed upon Goldberg and McCann is nearly carried out. Stanley appears as a fully changed man. His bohemianism is transformed into pattern. He is now clean-shaven and culturally dressed up. His reticence has become speechlessness. He now only makes sound, incoherent sound. The Stanley of the final act is merely the shadow of the Stanley of the previous two acts. The conversation between Goldberg and McCann confirms his spiritual death:

GOLDBERG : We'll make a man of you.

MCCANN : And a woman.

GOLDBERG : You'll be re-oriented.

MCCANN : You'll be rich.

GOLDBERG : You'll be adjusted.

MCCANN : You'll be our pride and joy.

GOLDBERG : You'll be a mensch.

MCCANN : You'll be a success.

GOLDBERG : You'll be integrated. (p. 83)

Thus, the intended integration is achieved. And Goldberg assures Petey who is a bit anxious about Stanley's a lot by saying that everything will be taken care of. Ironically, Stanley's vague birthday turns into his day of demise too. Or, is it a new birthday? A clean Stanley is born out of a rotten Stanley! Could the Establishment and System give him anything more than such a wonderful present of his birthday? He has got a new life in the expense of his identity. He should not mourn at the loss of his self because what more could he expect than his survival? Now, we should not bother about the questions like "Is it a real survival?", or "Is he not 'more sinned against than sinning'?" Discussions can be made on this subject elsewhere. Here we should be satisfied because the glory of life is retained. What though the essence is lost? Existence has

narrowly escaped. We should celebrate this and, if needed, society will bear the costs! Now, Stanley should better try to make a robe which will easily fit the Establishment even if he has to wear such attire which is anything but his!

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