



LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION AND DYNAMICS OF POWER IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE CARETAKER

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“The word within a word, unable to speak a word”- Gerontion (T.S Eliot)

“The more acute the experience the less articulate is its expression”(Harold Pinter)

Harold Pinter, the much proclaimed playwright carved a niche with his plays which centered on day to day experiences and which attempted to crystallize fragmentary moments in human interaction. These moments are translated into experiences that human beings can relate with in varied circumstances- as one travels in a train, or takes a bus, or more pointedly spends some time in the waiting room, or within the confines of one's workstation at his/her office. His dialogues mostly center on and highlight this vacuity of expression, this disconnectedness of communication, which also borders on a menacing sense of power dynamics at play in human interaction.

I

The present paper attempts to focus on Pinter's much acclaimed play, The Caretaker. It is pertinent that the style of Pinter's writing may briefly be enumerated here, so that an organic whole may emerge in the process of analyzing the play in question, as Pinter's style is inextricably bound with the content and the themes of his plays. Pinter highlights the vacuity of conversation by using repetitive dialogues, which are not essentially logical and coherent, they are even self-contradictory on occasions. The dialogues of his characters give the impression of Pinter being a compulsive listener, who has an ear for the mundane everyday conversation which borders on the inconsequentiality of discourse, many a times indulged in only for biding time, and to give one a sense of purpose. One can easily compare them with

situations like that of Vladimir – Estragon, Lucky – Pozzoin Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Though Beckett’s plays are more about abstract images, Pinter’s are more about lifelike situations. Many of his characters are even drawn from his own personal experiences.

Pinter’s style is flexible; it is realistic yet stylized, which covers a wide social and emotional range. He does not seem to be interested in exploring experience; rather he aims just to present a situation as it is, with the character’s delineation not going beyond the immediate combination of situations. It is within this mesh of emotions, and interaction, that the dramatic situation is posited. Most of his plays are situated within the closed environs of a room, he appears to be obsessed with the subject of safety of the womb or the room and the dangers of dispossession. The character’s are to be studied from the facts or words revealed about them on the stage. Even their words are often times self contradictory and their actions are inconsistent. The focus never shifts from the immediate here and now, which interestingly gives the plays a timeless quality, because they are not limited by the immediate social, cultural or political context, rather they are about human situation in general. Similarly, Pinter’s story line is usually subject to the same indefiniteness as his characters.

Ronald Hayman succinctly notes that:

Pinter’s plays are thrillers, full of mysteries that are put in with no intention of solving them and no pretense that he himself is in a position to do so. They work on the audience by spreading out the mystification, enjoying it and exploring it for its own sake but never solving it.

Hints are dropped deliberately as if they were clues in the mystery but the trail of evidence never leads to a solution...Motives are not important either for Pinter or for us. Once an action is in the past tense, there is no way of distinguishing fact from fiction. The two mix together.(10)

Similarly, there is a lot of emphasis on ‘Silence’, and ‘Pause’, in Pinter’s plays. If routine conversation is observed, it will seem natural that speakers do digress, or pause or utter a torrent of words, or respond in such a way that the original context of the conversation is totally lost. The speech we hear is many a times also an indication of what we do not hear, it is sub text, that remains more meaningful, or relevant. Many a times speech, or utterances are used only to cover up the uncomfortable nakedness of human communication which is also

the discomfort caused by silences. Pinter's plays can also be studied as a constant stratagem to uncover this "nakedness" (Harold Pinter by Ronald Hayman).

II

The *Caretaker* published in 1959, centers around three characters, the two brothers Aston and Mick, and Davies, the tramp. As the play unfolds, the relationship between the two brothers is explored, and in an interesting turn of events we find each one of the three characters getting the better of the other one, the interplay reveals a peculiar power play at work, as it also delineates each of the characters as being individuals, not much at ease with their circumstances. The menace is palpable in their interaction and exchange of words. It is interesting to study the use of language as a tool to assert power and even violence.

The play begins in an unnatural setting, with a room filled with clutter, and a peculiar bucket hanging from the ceiling gathering drops of water, may be from a dilapidated ceiling. The visual impact seems to be one of an ill kept room filled with disposable yet treasured scraps, which have been collected by Aston, in the hope of using them. The scene is soon broken in by the entry of a dynamic looking Mick, who looks around in silence and leaves the stage without a word, what remains with the reader/ audience is the deep look in the eyes of a man who does not quite approve of the setup.

Aston and Davies' entry brings in the essential archetypal triangle, albeit between men, and the inevitable power struggle ensues. It is like the assertion of physical territory that one finds in the animal kingdom, and also in human beings, when roles of the victim and the victimized are so often swapped, it is about who has the upper hand and when, but the desire to assert power is forever at play.

It becomes evident that Aston has rescued Davies from a scuffle, and has offered him refuge, until the man can find his "papers", and "shoes", and go to "Sidcup". The real identity of Davies is also as vague as his persona, it is uncertain whether Pinter's characters are to be believed, or they are to be looked at with suspicion, because they contradict themselves. It is not sure who Davies is? Though he begins with gratefulness, at the kindness shown by Aston, we soon find him spreading his wings, and asserting his 'territory', by demanding which window he wants to be kept open/shut, about who the 'blacks' are opposite the apartment, and how Aston is a weakling, who is never able to make the "shed", or repair the toaster, or get him the right fitting shoes, so that he could make his visit to Sidcup, and get his identity papers- his identity is in question, even his name is not surely, Davies.

The entry of Mick, the street smart young man, and brother of Aston, reveals the delicate relationship between the brothers, and also helps to reassert the territory of the brothers, whereas, Davies got the better of Aston, Mick soon helps to recover his place, by conveying to him the offer of taking up a place as a “Caretaker”, as a man who would look after the household, in return of the accommodation offered to the tramp.

It is difficult to ascertain, the nature of their relationships. Each of them is seen as a game involving the dynamics and the play of power.

III

In his Interview to Larry Bensky, in *The Paris Review* in the series, *The Art of Theatre No 3*, Harold Pinter says:

Violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays....
A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be.

Struggles for power form the basis of conflict in *The Caretaker*. Like in his other plays, here too the potential victim fights victimization, even tries to victimize the antagonist, and it gradually becomes ambiguous as to who is the victor, and who the victim. Words and Silences are often employed as weapons by the characters, especially Mick, and Davies. When Davies asks Aston to confirm that he reprimanded the man who went for him earlier, Aston replies outside the range, saying only that he saw the man have a go at him; and the second time Davies asks Mick what will happen to him, Mick’s silence is a rejection of him.

Instead of action, language becomes the primary medium through which the characters negotiate. The study in the present paper aims at summarizing the form and function of language in the play, and to establish how it is used to establish relationship between the central characters amongst themselves and with themselves. The dynamics of power are at play throughout, and as mentioned above it is even used as a weapon more pointed than a rapier, the sharpness of silence being the most potent.

Almansi and Henderson make a pointed observation:

He is concerned with manipulating not a language of enlightenment but a language of obfuscation; not a language of social progress but a language of social existential survival; not a language of communal

faith but a language of diversivestrategy. The words of his plays are intransigent and intransitive; they cannot be transferred to other levels of meaning, be they philosophical, ideological or allegorical. You can play all sorts of critical games with them, but it is a mistake, as we shall show, to consider them out of the context of their dramatic precincts. In Pinter words are not bridges, they are barbs to protect the wired enclosure of the self.(50)

Bernard F. Dukore ,refers to the origin of the phrase , Comedy of menace:

In 1957 David Campton coined the term “Comedies of Menace” as the subtitle of his one act plays collectively called The Lunatic View.In 1958 Irving Wardle applied it to The Birthday Party.Although he subsequently wanted to withdraw the label, its aptness made it stick.(25)

The term Comedy of Menace indeed sums up the interplay of power, violence, action, and hysteria of the plays of Pinter. The Caretaker has simmering anger below the surface, and one is apprehensive and afraid that it would explode. The three characters in the play , appear to be in a state of uncertainty , the fear of the unknown seems to lurk and threat, and it is often expressed in their interpersonal interaction. They all appear to be waiting for the worst to happen to them. A quote from the Interview by Larry Bensky in the Paris Review, mentioned above helps to reiterate Pinter’s treatment of violence and also its abundant use in his plays:

Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. It so happens I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also, I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. There were one or two ways of getting out of it—one was a purely physical way, of course, but you couldn't do anything about the milk bottles—we didn't have any milk bottles. The best way was to talk to them, you know, sort of “Are you all right?” “Yes, I'm all right.” “Well, that's all right then, isn't it?” And all the time keep walking toward the lights of

the main road.

Another thing: we were often taken for communists. If you went by, or happened to be passing, a Fascist street meeting and looked in any way antagonistic—this was in Ridley Road market, near Dalston Junction—they'd interpret your very being, especially if you had books under your arms, as evidence of your being a Communist. There was a good deal of violence there, in those days. (Issue 39, Fall 1966)

The Caretaker may be interpreted as an exercise in power, position and status. The play appears to be an extensive status game. This power struggle between three self-deluded men: one a tramp, Davies, one affected by mental health issues, Aston and the third, his brother, the bullying and confident Mick. Each of these characters has ambitions, like building of a shed or the acquiring a pair of shoes to undertake a journey to Sidcup. One gets a disconcerting feeling that none of these ambitions will ever be realized. All three are lonely, unhappy and dissatisfied and each projects their frustrations on the others. Because they have nothing, they try and build up every little thing to have some meaning. They have delusions of grandeur. But all of this also may be seen as their search for some sense of security in their chaotic, meaningless lives.

The Caretaker is a play about isolation and loneliness but at the same time it is equally about personal identity, communication and human nature, and number of other themes beside.

IV

Subsequently, in the paper, it will be attempted to explore the use of language as a tool of power and how each of the three characters, Aston, Mick and Davies use it in Act I, II and III, as a means of asserting supremacy, and even as a mechanism to gain control akin to physical dominance and intimidation of the other character.

The play begins with Aston's and Davies' interaction, as Aston offers refuge to the latter who had been 'given the bullet' by the Scotchman. Had Aston not brought him, he would be in the 'hospital'. After the preliminary conversation and warming up, Davies begins to enquire about the establishment, and is much relieved when he is offered accommodation in the room with Aston. Davies suggests that he is waiting for the weather to 'break', before he can proceed to Sidcup.

Aston: You can sleep here if you like.

Davies; Here ? Oh , I don't know about that .(Pause)

How long for?

Aston: Till you... get yourself fixed up.

Davies(sitting): Ay well that...

Aston: Get yourself sorted out..

Davies: Oh, Ill be fixed up...pretty soon now...(Pause) Where would I sleep?(16)

Beginning with Aston being at the superior position of offering help to the tramp, Davies, we soon find the dynamics shifting when he takes over as the one who calls the shots. Apart from complaining about the cool draught of wind from the window at night, he whines about the 'Blacks' making noise at night. His identity becomes hazy as he reveals his assumed name being Bernard Jenkins and he dodges the question regarding his place of birth and origin. Aston leaves for a 'stroll'.

Mick's entry completely reverses the situation. In Aston's absence Mick clearly perceives Davies as a stranger, an intruder, a trespasser, and energetically pounces upon him, physically. He overpowers him, pins him down with his foot and stands over him. Each of the two characters perceives the other as an impostor, an intruder.

Davies introduces himself as Jenkins, and Mick observes that he is reminded of his uncle's brother who was always on the move, always with his passport, an established proof of one's identity. On interrogating Davies, Mick finds out that the man is, "choosy", he snatches his trousers and further probes him till Davies reveals that he was brought there by the man who lives there. Mick calls him a, "fibber", and we find Davies the strong man so far delivering long verbose speeches, now breaking down :

Davies: I was brought here, last night...met him in a caff...I was working..I got the bullet ... I was working there...bloke saved me from a punch up, brought me here, brought me right here.....

Mick: You're stinking the place out. You're an old robber, there's no getting away from it You're an old skate...You're an old

barbarian...I could charge seven quid a week for this if I wanted to....If that sort of money is in your range don't be afraid to say so...Say the word and I will have my solicitors draft you out a contract. Otherwise I 've got the van outside, I can run you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing , loitering with intent, daylight robbery , filching , thieving an stealing the place out... (34)

This long speech, perhaps one of the longest in the play so far, clearly establishes Mick as the master of the situation, and the household's as well. Davies, who had so far been the more vocal one, enquiring, complaining, and boasting is suddenly reduced to a man uttering broken sentences, to being able to mouth mere monosyllabic responses. Pinter uses language remarkably to establish the power of one character over the other through the use of language.

Aston's entry relieves the tension, and is intermediated with a circus like action as the three characters throw the bag Aston brought with him, with Davies' belongings. This action also reveals to Davies that Mick is Aston's brother, who now Davies says, " is a bit of a joker, en he?". Once again we find Davies trying to get the better of Aston through his language, complaining of being given the wrong bag, which has clothes that won't last long. He is offered the position of a caretaker in the house by Aston. Davies again utters broken sentences:

Davies: Well, I ...I never done caretaking before, you know ...I mean to say ...I never...what I mean to say is...I never been a caretaker before.(42)

Unlike his previous speech where he was coherent in his complaints, we find him once again unsure of himself, as he was with Mick. Davies is not sure of his safety if he accepted the offer.

With Mick's entry, once again we find a lot of movement and action, and threatening menace as he tries to scare Davies with the Electrolux vacuum cleaner. They befriend one another and Mick offers him a sandwich. He tells Davies that, they have just been on the 'wrong foot'. Pinter gives a deft revelation of the fluid, uncertain nature of human relationships and communication.

Subsequently Davies and Mick discuss Aston, and Mick shares that his brother has a problem, “he doesn’t like work”, which appears to be ironical as Aston has been seen working on repairing old junk , or planning to make the shed, or paint , or plaster the roof which is dripping. Mick offers Davies the job of a Caretaker, like Aston had offered before, his reason being that Aston does not like work , he is “work shy”.

We find circular movement of the plot and action in the play, as the same dialogues get repeated, about Davies’ need to go to Sidcup to get his identity papers, his need for proper shoes, his waiting for the weather to break, him complaining about the rain at night, the draught of wind. And once again through the dialogues, Davies emerges as the person who is in control of the situation, vis- a vis, Aston, who also shares with Davies his childhood experiences of his traumatic treatment at the mental hospital.

Pinter’s astute reading of human motives, finds another expression in Act III, when Davies completely tries to overpower Aston. Having come to know that Mick is the owner of the place, that he has a van, and he has more power, in terms of wealth and physical strength, his approach towards Aston undergoes a change. We find human motives changing as per the situation; each character’s interaction with the other is manipulated and maneuvered so as to maximize one’s gain in the given circumstances.

Act III reveals Davies as the opportunist who tries to oust Aston, and seek a permanent place in their setup, he subtly complains to Mick that he can’t get , “the hang of Aston”, and that he is not doing his job well. Having seen Mick as the more powerful one Davies says:

Davies: He’s no friend of mine. You don’t know where you are with him. I mean, with a bloke like you ,you know where you are.

I mean you got your own ways ...you may have some funny ways, but that’s the same with all of us, but with him it’s different. See?

Mick is appreciated for being “straightforward”, and Aston criticized for having no feelings:

Davies: He’s got no feelings!... See what I need is a clock...But he don’t give me one.He wakes me up !He wakes me up in the middle of the night! Tells me I’m making noises! I tell you I ‘ve half a mind to give him a mouthful one of these days.(pp.62)

Subtle power politics is at play here, Davies trying to win over Mick by criticizing Aston for not doing any work, and going for walks aimlessly. Ironically, Aston enters with a pair of shoes for Davies, which once again are not right for him. It's either a pair which has laces, or is black or brown, not what he wants.

Davies is infuriated at Aston for waking him up at night, for making noise. It is Aston's house, he is Aston's guest, but Davies uses powerful language to intimidate him. He ridicules him for being put into a mental hospital, and attacks Aston where it hurts him the most emotionally and psychologically.

Davies: What do you expect me to do? I'm not surprised they took you in. Waking an old man up in the middle of the night, you must be off your nut!....It's getting so freezing in here I have to keep my trousers on to go to bed...I'm a sane man! So don't you start mucking me about. They had you inside one of them places before, they can have you inside again. Your brother has got an eye on you! They can put the pincers in your head again man!....That was the greatest mistake they made, you take my tip, letting you get out of that place.....You think I 'm going to do your dirty work? Haaaaahhhh!You don't know what you are doing half the time. You're up the creek! You're half off!...Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nut house!(66)

He tells Aston to find a place for himself, because he has a job here:

Davies: I'm staying on here as a caretaker! Get it! Your brother, he's told me see, he's told me the job is mine. Mine! So that's where I am. I'm going to be his caretaker.(70)

Language and words do not serve the purpose of any communication or in building a connect between the characters. Situations reverse and Mick takes exception to Davies calling his brother a nut. Davies becomes an impostor from a caretaker in no time:

Mick: You're a bloody impostor mate!...

Mick: Nutty? Who's nutty? My brother. That's a bit of an impertinent thing to say, isn't it?(72)

Davies is now identified as , ‘erratic’, ‘unpredictable’, a ‘wild animal’ , a ‘barbarian’, the complete role reversal now leaves him once again as the outsider and he is asked to leave. He begs Aston to let him stay , makes amends , promises to take care of things , help him in making the shed, but the only response he finally gets is silence, which eventually turns out to be most eloquent in expressing the politics, the change of power , the helplessness and the regaining of confidence in Aston , who stands without moving.

V

Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, emerges as a text that deals with the theme of the politics of power games between people, in which language plays a crucial role in establishing one’s ‘upmanship’ , apart from attributes like physical power, wealth and clout. Communication is broken and non existent, with each person speaking not really to connect but for the self satisfying experience of being able to articulate one’s experiences and opinions, which of course are meaningless the minute they are uttered, because we clearly see a cyclical structure of repetition of words, dialogues, situations, bringing in a sense of futility and meaninglessness. It is through this use of language, that we see the characters alternately as victims or victimizers, there being an undercurrent of incongruities in their motives, words and actions. Language, hence becomes the most sophisticated medium of non – communication.

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