



## POLITICS AND HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS

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Harold Pinter belongs to the playwrights whose name could never be associated only with literature and drama. When he was asked if his plays were political, he avoided giving a straight answer of being political and having intentions of delivering political messages via his plays. However, he alluded being always a 'political playwright of a kind'. Certainly, he never wanted to label his plays as strictly political, but nowadays his drama is highly featured as politically themed. Pinter's plays don't explore any political ideology or party politics but rather scrutinizes individuals through dramatic polemics. Indeed, a playwright who was actively engaged in the world politics from an early age could hardly escape politics in his plays.

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Harold Pinter as a playwright has never strictly been considered as a political playwright in literature. However, the speech he delivered for Nobel Prize Award makes it clear that politics is an integral part of his work and is clearly reflected in his plays. This speech which lasts up to 46 minutes, Pinter devoted largely to talking about politics and criticized the US policy and policy of those big countries that are trying to gain power through the oppression of small countries. This speech is mainly a bitter criticism of US government, the state that is constantly using its policy to dominate and subjugate other countries. Thus Pinter is not reluctant to openly demonstrate his political views. On the contrary, he never misses a possibility to express his strong political beliefs.

Pinter's Nobel Prize speech provokes some questions: why has the playwright who received a Nobel Prize in literature dedicated most of his speech to talking about politics and not about art? What has ignited his anger towards American or British governments? Definitely one can hardly find an unequivocal answer for these considerations. However, one is obvious: Pinter fights against oppressors and is a guardian of human rights and can't tolerate discrimination. In this regard, Pinter's role as a playwright is much bigger than of any politician as throughout centuries it has been writers, poets, playwrights who disclose evil and fight unfairness and injustice for those discriminated, homeless and abused.

Therefore, in this case, it doesn't matter whether Pinter is a playwright or a politician, he carries a significant mission in this world: to bring the truth to the light and to uncover hidden vices. It is noteworthy that politics in Pinter's work should not be conceived traditionally as his intention is not to praise or denounce any political ideology. His politics, in this case carries, a clear-cut mission: to uncover and reveal the malevolent inclinations of those who have dominated the world and to criticize oppressors.

Themes illustrated in Harold Pinter's plays vividly connote his Jewish origin and are based on his experiences as a child. Pinter's birth (1930 year) coincided with the rise of anti-Semitism movement in

Europe which influenced the western part of London where Pinter was born, in Hackney. Pinter's birthplace was mainly inhabited by Jewish population and upon the break of World War II Pinter had to evacuate with others. He could return to London only in 1944. Pinter painfully recalls his return to London as the very first thing he saw was a flying bomb and sometimes when he opened the front door he found the garden in ashes and they had to evacuate constantly.

“One that day I got back to London, in 1944; I saw the first flying bomb. I was in the street and I saw it come over... There were times when I would open our back door and find our garden in flames. Our house never burned, but we had to evacuate several times”. (Gale, 1977:18)

His childhood fears deeply rooted in his psyche had a great impact on his career as a playwright. He always remained a Jewish child who had undergone World War II and was shattered and scared. His childhood memories are a leitmotif for Pinter's whole career.

“When Pinter began his playwriting career in 1957, however, one idea was foremost in his mind as a major theme: fear. As a young Jew living through the early days of World War II, he had gone to bed afraid that he might be awakened in the night by a knock at the door and that he and his parents would be taken forcibly from their home by unknown assailants, a picture vividly impressed on his mind by tales of Hitler's Germany.” (Gale, 1977:18)

Pinter himself stated in interviews that he could hardly bring his childhood memories back and was unable to recall any stories whatsoever. Pinter's bad memory or absence of his childhood memories implies his unconscious will to suppress his past and escape from it. He would rather forget the type of past than remember it. He himself confirmed this: “I can't remember so much, but it is not actually forgotten. It exists-because it has not simply gone. I carry it with me. If you really remember everything you would blow up. You can't carry the burden”.(Gale, 1977:39)

Pinter's Jewish origin, his painful war experiences, and childhood feelings played a significant role for Pinter's future political life too. He got engaged in world political events from an early age. Pinter despised cold war policy which he officially demonstrated by the refusal of military service. He also joined apartheid movement as he shuddered against the deeds of Americans committed in Vietnam. He visited Turkey together with Arthur Miller where he witnessed an abundant number of Human Rights violations which he later publicly condemned. He also supported anti-Thatcher group who were against policies carried out by Ms. Thatcher. Pinter condemned the foreign policy of America and Britain after World War II.

It is those suppressed memories that later occur in Pinter's plays and are portrayed in such themes as the relationship between an oppressor and oppressed when issues of violence are put in the foreground. Pinter never attempted to convey holocaust directly. Generally, it should be noted that Pinter's aim has never been to illustrate violence in his overtly political plays even though Pinter touches such themes as the Holocaust, repression, rape, violence and other serious forms of brutality. However, he more effectively achieved this through other means. For example, in the play, “One for the Road” “interrogation chair, on which the main character Victor sits, indirectly provokes more horrific feelings in readers. Moreover, dialogues that take place between the characters affect readers more deeply than the mere description of the scenes of violence could have done. Despite the fact that Pinter's plays are not rich with eloquence and his characters avoid being eloquent, Pinter manages to convey more and imply more through the use of pause and silences which impress readers more. Pinter's political plays, unlike his other plays, are even more laconic and shorter, but no less effective or impressive.

At the beginning of Pinter's career one can hardly notice any political implications in his plays and despite the fact that Pinter's early plays such as: “Room” (1957) and “Homecoming”(1964) are considered apolitical, there still remain political elements that one can apprehend. For example, in his early plays Pinter depicts fears, specifically, he describes people who retreat in closed spaces, they are

horrified to leave and go out and they constantly feel haunted and fear that unwanted intruders might arrive and knock at the door causing panic and horror in them. They refuse to keep a touch with an outside world as outside world symbolizes evil and death for them. Outside world is cruel and brutal which can only bring death to Pinter's characters. "Room" in this case is a safe place where they feel secure and cruel world can't reach them. Perhaps, Pinter intended to show how hostile his contemporary world was where people lived. People didn't feel safe anymore in the world they dwelt, especially after World War II. People hadn't forgotten holocaust horrors and definitely their life was not secured from human evil and malice.

The main causes for this cruelty were the heads of the states who didn't exercise any credibility among citizens and as a result of their wrong policies more and more people were under threat. This feeling of threat was further intensified after World War II during Cold War tensions between western and eastern blocs. The world was before the threat of World Nuclear War. Naturally, within the bound of this status quo, Pinter's characters rush to rooms and spaces to keep away from hostile environment existing outside. Definitely, Pinter's early plays are not political. Pinter hides those political messages so delicately that on the surface it is difficult to label them as political plays.

Thus during 1950-60s Pinter was never considered as a political playwright. It is true that Pinter started writing plays in 1957 but the first play which is considered as an overtly political play he wrote after three decades in the 1980s. When Pinter started writing political plays, they were met by skepticism from the society. First of all, public disapproved Pinter's decision to diverge from his traditional plays. They were doubtful about his political commitment and artistic autonomy. They considered it's not a playwright's obligation to write about politics. The public became uninterested in Pinter's play they thought wore political messages. However, what they didn't realize was that Pinter's politics here didn't imply making political statements praising any party politics but what he intended was to portray those malicious intents of political systems aimed at suppressing and demeaning humans. In this case, Pinter will question and cast doubt on the truth of the accepted norm of society.

Famous critic Michael Billington in his essay: "Evil that man do" claims that majority of people see a dichotomy between his early, mysterious, comedy of menace plays and his late political plays but if one studies his early plays, one can notice Pinter has always been driven by his suppressed political motives.

"What is fascinating is that many people see a dichotomy in Pinter's own career between the mysterious early plays and jaded certainties of the later political plays. But recent revivals of *The Birthday Party*" and *Hothouse* have shown that Pinter was always exercised by political oppression" (Pinter, 2000:28)

For example, when the play "Mountain Language" has been staged, it was Pinter's idea to stage it in duo with "Birthday party". Two plays belonging to different time periods and different types of plays but as American critic Carey Perloff stated: "It became immediately clear that, for all their surface differences, both pieces wrestled with a concern that has been paramount in Pinter's work from the beginning: the struggle of the individuals to survive the depredation and aggressions of society". (Perloff, 2001:2)

One of his first overtly political plays was "One for the road" which he wrote in 1984. This play marks the departure from Pinter's traditional plays and marks the beginning of his political plays. The play consists of only four scenes. The action takes place only in one room. Nicolas, an interrogator tortures Victor through questioning. It's noteworthy how Nicolas claims his actions are motivated by true reasons.

"I run the place. God speaks through me. I'm referring to the Old Testament God, by the way, although I'm a long way from being a Jewish. Everyone respects me here. Including you, I take it? I think that is the correct stance." (Pinter, 2001:2)

Nicolas is a desperate man who tries to justify his deed through the speech about God. Pinter thinks if we look around we can find a lot of Nicola in World Leaders.

Pinter despised language that is purposefully used maliciously by political systems to cover up their wicked intentions and how they manipulate people by using such phrases as: “We do it for democracy”. Democracy and freedom speech have become a common rhetoric which they use to mislead the masses. Pinter believed that in recent years Freedom speech has become a cliché which implies using empty structures of the language devoided of any true meanings. But at the same time, it represents well targeted successful rhetoric having a great effect on people. To Pinter’s mind, this is a complete failure of intelligence.

“I believe that the root cause of this state of affairs is that for last forty years our thought has been trapped in hollow structures of language, a stale, dead but immensely successful rhetoric.. This has represented, in my view, a defeat of the intelligence and of the will”. (Pinter, 1998:206)

Another famous political play by Pinter is “Ashes to ashes” written in 1996. This play brings back vivid memories to one of the main characters Rebecca. Ultimately those memories go back to the holocaust. It is never stated directly the word “holocaust” but the readers see scenes from Rebecca’s memories and realize that those memories are all about the holocaust. Rebecca is haunted by her past as Pinter himself was.

“From my point of view the woman is simply haunted by the world she’s been born into, by all the atrocities that have happened. In fact they seem to have become part of her own experience, although in my view she hasn’t actually experienced them herself. That’s the whole point of the play. I myself have been haunted by these images for many years, and I’m sure I’m not alone in that...”.( Gussow, 1990:29”)

This play was extremely personal for Pinter. He could also never forget his past related to World War experiences and his inability to live in the present and the feeling of impossibility to live peacefully in this world.

Thus, whether Pinter wrote a play in 1957 or in 1984, irrespective of the fact that a play belongs to comedy of menace or late political plays, they carry common connotations: these are human repressions, violence which is all based on Pinter’s experiences himself and go back to his childhood when a Jewish child witnessed horrors of the second World War II and later consciously or unconsciously put forward into his plays.

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