

The Eccentric Conduct of Pinter's Characters in The Birthday Party

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Abstract:

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* revolves around man's alienation and man's feeling of anxiety, fear, insecurity, and perplexity in the postmodern era because of disintegration with the new world. Pinter depicts a man of the postmodern era as a victim of social, economic, political crises and ideological conflicts, which a man has to submit as a coercive response to this world. This study tries to cast a light on the eccentric conduct of Harold Pinter's characters in this play through their actions and dialogues, which is regarded as a man's reaction to his/her feeling of anxiety, fear, insecurity, and perplexity in the postmodern era.

Keywords: *The Birthday Party*, alienation, perplexity, postmodern, disintegration, coercive, eccentric

A Bird's Eye View:

Drama, as one of the cardinal pillars which literature stands on, has proved for a long time, that it is an active and effectual medium in communicating the playwrights' message to audience and readers through live visualization of man's problems which are represented in actions and dialogues performed on the stage. Dramatist, as other writers, is the child of his/her environment. He/ She shares others' pleasures, sufferings and anguishes as other common people. But he/she has a talent or skill to translate these pleasures, sufferings and anguishes into literary life – like works whose major concern and message may be not only to entertain, but also to pose and diagnose the light and dark corners of their societies, in a sense, they stand on the negative and positive aspects which practiced by individuals or institutions or authorities of society.

Introduction to Pinter's *The Birthday Party*:

The eminent British dramatist, Harold Pinter (1930) is one of the twentieth century playwrights. He is definitely one of the great figures who has succeeded in depicting skillfully and realistically man's predicament in the world of modernism . Pinter's world is full of various problems which have blown not only individuals but also the whole of his society. Social, economic and political crises and wars (especially the Second World War) and ideological conflicts have undue affected on man's life. These bad conditions have created an atmosphere of chaotic life as Pinter himself asserts that "in our present day, everything is uncertain, there is on fixed point, we are surrounded by the unknown ..." (Gussow, 2006: 142). Harold Pinter is the legitimate child of the postmodern world, so it is natural for him to live and experience all its happy and sad moments as Pinter himself asserted "there is no artist who is not a child of his own time..." (Esslin,1967: 32). Consequently, he could masterly and vividly delineate the plight of the modern man through his literary products and communicate successfully his message to the public as a dramatist "Pinter, essentially remains on the firm ground of everyday reality" (Esslin, 2004 : 35). Although his characters' demeanour seems to be idiosyncratic as their motives are enigmatic as Pinter states "If you press me for a definition I'd say what goes on in my play is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism "(Pinter, 2006 : 174).

Pinter's play "The Birthday Party"(1958) depicts the ordeal through which the man of postmodern era has to go as a coercive response to the surroundings around . Harold Pinter takes Stanley Webber, the central character of this play as a sample of the postmodern man. He is an ex – pianist with no history. He lives in a boarding – house far from the town, which is owned by Mrs. Meg and her husband Petty. Goldberg and McCann are two strangers with no history too. They have come to live in the boarding – house for a couple of night. They have a mission to execute, but it is unidentified as their identities. Stanley undergoes a complete transformation in both his appearance and state of mind by the two strangers, Goldberg and McCann and he is finally taken to unknown destination. In his full – length play "The Birthday Party" ,Harold Pinter tries to delineate man's failure in pursuing his or her own lifestyle away from the ailments of the postmodern world around. Man "is simply too aware of the dangers of being unguarded" (Oliveira, 1999: 38). Man shows resistance to the dangers of the postmodern world around, but he or she my be threatened or blackmailed to succumb to them as Elena shows "in a universe devoid of meaning and dominated by anxieties and fears, characters fight to defend themselves from intruders and to preserve autonomy" (Elena, 2009 :67). Stanley is the man of the postmodern era who plays as the life and soul of the play "The Birthday Party". He has put himself in a boarding – house far from the town to evade himself the harms of

the outside world and to keep others away from poking their nose in his personal affairs. He wants to think freely and decide by himself without others' intrusion and threat. He searches for a safe and comfortable shelter."... the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life" (Bensky' 2005: 36). But Stanley unfortunately fails to fulfill this wish. He still suffers from feeling of anxiety, menace, fear, insecurity and perplexity. " The Birthday Party has captured the anxiety... of life in the second half of the 20th century... "(Gussow, 2006: 21). He still feels that he is threatened and outcast to society. He leaves the world, but the world never leaves him to live alone. Stanley's sanctity and privacy are eventually violated by the two strangers Goldberg and McCann so that Stanley can be in agreement with the requirements of the postmodern world.

Man's feeling of anxiety, menace, fear, insecurity and perplexity has been translated as an apparent eccentric conduct acted by the characters (especially the principle figures Stanley, Goldberg and McCann) of this play. The way the characters behave is questionable and ambiguous as their motives and their absurd speech though the characters go through natural conversations. They have been treated by Pinter completely realistically through making them speak in ordinary and colloquial language as Pinter asserts" if you press me for a definition I'd say what goes in my play is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (Pinter, 2006: 174). This eccentric conduct of the characters is very conspicuous and seems to be at times absurd or comic in their interrelations and encounters with one another although this absurdity may turn to be somber in some situations. " the comic face of man's subject matter can be very Funny up to the point when the absurdity of the characters' predicament becomes frightening, horrifying, pathetic and tragic" (Esslin, 2004: 51). The birthday party for embodying the comic and threatening mood has been labeled as "comedy of menace" by Warble (Peacock, 1997: 56).

Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is marked by the eccentric conduct of its characters especially the principle characters Stanley, Goldberg and McCann, and this paper tries to diagnose the characters' eccentric conduct through the following below – mentioned scenarios:

- **Stanley's Relationship with Meg**

Stanley's relationship with Meg is a kind of the eccentric conduct. Meg mothers him but at the same time, she is sexually interested in him. She gets worried when he is late for breakfast. His comfort and well-being are her constant concern.

Petty: Didn't you take him up his cup of coffee?

Meg: I always take him up his cup of tea. (act i)

Meg: Is he (Stanley) still in bed?

Petty: Yes, he's... still asleep.

Meg: Still? He'll be late for his breakfast. (act iii)

Though she treats him as a son, she is also sexually attracted towards him. In act one she flirts with him, ruffles his hair and fondles his arm. When he says that he may leave this place to accept a job, which has been offered to him, she expresses her reaction by saying:

Don't you go away again, Stanley. You stay here. You'll be better off. You stay with your old Meg. (act i)

She has had some enjoyable afternoons with him in his room. She reminds him that she has had lovely afternoons with him in the room he describes as dirty and unworthy living in.

Meg: Oh, Stan, that's a lovely room. I had some lovely afternoons in that room. (act i)

Although she behaves with him in motherly and amorous way, he treats her idiosyncratically. He speaks to her rudely and scornfully. When Meg orders him tea, he says:

This isn't tea. Its gravy... you're a bad wife... you succulent washing bag. (act i)

And later in act three he tries to strangle her in the course of the game of blind man's buff at the same time he says that he would nowhere without her, thus showing complete dependence on her.

Stanley: I don't know what I'd do without you (Meg). (act i)

• **Stanley's Dialogue with Meg about the Two Strangers**

Meg informs Stanley that there are two gentlemen coming to stay in the boarding – house for a couple of nights. But Stanley shows his exclamation and unexpectation for the two strangers' coming to the boarding – house.

Meg: I'm expecting visitors.

Stanley: What?

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

Stanley: I don't believe it. (act i)

He tells her that there is somebody trying to throw dust into Meg's eyes and nobody will come to stay here.

Stanley: They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm; a false alarm. (act i)

Although he is ignorant not only to their identities but also to their names, he refuses the idea of their coming as if he were the owner of the boarding – house. His curious questions about these two strangers again express his enigmatic conduct since he is just a lodger and has not the right to investigate the visitors of the boarding – house.

Stanley: Who are they?

Meg: I don't know.

Stanley: Did he (Petty) tell you their names?

Meg: No.

Stanley: (pacing the room). Here? They wanted to come here?

Meg: Yes, they did.

Stanley: Why?

Meg: This house is on the list.

Stanley: But who are they?

Meg: You'll see when they come. (act i).

Stanley's demeanour seems to be idiosyncratic when he tries to scare Meg. He tells that some people would be coming to the boarding – house to take somebody in the wheel – barrow.

Stanley: They're (two newcomers) looking for someone. A certain person.

Meg: (hoarsely) No, they're not!

Stanley: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?

Meg: No! (act i)

His conduct is idiosyncratic and absurd at the same time. It is idiosyncratic since the motivation or purpose behind Stanley's story is enigmatic or unjustifiable or it may be fictitious especially the end of this play is unknown at this moment of the actions. It is absurd because Meg feels of fear on hearing this story. And when Lulu, the next door woman at this moment knocks at the door of the boarding – house, Stanley's reaction appears to be questionable. He sidles the door and listens to know who the knocker is.

• **Goldberg and McCann's Mission**

The two strangers, Goldberg and McCann come to the boarding – house to execute a mission, but neither McCann knows it nor Goldberg declares it . this mission remains unidentified up to the end of the play. McCann in a dialogue with Goldberg, wants to know it but he is not told. It is an idiosyncratic and absurd conduct that McCann accompanies Goldberg to do something, but he is ignorant to it.

Goldberg: McCann, what are you so nervous about? Pull yourself together. Everywhere you go these days its like a funeral.

McCann: That's true.

Goldberg: What it is, McCann? You don't trust me like you did in the old days? (act i)

• **Goldberg's Talk to Meg about Stanley**

In a talk with Meg, Goldberg poses questions about Stanley which represent an eccentric conduct since Goldberg is a strange inmate and his unknown identity. Goldberg's idiosyncratic conduct rises up when he talks to Meg about Staley's birthday party. He suggests that there should be a birthday party for Stanley and will

manage it and they (Goldberg and McCann) are glad to come to the boarding – house in time.

Goldberg: Are you going to have a party?

Meg: No.

Goldberg: Well, of course, you must have one. We'll have a party, eh? What do you say?

Meg: Oh, yes!

Goldberg: Sure. We'll give him a party. Leave it to me. (act iii)

• **Meg's Birthday Present to Stanley**

In act two, the scene of the eccentric conduct is also clear. Meg gives Stanley a boy's drum as a birthday present. He hangs it around his neck. At first, he beats the drum gently and rhythmically, but then he begins to beat it violently. He almost becomes savage in his beating of it.

• **Stanley's Clash with The Two Strangers**

Stanley's eccentric conduct towards the two newcomers is reinforced when he encounters the two strangers. In a conversation with McCann, Stanley presents himself as a positive character having good qualities and gives justifications for his stay at the boarding – house as if he had been forced to disclose these peculiarities.

McCann: Do you find it (boarding – house) bracing?

Stanley: Me? No... No place like home ... I wouldn't have left, but business calls... I started a little private business and it compelled me to come down here – kept me longer than I expected ... I'll be all right when I get back ... but what I mean is the way some man that I always was. (act ii).

Later he tells Goldberg and McCann that there is no accommodation in this boarding – house and they must leave. He behaves as the owner of the boarding – house.

Staley: I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We're booked out. You're room is taken. Mrs. Boles forgot to tell you. You'll have to find somewhere else. Goldberg: Are you the manager here?

Stanley: That's right. I run the house. I'm afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation. (act iii)

Then Stanley is subjected to a grueling cross – examination by Goldberg and McCann who behave as if they were detectives. He is treated as a guilty. Though Goldberg and McCann's identity is unidentified, they arraign Stanley of things that seem to be a kind of hotchpotch.

Why did you kill your wife?

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Chicken? Egg? Which came first? (act ii)

- **The Night of Stanley's Birthday Party**

In act three, through Stanley's birthday party, Stanley behaves enigmatically with Lulu. When Stanley's birthday party begins, all the characters, Stanley, Goldberg, McCann, Meg and Lulu enjoy the game of blind man's buff. When Stanley's turn comes, he is blindfolded. The lights are gone out. Then he begins to move towards Meg dragging the drum on his foot. He reaches her and stops. His hands moves towards her and they reach her. He begins to strangle her and then he tries to rape Lulu, but Goldberg and McCann rush forward and throw him off.

Lulu: The lights ... someone's touching me! (act iii)

- **After The night of Stanley's Birthday Party**

In act three ,Goldberg's reaction to McCann and Stanley's thorough transformation in appearance is eccentric. After the night of Stanley's birthday party, Goldberg becomes furious with McCann when he calls him: "Simey" as if he seems to be insecure or is not content about this name.

McCann: Simey!

Goldberg: (murderously) Don't call me that! (he seizes McCann by the throat) NEVER CALLME THAT! (act iii)

Goldberg feels knocked out. He also splutters and falters.

Goldberg (interrupting): I don't know why, but I feel Knocked out. I feel a bit it's uncommon for me...(act iii)

Goldberg admits his uneasiness, reveals his despair and criticizes the way his own self has been formed and calls into question his own status of being. He addresses McCann saying:

You know what? I never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed... what do you think, I'm a self – made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit... because I believe that the world (Vacant)... (act iii)

And McCann refuses to go upstairs again into Stanley's room. To the end of this play, Stanley presents a complete contrast to his personality in the first two acts. After an obscure atmosphere of the night of his birthday party, Stanley comes to be dressed in a dark, well – cut suit, and a white collar, and he is clean – shaved. He holds his broken glasses in his hand and he is almost speechless. At last, Goldberg and McCann somewhere unknown take him.

Conclusion:

Harold Pinter has portrayed his characters especially the major figures, Stanley, Goldberg and McCann with enigmatic motivations and unknown historical background. In this play one detects "the element of uncertainty about the motivations of the characters, their background and their very identity" (Esslin, 1967: 37). But this uncertainty about the characters' motivations, background and identity has been leveled to the surface of their dialogues and actions as idiosyncratic demeanours acted by them as shown in this study. Broadly speaking, although these characters are presented as complex ones, they have been convincingly drawn. All the characters of Pinter's the birthday party, the three inmates of the boarding house (Meg, Petty and Stanley), the next door woman (Lulu) and the two strangers (Goldberg and McCann) have been introduced on the stage realistically through their inter – relations and encounters with one another employing simple dialogues and colloquial language.

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