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The Dynamics of Violence in Harold Pinter's Play- *the Caretaker*

Abstract: Harold Pinter has explored violence on many levels, ranging from the most palpable, visible forms to the most subtle. Taking recourse to Johan Galtung's theory of violence and its typology as presented in his violence triangle, I have attempted to probe in this paper how direct, structural and cultural violence are projected in Pinter's play, *The Caretaker*. Direct violence, which has a visibility factor is most often related to the invisible cultural and structural violence and is time and again the outcome of these subtle forms of violence. But it is a fact that direct violence does not affect many people as the cultural and structural violence, which constitute the hidden but major part of the ice-berg. The world has faced more violence through racism, poverty, religious fanaticism, unemployment, famine, illiteracy, sexism, conservative ideologies and so on. The paper attempts to establish that Pinter has through the play, *The Caretaker*, has presented a keen vision of our essentially violent world, which is intensified by the notion of menace and man's basic insecurity.

Harold Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Laureate for literature, was not only a popular playwright, poet, screen writer, short story writer, director, actor etc. but also a political activist who fought against the abuse of power in the familial, social and political sphere. As a pacifist, Pinter had always fought against violence, torture, and oppression. In his early comedies of menace, the latter political plays as well as his anti-war poems, an element of disillusionment

with war, violence, and torture of any form is always present and a plea for disarmament and universal peace is subtly hinted at. Pinter had always protested against the use of violence by the State or the people in power and this is manifested in his early comedies of menace and the latter overtly political plays.

Pinter has in these plays constructed models of organisations or characters who unleash ruthless terror and violence on their victims. Through these agents of violence, he portrays that violence leads to serious and often irremediable physical and psychological effects and therefore its application should be prevented by the State or the one in power. Pinter's plays show his keen interest in the physical and psychological mechanisms of exerting power and violence, and the psychological constitution of the torturer and his victim. In order to authenticate this statement, following is a discussion on the nature of violence and the manifold forms in which violence is presented in Pinter's play, *The Caretaker*, which is a proof of his concern with the politics associated with violence.

Violence as defined by the World Health Organization in the WRVH (World Report on Violence and Health) is, "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment [sic] or deprivation" (5). This definition implies that violence can be self-inflicted like suicide or self-abuse, or it can be inflicted on others like domestic violence, sexual violence, elder abuse, or it can be committed by large groups of people on other weaker, abjected groups in order to achieve political, economic or social goals.

In contemporary times, violence has been studied from a multi-dimensional level and one such pioneer researcher who has studied violence from a close angle during his study in the field of peace research is the Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung. According to Galtung, "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and

mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (“Violence, Peace and Peace Research” 168). Galtung here opines that violence hinders its victims from realizing their potentialities both physically and psychologically.

In line with Galtung’s definition are the definitions of violence Barak and Henry. Barak defines violence as “any action or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons” (qtd. in de Haan 32). Henry describes violence as, “the use of power to harm another, whatever form it takes” (qtd. in de Haan 32). He elaborates the nature of the ‘harm’ by saying that harm is not only physical pain and suffering. It “can also occur along many dimensions beyond the physical to include psychological or emotional, material or economic, social or identity, moral or ethical, and so on” (qtd. in de Haan 32).

The above definitions indicate that the word ‘violence’ has a multi-dimensional character and it goes beyond the somatic boundaries to the psychological, economic, social and moral boundaries of life. It is to be noted here that that violence as a pattern of behaviour is inflicted on others to establish and maintain control over individuals and groups and that it deeply affects individual’s/group’s health and well-being. Moreover, the existence of violence leads to a society that abounds in many inequalities and imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the abused.

Johan Galtung gives an elaborate description of how violence functions in the different levels of the society through the typology of violence which he defined as his ‘violence triangle’. Galtung’s triangle of violence comprises – direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Galtung opines that the structure of violence is analogous to that of an iceberg, in which there is always a small visible or perceptible part and a huge concealed part. Direct violence is just like the tip of the iceberg which is visible to everyone, whereas structural and cultural violence are invisible like the iceberg that is concealed underneath.

Analogous to Galtung’s typology of violence is Slavoj Zizek's classification of violence

into objective violence and subjective violence. Zizek defines subjective violence as a “Violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (*Violence 1*). This violence is suggestive of Galtung’s ‘direct violence’ where the perpetrator of violence and his victim are clearly visible as in the case of assault or terrorist attacks. Contrary to the visible nature of subjective violence is the invisible nature of the objective violence. Zizek further divides objective violence into systematic violence which is the exploitation of people by corrupt political and economic structures (*Violence 2*) and symbolic violence which is embedded in the structure of language (*Violence 1*). Zizek’s symbolic violence is reminiscent of Galtung’s “cultural violence” and it includes those aspects of news media that legitimizes the use of force against social uprising or rebellion or news media that justifies war.

Pinter’s play, *The Caretaker*, abounds in violence direct, structural as well as cultural violence. Direct violence is a violence which is visible in form and can be physical and psychological in its effects. Such an instance can be seen in the first meeting between Mick and Davies in the play *The Caretaker*. In order to take Davies by surprise and to intimidate him, Mick turns to violent behaviour as illustrated below:

MICK slides across the room. DAVIES half turns, MICK seizes his arm and forces it up his back. DAVIES screams. Uuuuuuuhhh! Uuuuuuuhhh! What! What! What! Uuuuuuuhh! MICK swiftly forces him to the floor, with DAVIES struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring. (26)

Another form of direct violence is psychological violence in which the victim is subjected to mental or emotional abuse through words, gestures, writing etc. O’Leary defines psychological abuse as, “acts of recurring criticism and /or verbal aggression toward a partner, and /or acts of isolation and domination of a partner. Generally, such actions cause the partner to be fearful of the other or lead the partner to have very low self-esteem” (“Psychological Abuse” 19). *The Caretaker* portrays psychological violence in the scene where Davies

threatens Aston that he might be again sent to a mental asylum for his erratic and insane behaviour, “They had you inside one of them places before, they can have you inside again... They can put them pincers on your head again, man!” (65).

A form of direct violence is verbal violence wherein one abuses another through offensive words, slangs, shouts, criticism with the intention of humiliating, demeaning and insulting the other person. *The Caretaker* exhibits similar violence when Davies humiliates Aston, his benefactor, by referring to him as an insane person in the lines, “You’re up the creek! You’re half off!” (65). Later on, Mick abuses Davies by calling him “a bloody imposter” (70).

Structural violence exists when a small group or class has more access to properties, resources, and opportunities than other groups or classes. Consequently, the majority of the common people suffer from poverty, lack of job opportunities, illiteracy, discrimination, and abjection. In the above forms of violence, the perpetrators of the violence are usually the ones, who are in power and/or in charge of the social, political and economic institutions of the society. But their mode of harming their victims is masked and disguised as welfare acts or acts for the betterment of the nation, and as such, they are not realized as concrete actors of violence.

In Pinter’s oeuvre, structural violence can be seen in the play *The Caretaker*. Davies, the central character of the play is a victim of structural violence. He is a homeless, aged man forced to be on the streets owing to his poor condition. Poverty is one of the many evils that spread due to the two world wars of the twentieth century. Poverty is a type of structural violence as it leads to institutionalized deprivation of the means of survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. In the period after World War II, due to sheer poverty many families disintegrated and the young started considering the old as a burden on family and society as well.

Consequently, the senior citizens of the society were not given respect by the younger generation and they (old people) were left to fend for themselves. Through Davies, Pinter

attempts to depict the post-war life where people especially the old, suffered from poverty, displacement, homelessness, idleness, anxiety, and unemployment. Though Davies in the play, *The Caretaker*, turns out to be opportunistic, ungrateful, egotistic and violent, his personality is shaped by the insecurity and anxiety brought about by the abject conditions in which he had lived for years.

Another example of structural violence can be seen in the Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which Aston received in the mental asylum owing to his habit of talking too much. Now if we look at the reason for Aston (in the play *The Caretaker*) being treated with ECT in a mental hospital, we will find that his family thought he was suffering from schizophrenia and that he hallucinated most of the day. The ECT was meant to cure Aston of his hallucinations. But the way it was applied on Aston (in standing posture) is indicative of the neglect of the hospital doctors, nurses or attendants towards the safety measures required to be taken while using the therapy on patients. Consequently, Aston suffers from a permanent disorientation of thoughts and he becomes slow in his thoughts and action. This neglect on the part of the hospital authorities echoes the society's neglect towards the mental patients and as such exhibits structural violence.

It is a known fact that the prevailing attitudes and cultural beliefs that we have been taught since childhood form our state of mind and structures our behaviour and way of life. Based on this fact, it can be assumed that cultural violence occurs as a result of the cultural attitudes and beliefs that we have been fed with since childhood, regarding the necessity of violence. Some forms of cultural violence are racism, gender discrimination, doctrine of war, casteism or ethnic prejudice which are often found in the symbolic spheres of society such as religion, art, science, and education.

It is essential to note here that cultural violence is the source of both structural and direct violence. For example, the cultural upbringing of many of the white Europeans had led them

to consider the Black people as abjects, who are inferior in position and thus are fit for marginalization through the State's administrative system. It had also led to the treatment of the Blacks as slaves till the time Apartheidism existed. Another instance of cultural violence is that almost all the cultures in the world attach a romantic notion to war. These notions are patriotism, bravery, courage, uprightness, honour etc. While killing a person on other occasions than war, is considered as a murder by almost all cultures today, killing hundreds and thousands of men on the enemy side during the war is considered to be a necessary act of violence for the cause of country's security, welfare or freedom.

In the play, *The Caretaker*, cultural violence can be seen in the racist attitude of Davies. Davies in the play is suspicious of the immigrants or foreigners in Britain and he feels that they give themselves the airs that they are better than him. Throughout the play, Davies refers to them in denigratory terms which reveal his racist attitude towards them. He says, "All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it...And they had me working there" (6). Through Davies' fear and suspicion, Pinter tries to express the fear of the lower-class whites of Britain in the Fifties, regarding their position, rights and employment opportunities being usurped by the foreigners. Graham Woodroffe in his article "Taking Care of the 'Coloureds': The Political Metaphor of Harold Pinter's 'The Caretaker'," presents an interesting analysis of the situation in the following observation:

It is clear that by the 1950s many of the problems of insertion experienced by Jewish settlers in Britain had attenuated as the ghetto dispersed. The racial hatred directed against the large number of Jews who had arrived in Britain between 1880 and 1914 and in the years leading up to World War II was, in the late 1950s, directed at the "coloured" immigrants arriving from the former colonies. The problems these new immigrants faced, and the prejudice they encountered were, as many social historians have pointed out, very similar to

those previously experienced by Jewish immigrants. (503)

Another dimension of culture is language which functions as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural beliefs of a society. In other words, culture reflects what the society values or not values through its language. Sapir opines about the relation between language and culture that, "... (l)anguage does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (*Culture, Language and Personality* 207).

From Sapir's words, it can be inferred that the language used by the characters in Pinter's plays showcases the cultural beliefs of those characters' community, group, state, country etc. In the play, *The Caretaker*, cultural violence takes place when Mick tells Davies, a homeless old man, that he stinks the place out (33). Here Mick reflects the society's disapproval of homeless, old people. When Davies tells Aston "You're up the creek! You're half off!" (65) the society's attitude of neglect, sarcasm, and cruelty towards people who have stayed in a mental asylum for treatment is reflected.

Thus it can be seen that Pinter has in the play, *The Caretaker*, presented a keen vision of our essentially violent world, which is intensified by the notion of menace and man's basic insecurity. He has experimented with verbal violence and its direct psychological effects on its victims more freely than any form of physical violence, which he preferred to be performed off-stage and insinuated through the somatic effects on the body such as bruises and injuries. Pinter has explored violence on many levels, ranging from the most palpable, visible forms to the most subtle. Direct violence, which has a visibility factor is most often related to the invisible cultural and structural violence and is time and again the outcome of these subtle forms of violence (cultural and structural violence).

But it is a fact that direct violence does not affect many people as the cultural and structural violence, which constitute the hidden but major part of the iceberg. The world today

is facing more problems through structural and cultural violence such as racism, poverty, unemployment, famine, illiteracy, sexism, religious fanaticism, conservative ideologies etc. Whatever be the manner of projecting violence, it can be safely concluded that Pinter has used the technique of violence in almost his entire repertoire to bring out the characteristic of a world made up of people with an inherent aggressive nature and tendency to become violent. He says, “The world is a pretty violent place, it’s as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor” (qtd. in Bensky 7).

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