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BUCOLIC ANTAGONISM AND ITS RAMIFICATION: A STUDY OF HAROLD PINTER'S 'THE CARETAKER'

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Abstract:

Pinter's world within the drama seems to be at least somewhat more truthful than the others. The plays of Pinter take one directly into the belligerent areas of modern life wherein the individual has to fight against so many odds without any protest. A very general tendency of man is his avaricious nature which manifests itself in aggressive attempts to possess a piece of land or a room or a person. Ever since the dawn of civilization, human aggrandizement and voracity had led to serious and severe problems leading to betrayals, slaughters, breaking of families and human relationships. Various methods are employed by human beings to achieve their goal. Viewed from this perspective, *The Caretaker* bears a highly widespread significance and presents a serious but persistent issue and highlights its aftermath in the modern scenario. The play elucidates the importance of provincial antagonism seen ever since the dawn of any human evolution.

The twentieth century British theatre had seen many turns of which the chief ones being the Poetic theatre, the Angry theatre and the Absurd theatre. Whatever multifarious forms the theatre had taken in the present period, the ones which furnished the interests of the audience only survived. Even if the new theatre could not endorse the verse drama, it riveted the Angry drama and the Absurd drama. The latter coped better than the former as it could do more justice to the problem of human suffering in the world. Harold Pinter along with a number of other noteworthy writers like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Paul Sartre etc. gave a new direction and shape to the twentieth century drama. What seems to set Pinter apart from other writers is that unlike Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter's world within the drama seems to be at least somewhat more realistic than the others. The plays of Pinter take one directly into the contentious areas of modern life wherein the individual has to fight against so many odds without any protest.

Keywords: belligerent, aggressive, provincial, antagonism

Harold Pinter, the English playwright who achieved international fame known for his "comedies of menace" was

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one of the most complex and challenging post -World War II dramatists. Besides being a playwright, he was also a screenwriter, actor, director, political activist and poet. In awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, the Swedish Academy noted that Pinter occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an eponymous adjective. The supra-realistic dialogues in his plays and the menace in them, more than any other aspect of the work, have made the term “Pinteresque” extremely important in the world of modern dramatic literature.

A very universal tendency of man is his avaricious nature which manifests itself in aggressive attempts to possess a piece of land or a room or a person. Ever since the dawn of civilization, human aggrandizement and greed had led to serious and severe problems leading to betrayals, slaughters, breaking of families and human relationships. Various methods are employed by human beings to achieve their goal.

A piece of land or a room and an attempt to possess it by hook or by crook is a recurring theme in the plays of Harold Pinter. The idea of provincial violence can go beyond material things to men, i.e from the forceful possession of a room to the forceful possession of people. This type of violent aggression of the domain or people is explicit in Pinter’s plays like *The Room*,

The Caretaker, *Betrayal*, *A Slight Ache* and so on. Even if the dramatist’s treatment of the theme is quite different in each of these plays in their very intensity of the struggle or the volume of violence, the universally relevant motif of bucolic antagonism gets truly dramatized in them. The fight for a room of one’s own that may extend up to territorial aggression is the main theme of *The Caretaker* that brought Pinter his first great success among the public.

The Caretaker, a play written by the Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter and published in 1960 is actually not about a caretaker, but it is about a man who might have become one if only he had been less greedy. The play includes both the elements of humor and pathos in it. Davies, the central character of the play appears to us as a true object of pity and laughter. He could have continued being the caretaker of the house if he had not misused the kindness and sympathy shown to him by the occupants of the house. His tragedy is therefore the result of the intolerant, rapacious and short-tempered nature for which he pays very dearly at the end of the play. “Davies’s lying, his assertiveness, his inability to resist any chance to impose himself as superior, are, after all, mankind’s original sin- hubris, lack of humility, blindness to our own faults” (Esslin 249).

The play offers a thorough moral dogma and a strict warning to those who

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attempt to possess something immorally and betray others. Viewed from this perspective, *The Caretaker* bears a highly widespread significance and presents a serious but persistent issue and highlights its aftermath in the modern scenario. The way that the three characters in the play behave with each other has had the power to mesmerize audiences since the play's first production in 1960. It deals with human responses that are basic to all mankind and particularly expresses a darker sense of man's insecurity, aggressiveness or duplicity. In addition to the major theme of provincial belligerence, other themes that are touched on in the play include self delusion, the difficulty of communication, racism, family, mental ailment and the plight of the poor. It is a play about human connection, friendship, isolation, and even love. The depth and insight shown in the author's dialogue, plus his use of both comedy and tragedy, all contribute to the reputation of the play as a modern masterpiece.

The play begins with the younger brother, Mick, who observes the room and leaving it after hearing some voices. Aston, the elder brother enters with Mac Davies, a tramp whom he had saved from a fight at the café. The kind Aston offers him food and accommodation. But when once he is there, Davies observes the surroundings quickly and tells Aston about his employment in the café. It is clear from his conversation that

Davies hates all those other than the English- whether Blacks, Greeks or Poles. To quote him,

Ten minutes off for a tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lots of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there... they had me working... (Pinter 2:6).

Davies talks at great length about his career and his inability to place himself in a good position. The talk exposes his ever troubling nature for which the reasons are not lucid. He appears boastful when he tells Aston, "I've had dinner with the best"(Pinter 2:7) and appears fastidious about cleanliness. We are quite surprised to hear the reason why he had given up his wife. He tells Aston:

Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week, I took the lid of saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since (Pinter 2:7).

Davies seems particular not to do any other job assigned to someone else. In fact, he had threatened his master when he was asked to substitute for another. He constantly claims himself to be an old man

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and tries to get respect under its pretext. He appears to be a highly cunning man with shrewd intelligence and sharp observational powers. While entering Aston's room, he observes the room closely, stares at the wall, watches Aston's actions with meticulous attention and ascertains himself to be among his likeable group. He is also eager to know whether Aston is the "landlord". He manufactures the story of his life, lying or skipping some details to avoid telling the whole truth about himself. As Billington points out, "When Mick suggests that Davies might have been in the services- and even the colonies, Davies retorts: "I was over there. I was one of the first over there". He defines himself according to momentary imperatives and other people's suggestions"(122).

Davies is in dire need of a pair of shoes and he even accuses the monk who had refused him that. When Aston offers him a pair of shoes, he does not like them for their color, shape, size and material. But finally, he accepts them indifferently. Even if Davies is a complete outsider and a dire dependant of the members of the family, he tries to get things done in his comfort. He wants to exchange his bed with Aston's and his ill-natured behavior gets revealed in his every dealing.

Davies admits that he is homeless and has been going about with an assumed name, Jenkins. He wants to go to Sidcup

where he had left his papers fifteen years ago. But on account of the bad weather and inability to get a pair of shoes, he could not go. Aston tells Davies that his brother had bought him the house and he plans to decorate it and make it inhabitable. Very soon, it becomes certain that Aston and Davies cannot live in harmony. Davies, who had been prattling all night, ascribes it to the Blacks who live next door.

The entrance of the shrewd Mick throws a setback to Davies' overpowering nature. He is literally attacked by Mick and falls to the ground trouser less. The second act offers a drastic change in the attitude of Mick, who tries to become friendlier to Davies by saying that he bears some resemblance to his uncle's brother. Mick even tells him that everything there belongs to him. Davies is offered the job of the caretaker of the house, but he denies it telling Mick that he does not have papers to prove his identity. Davies wins Mick's confidence and begins to quarrel with Aston. Aston tells Davies about the treatment he had received in the mental hospital.

Act Three opens with a discussion between the two brothers about Davies. Ever since the opening of the play, we had not seen three of them sitting together to sort out things. The shrewd Davies knows the strengths and weaknesses of each brother. He has his own judgement about them and he uses this strategy to play games between

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the brothers. He dismisses Aston as insane and one fit only to be sent to a mental hospital. He tells Aston that Mick is always in a hurry but not very serious and therefore should be ignored. He even endeavors to drive Aston away from his own room:

ASTON. I...I think it's about time you found somewhere else. I don't think we're hitting it off.

DAVIES. Find somewhere else?

ASTON. Yes.

DAVIES. Me? You talking to me? Not me, man! You!

ASTON. What?

DAVIES. You! You better find somewhere else!

ASTON. I live here. You don't.

DAVIES. Don't I? Well, I live here. I been offered a job here (Pinter 2:66).

But Davies could not understand that he is digging his own pit. His scheming mind fails to understand Mick's shrewdness. The play ends on a touching note as we find Davies pleading for some space in the house. Esslin commented on Pinter's power as a dramatist as evidenced from the ending of the play:

It is a measure of Pinter's power as a playwright that the final scene, in which Davies vainly pleads to be given another chance, is almost unbearably tragic. After Davies has been shown in all his abject unreliability, clearly undeserving of the

charity offered to him by the brothers, his ejection from the dingy room that could have become his world assumes almost the cosmic proportions of Adam's expulsion from Paradise (249).

Pinter's own remark on the very touching finale of the play is worth mentioning: At the end of *The Caretaker*, there are two people alone in a room, and one of them must go in such a way as to produce a sense of complete separation and finality. I thought originally that the play must end with the violent death of one at the hands of the other. But then I realized, when I got to the point that the characters as they had grown could never act in this way (qtd. in Hinchcliffe 89).

Martin Esslin quotes Pinter who in an interview with Tynan revealed that originally he wanted to bring in violence:

The original idea ...was...to end the play with the violent death of the tramp...It suddenly struck me that it was not necessary. And I think that in this play...I have developed, that I have no need to use cabaret turns and blackouts and screams in the dark to the extent that I enjoyed trying them before. I feel that I can deal, without resorting to that kind of thing, with a human situation...I do see this play as merely...a particular human situation, concerning three particular people and not, incidentally...symbols (249).The play highlights the theme of brotherly love and

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highlights the tragic fate of any aggressor who tries to act ferociously or amorally for any kind of belligerence. Guido Almansi remarks:

Despite the viciousness of Davies, the dullness of Aston and certain traits of motiveless malignity in Mick, *The Caretaker* is finally a play about love: brotherly love. When Pinter was recently asked about the meaning of the faint smiling between the two brothers in the final scene, he surprised everybody present, first of all by answering such an “impertinent” question and then by the outrageousness of his answer: “I think it’s a smile that they love each other” (57).

The dramatist does not make the nature of the ownership of the house clear. The room has a leaking roof and the house itself is in decrepit condition. It is for such a room that the tramp fights and plays games between the two brothers. Even if the brothers do not appear together on the stage, they seem to communicate their feelings between them. Each has a mental chemistry with the other with which they protect each other. The most striking sign of the love between them appear when they smile at the end: “*ASTON comes in, he closes the door, moves into the room, and faces MICK. They look at each other. Both are smiling faintly*” (Pinter 2:73). Defeated in the battle, Davies becomes the pitiful victim of provincial belligerence.

We find that the characters engage in deceiving one another and themselves. As a result certain deceptive phrases and self-deceptive strategies recur as refrains throughout the dialogue. Davies uses an assumed name and has convinced himself that he is really going to solve the problems relating to his lack of identity papers, even if he appears too lazy to carry out any responsibility. Aston is extremely particular in dreaming to construct a shed which will eventually become successful. Mick is trying to find a perfect balance between his option for a successful career and the responsibility towards his mentally deranged brother. At the end of the play, we find that all three of them are misleading themselves. Their lives may continue just as they were at the beginning of the play. Apart from the theme of trickery and self-deception, the play also highlights the theme of isolation that appears to result from the characters’ inability to communicate with one another, and their narrow-mindedness seems to exacerbate their difficulty in communicating with others.

The structure of the play is a result of Pinter’s interest in symmetry; it contains three acts and three characters. The two brothers are unlike but they complete each other. When the intruder Davies comes into the house and tries to fool the brothers, they unite to oust the stranger out. The dramatist may be trying to drive home the point that

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any kind of aggression, whether literal or allegorical has serious obstacles and the act of provincial belligerence may be avoided by any individual or community or nation to prevent the resultant drastic and dire failures.

The play elucidates the importance of provincial antagonism seen ever since the dawn of any human evolution. The wars mentioned in the Puranas, the Bible, the Greek literature or the World Wars etc. suggest man's long-lasting tendency of aggression and selfishness for power. If we examine the histories of nations, we see that they are full of accounts of war. Pinter in *The Caretaker* may be trying to draw home the outcome of this bestial trait which survives perennially in man. Even if we are aware of its upshots, the tendency still exists. No religion, ethic, moral system or

principles has proved successful in offering an absolute remedy for the belligerent inclinations of man.

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