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The burning issues of human rights in the plays of Harold Pinter

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Abstract

We contend that the issues of Human Rights are central in the plays of Harold Pinter, English playwright and Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2005. By focusing on two of his early plays both published in 1957, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, we show features of human rights concerns which have been neglected in previous research on Pinter. While the two plays have been analyzed from the perspective of absurd drama, we argue that they exhibit latent manifestations of Human Rights features. To prove our contention, we choose three focal articles of the Human Rights Charter – Article 2 entitled “Don’t discriminate”, Article 5 named “No Torture” and Article 12 specified as “The Right to Privacy” – to show the initial stages of Pinter’s inclination towards Human Rights which became overt in his later plays.

Keywords: Drama, theatre of absurd, social interaction, human rights, Pinter

Introduction

In his speech made in the Nobel awarding ceremony in 2005, Pinter made overt his political and humane leaning of his works. He said,

“Everyone knows what happened in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe during the post-war period: the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, and the ruthless suppression of independent thought. All this has been fully documented and verified. But my contention here is that the US crimes in the same period have only been superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged, let alone recognized as crimes at all. I believe this must be addressed and that the truth has considerable bearing on where the world stands now”. (Art, Truth, and Politics: Nobel Lecture, 2005)

In this speech, Pinter declared himself as a real political playwright who “focuses on the exploitation of victimized countries that are unable to fight back against the proverbial schoolyard bully, the United States Government... and its subsequent dictating measures that manipulate incompatible countries until they are entirely dominated” (Halwas, 2007, p. 1).

Political concern is a prevailing viewpoint of Pinter’s drama. Pinter reacts toward politicians to defend humanity. His Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2005, is a token of Pinter’s enthusiastic trend toward humanity, to observe humans, and to fight on behalf of human rights:

Many had thought that his [Pinter] outspoken views might preclude any chance of such an honor [Nobel Prize for Literature], but in the last decade the Nobel Prize judges have increasingly linked the award with a politics of human rights and a championing of freedom of expression (Luckhust 2010, p. 105) ^[1] While it is true that Pinter’s later plays and writings display overtly human rights concerns, we argue that latent manifestations of these issues can be also traced in his early plays. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to map two of his plays, *The Room*, and *Birthday Party* to three articles of Human Rights Convention and consequently to show the early burgeoning of Pinter’s inclination. Harold Pinter has always shown his opposition to the sources of totalitarian powers both in society and culture. The genre of absurd drama does not merely bear a specific meaning, and the well-known proponents of absurd theatre, such as Camus, Ionesco, and Esslin, have argued that there is no definite meaning for absurd and Absurdity. In “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Albert Camus(1969) ^[3] describes the concept of absurdity as the deprived old memories of mankind who has also no hope for the Promised Land:

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A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions of light, man feels a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of memories of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity (Camus, 1969, p. 13) ^[3]

On the contrary, the meaning of absurdity is something different to Eugene Ionesco's definition. He defines the feeling of absurdity in human life when he is actually separated from his spiritual and transcendental origins. As Esslin (1961) ^[5] quotes in *The Theatre of Absurd*, Ionesco believes that absurdity dominates when a kind of devoid and gap exists in the meaning of life: ... that which is devoid of purpose ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. (Esslin, 1961, p. 5) ^[5]

The other depiction of the theatre of absurd is defined as the theatre of resistance. The notion of resistance was put forward once there was no specific meaning assigned to the genre. It seems that there exists different resistance in the core of the absurd drama: Resistance against concretization, Resistance against remembering and thinking; Resistance against the language; Resistance with the Language, and Resistance and Lacanian jouissance (Beckett and Ionesco: *the Absurd and Resistance*, 2009) ^[1]. Pinter is identified with the movement of absurd drama as Esslin (1961) ^[5] puts him in the line of absurdist in his book *The Theatre of Absurd*. Esslin enlisted a set of figures that were considered as the leading practitioners of the Absurd Drama. This sort of drama flourished as a literary genre in the middle of the 20th century. In Esslin's list we can see, from the most to the least importance, those figures like "Adamov, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, Albee, Arrabal, Gunter Grass, Pinget, and N.F.Simpson" (Cuddon, 1979, p. 962) ^[4].

Pinter's drama attributes meaningless features to Man's life. The human being is shown as a doll controlled or menaced by an indiscernible exterior force. The images are horrific and tragic. Characters are trapped in desperate conditions and are forced to do monotonous or futile actions; *Birthday Party* depicts the case properly (Esslin, 1961, p. 237) ^[5].

As we go further, the characters in absurd drama mislay their channel of communication. It is full of nonsense words which shape cyclical or absurdly expansive plots. Characters are alone and unable to communicate. They are always afraid of the world outside and the terror of betrayal is a psychic wound of their soul: Pinter's world has frequently been described as profoundly ambiguous, full of uncertainty, and menace. From the first his characters are isolated, withdrawn, vulnerable, and passive victims in retreat from communication and human connection... they are wary, edgy, and unpredictable.

All of them are obscurely anguished, suffering ... from personal psychic wounds They are often not only friendless but identity-less. Anxiety surrounds them. They are creatures caught in what is certainly the uneasy amber of the moment, but they are still suffering, still writhing, because of some imprisonment of the spirit which, it turns out, took place long ago (Johnson, 1958, p. 2). The concept of absurd is not a new realm in Pinter's dramaturgy. He has studied a lot of books from prominent figures of literature such as Beckett and Ionesco who were ancestors of absurd drama. Sense of betrayal and terror of the outside world are other suppressive elements of absurdity that push characters

to look for a safe refuge and cozy haven to escape outside intruders. The reader can actually see how Pinter alludes to the indirect role of Religion as an intruder in Human lives. He roughly depicts this dramatic allusion in *The Birthday Party* when he selects the two main protagonists of his play from Jewish and Christian sects. Pinter writes about them in this way: "Goldberg and McCann [in *Birthday Party*] are, respectively, Jewish and Catholic Irish and, hence, may be seen as representatives of Judaism and Catholicism... [And] how religious forces ruin our lives" (Karwowski, 2003, p. 229).

Discussion

The Room and *The Birthday Party* have traditionally been read with different point of views. *The Room*, which was written in 1957, raises different implications. Susan Rusinko (1970, p.114) defines the basement in *The Room* that "can be equated with Auschwitz", a town in southwest Poland which was a site of Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Moreover, *The Room* has also "a claustrophobic atmosphere" which is "an emblem of safe existence" (Rosador, 1971, p. 200) ^[14]. *The Birthday Party*, as Pinter himself describes in a letter to Peter Wood, "is a comedy because the whole state of affairs is absurd and inglorious" (1958, p. 5). The main character is Stanley Webber; he is under the pressure of two sinister forces called Goldberg and McCann, who are from an unspecified organization, and they finally take Stanley with them:

Stanley in his fog of self-fakery and flight has not lost freedom of expression since he never had any understanding of what authentic self-expression might be, but there is an argument, and Pinter pursues it, that in these last moments of traumatic utterance before he is removed from his day-to-day world to an infinitely worse place, he gains momentary self-knowledge. These blood-curdling sounds are the last noises he will make in public, perhaps the last sounds he will ever make: the belated recognition of the loss of himself provides him with the only moments of self-perception he has ever had (Luckharst, 2005, p. 109).

The plays show Pinter's basic ruminations of human rights issues. By studying the features that make the plays interesting such as verbal communications, subject matter, characterization, portrayals, and narration, we show the latent manifestations of human rights concerns. The Human Rights Charter includes a series of moralistic principals that have been legally established after the Second World War. It is, in fact, a set of moral rules rendered in 1948 by the United Nations to set up the relation of different governments together and to authenticate the way of equal treatment toward human beings.

The right of privacy is one of the essential rights of human beings that keep them together due to their personal needs and social presence. The right to privacy is the most well-known right which has been designated for each person. It is a right in being alone, having limited access to one person, preventing from any unwanted access to an individual, keeping secret some private affairs from the others, putting control on private data, and advocating one's dignity and personality. In essence, people deserve the right to stay in peace. It is not just a home to live in but a place which is both secure and exhibits calmness. Nowadays, the Right to Privacy is a legal right which belongs to any citizens of a country and must be observed by others. Everybody must know that individual privacy should be respected in any

possible way, and violation of this right comprises legal actions. With reference to Article 12 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the privacy of any person has been defined well. It has been worded that article 12 discards any illogical maltreatment that degrades the dignity and eminence of individuals and their families:

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks (Ghandhi, 2008, p. 11) ^[7]

The first play of Pinter, *The Room*, is a one-act play written in 1957. The atmosphere of this play resembles the gloomy and mysterious scene – a setting which has been identified as a place of absurd existence. It is portrayed as a place of menace, terror and obscurity. In this room, all actions are performed. It has a symbolic meaning which, through the course of the play, resembles a dreadful dungeon and horrible abyss where characters are trapped in. The characters are “bewildered; mechanical and afraid of the world outside. The Plot has neither a beginning nor an end; and dialogues are incoherent babblings” (Esslin, 1961, p. 5) ^[5]. Esslin’s reading of the play demonstrates the features of an absurd drama.

Racial discrimination is an unaccepted policy in the 21st century. Human societies separate themselves from each other due to land, race, blood and social status. This separation is sometimes defined as a right to peruse one’s benefits without any attention to the equal and fair rights for the others. Racial discrimination has different levels. Fondness to one specific country, nation, race, or tribe forms the most important levels of discrimination. The social systems such as Nazism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, Zionism in Occupied Palestine, Islamic Fundamentalism in Afghanistan and a number of Arabic countries are the most important tokens of discriminations.

The main concern of Pinter in his plays is human beings. He intends to portray the human beings in a matrix of social and political problems which provide conflicts and challenges. The social problems are everyday troubles of mankind which will never let him escape. In the modern society, as Pinter depicts, man is restricted to the societal rules of life, and the reality of modern community is restriction and violence. Belarus Free Theatre illustrates properly the case when performing a play called “Being Harold Pinter” in (2005) ^[13].

“ Belarus Free Theatre creates visually striking images with simple means, and underscores the fierceness of Pinter's words with the intense physicality of the actors. Being Harold Pinter blurs the boundaries between art and reality, delivering a poignant contemporary commentary on violence, oppression, freedom and human dignity”.

The resistance against discrimination is hidden in Pinter’s play. In *The Room*, Riley as a black man stands for the mere representative of the Black People who suffer from social, economic, educational, inequalities. Although the United States of America and Britain introduce themselves as the leaders of democracy in the world, the social realities at present in America and Britain signify that a number of black tribes and races are under severe discrimination. Riley’s life in “the basement” stands as a hidden theme of discrimination in *The Room*. Riley has to live in the basement because he has no right to have a better life than this. Therefore, the lack of social and economic equality has

urged Riley to live in the lower part of the house. The house, thus, stands for the system of hierarchy in American and English societies.

Conclusion

In this article, three issues related to human rights were discussed: discrimination, torture and right of privacy. Departing from previous research on Pinter which mainly focused on the absurdist elements in his plays, we chose to re-view his works from the perspective of human rights. This angle of reading Pinter highlights his preoccupation with human rights issues long before they became overt in his later writing life. Discrimination is considered as an essential element of human rights that can also be detected in Pinter’s dramas, namely in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. Meg in *The Room* has a pessimistic viewpoint toward females and calls the birth of a baby-girl as “a shame”. In the same play, Riley is treated as a second-grade citizen in society, who must live in a “basement”, and is treated lower than White Citizens. He is a symbol of the Black community who has been mal-treated in modern society. Again, it can be observed that Pinter was a human rights advocate who seriously regarded discrimination to be condemned in any form.

Torture as a dreadful means of investigation has always prevailed in modern societies. Pinter depicts this frightful type of investigation in *The Birthday Party* where Stanley is physically and mentally abused under severe agony. He is totally shattered under the atrocities of threatening pressures from Goldberg and McCann who have no right to treat Stanley in this way and, as depicted in human rights charter, any investigation must be done in a court of law. The torture of Stanley illustrates Pinter’s advocacy of human rights. Pinter also announced his humane standpoint against torture when he challenged and severely criticized, in his Nobel Lecture (2005) ^[11], the atrocities of United States in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba: What has happened to our moral sensibility?... Look at Guantanamo Bay. Hundreds of people detained without charge over three years, with no legal representation or due process, technically detained forever. This criminal outrage is being committed by a country which declares itself to be ‘the leader of the free world’. Do we think about the inhabitants of Guantanamo Bay? At present many are on hunger strike, being force-fed, including British residents. Just a tube stuck up your nose and into your throat. You vomit blood. This is torture. (Billington, 2007, p. 438) ^[2]

And finally, the right of privacy is a matter of importance in Pinter’s drama. As we saw in *The Room*, Rose is frightened of the outside world. It means to Pinter that the character’s right to be alone or her right to be prevented from unwanted access has been shattered. She is under the attack of unwanted desires which are imposed on her by new and outside treats. Mr. and Mrs. Sand are the symbol of those who never advocate once’s privacy and dignity when they spy at the back of Rose’s apartment while she is inside and unaware of their presence outside. They interfere in Rose private life and disturb her physical and mental privacy. They even extend some private quarrels about their own relationship in front of Rose who becomes nervous; the negative impact of their presence makes her anxious. Based on the discussed elements, it can be clearly concluded that Pinter was a human rights activist and the right of privacy has the most important value for him.

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