

The Transition from Domestic Sphere to International Sphere in Pinter's Political Play: *Ashes to Ashes*

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Abstract

Motivated by the absurd tradition in the 1950s, in the following years, Pinter transitioned comedy of menace to the memory plays. With the political drama booming in the 1960s although the playwrights of the period such as John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond have written down overtly political plays, Pinter continued to write implicit plays unlike the writers of that time. By the time the political drama was on the decline, with the effect of globalization, Pinter wrote very overtly political plays after the 1980s. As a matter of fact, Pinter revived the New British Theatre with his third period plays such as *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*. Pinter who gained prominence with the latest period plays, has also exceeded the borders of his country; therefore, he referred to the social and political cases he observed in other countries. He addressed several international issues, including the Gulf War, American dominance over other countries, and disempowerment of minority rights. He repudiated the borders pertained at his interviews, even sharply criticised the British politics with courage. Pinter, who was awarded the Nobel Prize, did not hesitate to criticize the policies of England and America with great heart, even in his Nobel speech. Pinter, who handled only British issues in his own country in the early period plays, became the voice of many countries in the latest period plays. Pinter, who never admitted to being a political playwright, was almost always annoyed being tagged, and tried to be the voice of whole world while cutting across all boundaries. This paper discusses Pinter's domestic sphere in his early phase turns into a universally oppressive space filled with violence, rape, death and surveillance in his late plays. It is seen that the dramatised space in Pinter's late plays has been widened both literally and figuratively. The image of "room" is superseded by the global cities and foreign countries as the locus of oppression and the centre of political power. His late stage goes beyond the world of the theatre as the paper will reveal that Pinter's political play entitled as *Ashes to Ashes* cuts across all boundaries.

Keywords: Pinter, international issues, playwright who has no boundaries, political drama, *Ashes to Ashes*

Introduction

Harold Pinter had almost always been credited with the theatrical movement ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, which is a kind of post-war playwriting, and the term was coined by a theatre critic, Martin Esslin; however, Pinter refused to be given any distinctive label. Nevertheless, many critics and scholars regarded him as an inheritor to the tradition developed by Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and the others. Pinter adopted the same style with regard to politics. Although he stated that he is indifferent to political issues and distant from politics, and though he refuses any given label, his dramatic output (earlier, middle and late stages) is marked in his earlier plays “slightly” political, in his late plays “overtly” political. Till 1980s, his own statements almost always foregrounded his distaste for politics throughout his playwriting. The tradition of post-war political theatre in Britain that covers socialism for its political vision did not appeal to Harold Pinter because Pinter did not have partisan viewpoints. Political playwrights such as John Arden and Edward Bond have considered Pinter insufficiently clear, rational, and informative in his political theatre (Billington 333-4). This is because Pinter shows little interest in class consciousness without question and identity politics rather than the other playwrights concerned in post-war British playwriting. Pinter’s transition to political plays occurred at the time of other contemporary playwrights’ losing pre-eminence on British stage.

It is possible to claim that all socio-political, cultural events the playwright experienced in his youth and adulthood influenced his writing style. Especially the turbulent politics in the 1980s have great impact on the spatiality of Pinter’s texts and much more enlarging and globalising power politics in his plays. Therefore, the aim of the study will underline those local, narrow and limited spaces turn into enlarged, international spaces in his late plays. In addition to this, powerholders in his plays have become international from his earlier plays till his late period plays. In this sense, the concepts of space and power will be handled scrupulously in order to reveal that Pinter’s slightly political plays of the 1950s pertaining to local power-space turn out to be overtly political plays after 1980s pertaining to international power-space relations.

Pinter’s overtly political plays coincided with the waning of these playwrights; John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond, David Mercer, David Hare, Howard Brenton, Howard Barker, David Edgar, Caryl Churchill (Peacock 33). This tradition of radical theatre came to an end by the time of Pinter’s converting to overtly political plays. The work of writers such as John Arden, Edward Bond and Arnold Wesker had effectively been marginalized or self-marginalized in terms of the established British theatre, while characteristically Pinteresque features such as a concentration on personal anxiety, a disbelief in the existence of political solutions, a distrust of language, and a scepticism about the possibility of historical change, had permeated the playwriting of authors such as David Hare, Howard Brenton, and David Edgar (Grimes 1-3).

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, London borough in East End in 1930. Pinter's birth coincided with the rise of anti-Semitism movement in Europe which influenced the western part of London. 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. Living in this environment affected Pinter's conception of the class system that was present in Britain, as well as educated him as to where the Jewish people fit into that system (Mskhaladze 390).

Pinter's life, even as a young boy was shaped by his heritage. Martin Esslin describes the East End of London where Pinter grew up as a "political battlefield" (Esslin 32). With the outbreak of World War II, Pinter was evacuated from the city. He did not return to London until he was fourteen. Mel Gussow's interview with Pinter, "A Conversation (Pause) with Pinter" discusses Pinter's youth. Pinter claims that he remembers very little about his childhood, "If you ask me to tell my childhood stories, I would find it almost impossible" (Gussow 29). Pinter's lack of memory of his youth suggests that he tried to repress a past that was too hard to forget. He claims that "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." (29) Pinter's reflections suggest that his need to forget his childhood led him to withhold the trauma he survived, only to have it manifest itself in his plays.

The themes that recur in his plays distinctly reflect his Jewish background. Pinter recognises that his fascination with "dominance and subservience" has become a common theme in his plays (Gale 18). The roles of the victim and the aggressor begin to emerge from Pinter's fascination with 'dominance and subservience,' suggesting that the themes in Pinter's work are associated with one particular aspect in Pinter's life, his Jewish heritage. Steven H. Gale discusses Pinter's themes, suggesting that they are all ultimately related. He makes reference to Bernard Dukore's analysis of Pinter's work, who describes Pinter's writing as "a picture of contemporary man beaten down by the social forces around him, based on man's failure to communicate with other men" (Dukore 17). The idea suggested by Dukore that Pinter's plays reflect a type of social oppression, can be traced back to Pinter's experiences in his youth.

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 experienced World War II and was shattered and scared. His childhood memories are a leitmotif for Pinter's whole career (Mskhaladze 390).

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 vivid image drawn by the tales of Hitler's Germany (Gale 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.

In Miriam Gross's interview, "Pinter on Pinter," Pinter discusses his suspicion of political structures and governments and the way that the government manipulates people for its own gain. His political point of view comes from his strong feeling about war. He states, "I felt very strongly about the war. And still do, if you see what I mean. After all, I wasn't a child by the time it ended; though I was when it began" (Gross 39). Pinter's reflections on war reveal that perhaps he has buried his childhood memories, only because they were too painful or difficult to live with. This repression is important to consider when analysing Pinter's work, especially since he was victim to anti-Semitism. Pinter's childhood, the most formative years of a person's life, has a strong influence on his playwriting. It is important to reiterate that many of the defining qualities of Pinter's plays are a result of the world that he grew up in. Pinter's experience as a minority Jewish person influenced his use of menace in his plays. Pinter not only uses language as a tool for creating menace, but also as a tool for survival. Pinter's plays are influenced by events and moments from his past, whether or not they are consciously recognisable. For example, his plays are noted for their use of silence and cryptic small talk. Pinter's major plays are usually set in a single room, whose occupants are threatened by forces or people whose precise intentions neither the characters nor the audience can define. Often these characters are engaged in a struggle for survival or control. It is arguable that Pinter's plays depict his lifelong awareness of the discrimination of a minority group, all due to his own victimisation as a Jewish person.

Susan Hollis Merritt notes Pinter's Jewishness in her article "Major Critics, Strategies, and Trends in Pinter Criticism." She states that Pinter's "repressed wishes and fears are extrapolated from characters' dramatized ones; his repressed ambivalence and anguish about his own Jewishness in an alien, hostile world motivates tensions and ambiguities characterizing human relationships with others in his plays" (Merritt 314).

His early plays were ones that represent a subconscious characterisation of the Holocaust. More importantly, the plays act as a political commentary on the way that power corrupts people. Pinter, if not aware during the war, would have been distinctly educated after the fall of the Nazi Regime that over two-thirds of the nine million Jewish people that lived in Europe in 1933 were dead by 1945. Although Britain was never occupied by the Nazi Regime during World War II, there was a strong anti-Semitic attitude prevalent in London, an attitude that forced the British

Jews to live in fear as well. Pinter's experience growing up in a political minefield would later manifest itself in his work, both creatively and politically (Halwas 7).

Pinter's Jewish origin, his painful war experiences, and childhood memories played a significant role in his 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. People did not feel safe anymore in the world they dwelt, especially after World War II. People had not forgotten holocaust horrors and their life was not secured from human evil and malice. The main causes for this cruelty were the heads of the states who did not 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 during Cold War tensions between western and eastern blocs. The world was before the threat of a 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. Pinter's early plays are discreetly 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 a political playwright. It is true that Pinter started writing plays in 1957 but the first play which is considered an overtly political was written after three decades in the 1980s. When Pinter started writing political plays, they were met by skepticism from the society. To begin with, public disapproved Pinter's decision to diverge from his traditional plays. They were doubtful about his political commitment and artistic autonomy. They believed it is not a playwright's obligation to write about politics. The public became uninterested in Pinter's play they thought it included political messages. However, what they did not realize was that Pinter's politics here did not 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 (Mskhaladze 391).

In domestic and international politics, Britain goes through significant changes; for instance, India's declaration of independence in 1947 blemished Britain's national strength and international reputation. Furthermore, as Peacock explains, "Chinese involvement in the Korean War of 1951 and Russia's blockading of Berlin in 1947 and its invasion of Hungary in 1956 inspired fear of Communist expansionism. Finally, most threatening of all was the adoption of the atomic bomb by both East and West. By 1956, Britain was socially and politically very different from what it had been in 1939" (7). All these events taken into consideration, controlling and surveillance

become the central issues of maintaining a stable economy and creating a working welfare state in the political arena. Michel Foucault's discussion of the birth of the prison and Jeremy Bentham's design of the Panopticon will be correlated regarding the social conditions in terms of domestic and international affairs during the post-War years Britain.

Another reason Pinter's political turn is that the attacks he was subjected to in the public press were especially strong at the height of Thatcherite Britain, and the criticism he received from his scholarly admirers, were both entirely predictable. Pinter was exposed to personal and critical censure from reviewers, critics due to his public image as a politically engaged author.

The critiques of postmodern theorists have forced a crisis in locating and approaching the substance of politics. As Frederic Jameson has written, the cultural realm has explosively merged with the social, so that now, the political as a category, is dispersed throughout culture, art, philosophy, and lifestyles, rather than being traditionally found in the realms of governmental and political institutions and power relationships (48). This public level of power forms the basic thematic material of Pinter's political theatre (Grimes 3-5).

The Cold War and early post-Cold War era in which Pinter turned to politics is an ironic moment given the current status of politics, of the prospects for historical change, and even of the very notion of history. Power is always a defining element of human relationships. Indifference of others allows power and cruelty to function. Conflicts become battles for survival of identity and self, and struggles over protected, protective spaces and rooms are ever present. Victimisation, hierarchy, terror, ostracisation of individuals, and interrogations which are so close to torture intensely recur in Pinter's dramatic output since its beginnings, and they are prominent in plays not first thought political, such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. (Grimes 6-7)

Pinter's works have travelled through time and space. As his characters are meant to be portrayed as room dwellers who secure themselves against any danger or harm in his earlier plays in the late 1950s, his characters in the 1980s moved from the domestic sphere in to the public sphere. This domestic sphere in which post-war stricken and especially Holocaust victims take shelter in order to ensure their safety is the epitome of enclosed spaces depicted by Pinter. Pinter's "rooms" represent escape from the threat, menace or any hazardous attack because the horror outside threatens their life. The menace outside is dreadful and those who hold the power are those who inflict violence. These threatening interveners in the earlier plays turn into oppressive governors in his late plays. This domestic sphere turns into a universally oppressive space filled with violence, rape, death and surveillance. In his late plays, it is seen that the dramatised space in Pinter's late plays has been widened both literally and figuratively. The image of "room" is superseded by the global cities and foreign

countries as the locus of oppression and the centre of political power. His late stage goes beyond the world of the theatre and becomes a sharply political scene in 1980s.

Discussion

One of Harold Pinter's overtly political plays, *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), reflects the violence, political oppression and cruelty through the character of Rebecca. Her memories particularly resonate with the Holocaust and her dreamlike visions and inhumane treatments towards herself show her excessive and compulsive concern. The play occurs in the past and it shows how it constructs reality in the present. However, Rebecca's precarious memory distorts reality, and instead provides the audience with versions of different realities. This unreliability in her memory calls into question her assertion to the atrocities narrated in the play. *Ashes to Ashes* emphasizes the brutality, violence, torture and oppression observed throughout the world history, which haunts the conscience of humanity reflected in the character of Rebecca. In this sense, the play seems to be evocative of the Holocaust as it creates the same sense of responsibility for human suffering in the past and warns the audience about the possibility of acts of oppression and violence taking place in their other countries that seem to be far away from the atrocities performed in the play. She narrates those visions to a man named Devlin, who plays the multiple roles of her husband and/or lover, therapist and torturer:

REBECCA I walked out into the frozen city. Even the mud was frozen. And the snow was a funny colour. It wasn't white. Well, it was white but there were other colours in it. It was as if there were veins running through it. And it wasn't smooth, as snow is, as snow should be. It was bumpy. And when I got to the railway station I saw the train. Other people were there.

Pause.

And my best friend, the man I had given my heart to, the man I knew was the man for me the moment we met, my dear, my most precious companion, I watched him walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.

Silence. Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4, pp. 395-433

It can be acknowledged that there is an echo of Auschwitz in the image of the 'railway station' and the 'tear[ing]' of 'the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers'. However, by having a mentally driven insane woman evoke these scenes, Pinter seems to suggest that Rebecca cannot express her suffering and also her speech indicated the sheer irrationality and meaninglessness. It is crucial in this connection is Devlin's insisting on interrogating Rebecca:

Now let me say this. A little while ago you made ... shall we say ... you made a somewhat oblique reference to your bloke ... your lover? ... and babies and mothers, et cetera. And platforms. I inferred from this that you were talking about some kind of atrocity. Now let me ask you this. What authority do you think you yourself possess

which would give you the right to discuss such an atrocity? *Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4*, pp. 413

Pinter here presents a sexist discourse to suffering – a gendered discourse of the response that counters the affective-feminine response of Rebecca. (Irigaray, p. xii.) Devlin subjugated Rebecca to a kind of inquiry: ‘I’m compelled to ask you questions. There are so many things I don’t know. I know nothing ... about any of this. Nothing. I’m in the dark. I need light’. (*Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4*, pp. 399) It is important to note that the masculine, or hyper-masculine, character of Devlin’s interrogation entails not only a desire to master Rebecca’s mind but also to conquer her body:

DEVLIN *goes to her. He stands over her and looks down at her.*

He clenches his fist and holds it in front of her face. He puts his left hand behind her neck and grips it. He brings her head towards his fist. His fist touches her mouth. (Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4, pp. 428)

Pinter, who tends to create the image of a safe room, has eliminated the safe environment with violence and menace in this play. Devlin’s physical aggression is here highlighted by Rebecca’s pervious body, as suggested by her being not only sexually penetrated – ‘So your legs were opening?’ – but also psychically penetrated. (*Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4*, pp. 397) She completely loses her sense of self as she identifies with one of the mothers in her visions who was forced to give away her baby:

REBECCA I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl ECHO my shawl

REBECCA And I made it into a bundle

ECHO a bundle

[...]

REBECCA But the baby cried out

ECHO cried out

REBECCA And the man called me back

ECHO called me back

REBECCA And he said what do you have there

ECHO have there

REBECCA He stretched out his hand for the bundle

ECHO for the bundle

REBECCA And I gave him the bundle

ECHO the bundle

REBECCA And that's the last time I held the bundle

ECHO the bundle

Silence. Ashes to Ashes in Pinter: Plays 4, pp. 429

By narrating this haunting vision of infantile loss in the first person, Rebecca does not so much appear to bear witness to loss as to experience it. Moreover, Pinter seems to explore feminine subjectivity as an alternative to the masculine subjectivity that so dominates the world he represents, the world of political reality. What can be observed in this feminine subjectivity is insecurity and uncertainty.

Conclusion

In *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter goes beyond time and space, not only limited to England, but also reveals the occupation of citizens of Jewish origin living in European lands, and the spiritual and psychological movements of the people of that period of the brutality experienced in the 1940s. In addition, Pinter, who has generally transitioned to the public sphere in his political plays, has moved away from the domestic sphere and has begun to focus on global themes in international space. The Holocaust, which had an impact on people with the effects of the Second World War, induced deliriums and delusions on people and Pinter portrayed these effects with pauses in his plays and memories that cannot be distinguished whether they are real or illusory.

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