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Lacanian Analysis of Harold Pinter's the Birthday Party

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Abstract:

In this article my aim is to show how Harold Pinter's play The Birthday Party can be read through Lacanian lens. Both of them prioritize language. Lacan emphasizes on the centrality of language and how language dominates the characters in their different stages –the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. I will try to show how the characters of the play become the victims of language and how they are entrapped in the three stages for their misrecognition or misinterpretation of language. Their gradual change in the process of need, demand and desire is also a vital point of this paper.

Keywords: Pinter, lacan, language, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real stage, need-demand-desire, signifier-signified.

Pinter's characters are afraid of the outer world and they prefer staying in an alien room to be secured. This room can be considered as the mother's womb where a child is safe from the outer hazards. It symbolizes the mother-child relationship. A child is always afraid to be born. It wants to be protected into the mother's body and after the birth the infant demands to be provided its basic needs, and the process continues until the infant communicates the demands via language. When the child enters into the language stage, it becomes clear that it is the time for the child to be separated from its mother. In the case of Pinter's characters, their getting out of the room is similar to the child's separation from the mother. From Lacanian point of view this is the child's integration into the symbolic order. The child is afraid to face the world and to accept the rules of the world or the rules of the language.

While the room symbolizes the mother, some symbols represent the father figure also. This is another Lacanian aspect because Lacan gives emphasis on the Law, the father figure. Though Pinter's plays are ruled by male characters, the presence of women is also felt thoroughly even at the background. Many times Goldberg recalls his mother and wife and 'a beautiful girl'. With the references of these women the picture of Goldberg's physical and mental growth become clear. His adolescent love is referred in this line: "...I'd leave her with a little kiss on the cheek—I never took liberties". His love for his mother and for his wife, and the similar kind of behaviour of the both that hints the Oedipus complex, are noteworthy when he says:

"There's no comparison. Up the street, into my gate, inside the door, home. "Simey!" my old mum used to shout, "quick before it gets cold." And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate."

And

"I had a wife. What a wife..... "Simey," my wife used to shout, "quick, before it gets cold!" And there on the table what would I see? The nicest Piece of roll-mop and pickled cucumber, you could wish to find on a plate."

The Birthday Party opens in a room where Stanley, the central protagonist lives as a guest. This room is like a mother's womb where the child is secure; it feels safe. It is useless to say that Stanley is the child. In Lacanian term he is now in the Imaginary stage. After a while Stanley's morning slumber is disturbed by Meg, the mother figure of Stanley. Now the secured place is disturbed. It is like the birth of the child. As after the birth the infant demands to be provided its basic needs, in The Birthday Party the basic needs which have their roots in the Imaginary stage are demanded. Food is one such needs. Stanley says: "No breakfast. (Pause) All night long I've been dreaming about this breakfast." The 'dreaming' of Stanley is a child's unconscious need. But when the food is served to him it seems "horrible" to him. This is a problem which is centered on repression. A repressed desire comes out in dream. The breakfast for Stanley symbolizes his repressed desires. So, food stands for basic desires and also for repressed desires. If we go through the text of the play we will see that Stanley is repressed twice –earlier his artist soul was repressed and then his isolated entity by Goldberg and McCann. Again, Stanley's objection against the arrival of the two gentlemen and against the sharing of the house is like an infant's refusal to lose or share his or her mother. Goldberg shows the same attitude. Though his first name is Nat, his mother called him 'Simey'. But when McCann calls him 'Simey' he reacts violently and asks not to call him by that name. He refuses to share his mother.

Lacan says: "Need is biological; it can be satisfied." (Sarup 67). All these needs are transformed into demands and the infant communicates the demand via language. When the child enters into the language stage the child is separated from its mother. Lacan's central assumption was that any speaking being has to undergo to place himself or herself as a member of the symbolic order. As language exists before the birth of the subject, the subject has to be subjugated to its rules.

Stanley can not go through the process of language in proper order. So he is victimized by language.

Lacan's theory of language's role in formation of subjectivity is seen when Stanley is forced to submit to the law of an unknown institution of which Goldberg and McCann are agents. He cannot escape from his destruction. It is similar to the castration of a child. This castration is symbolized by the breaking of Stanley's glasses and his toy-drum. The artist soul of him which was half-alive is now totally destroyed. His bondage with the family is also going to be broken. Before the mental torture made by Goldberg and McCann, Stanley had a false assumption similar to that of a child in front of a mirror. In its mirror stage a child constitutes an idealized ego. Richard Feldstein says in his article called "The Phallic Gaze of Wonderland":

"In the mirror s/he is presented with a gap between viewer and viewed, the assumption of which position is crucial to the development of personality". (159)

This gap did not make Stanley realize his fragmented body due to his idealized ego, which misleads subjects into the idea that he or she is a unified entity. By the Interrogation of Goldberg and McCann Stanley's unified self image is threatened. He is trapped under the destructive effect of language. Goldberg and McCann, two mysterious intruders use language skillfully over Stanley and the other characters as a means of power or menace. A Lacanian line of reading emphasizes the centrality of language. It is not society that dominates the individual, but language dominates each speaking member even before their birth. He is more powerful who can use language more skillfully. Lacan defines speaking members of society as signifiers. On the other hand, Lacan makes it clear that signified is not related to hearing but reading. Hearing is related to signifier. So, the only choice for the subject is to hear the signifier and then get the effect of it. Otherwise the subject will be trapped in between the three stages—the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Here, Stanley is not able to surrender to the signifier or the command of language and he is captivated under a power. This extract is an example of Stanley's such inability:

STANLEY (abruptly) : How would you like to go away with me?
 LULU : Where?
 STANLEY : Nowhere. Still we could go.
 LULU : But where could we go?
 STANLEY : Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It Wouldn't matter.
 LULU : We might as well stay here.
 STANLEY : No. It's no good here.
 LULU : Well, where else is there?
 STANLEY : Nowhere.

Stanley's inability to posit himself in the Symbolic order hints that he did not go through the infant stages in proper way. He did not obey the commands of language. That is why he can not insert himself into the world of human relation which is centered upon the mother figure and the Law. He refuses to respond to the sexual intimacy of Meg. There are insults, mockeries and negligence in his words towards Meg. This refusal of Stanley symbolizes his fear of castration.

The Lacanian concept is that in the course of a child's growing up the demand is transformed into desire. It is the desire for recognition. When desire comes, the subject enters into discourse. But the desire is always insatiable because desire shows a lack in the subject. This is the Real stage of the subject. Stanley tries to fill the lack to achieve wholeness but fails because of his separation from the mother. The desire for recognition and the result of misrecognition is a vital part of the play. Meg tries her utmost for her recognition; but it never reaches to fulfillment. Her recognition is repeatedly refuted. Stanley is harsh towards her in his verbal attack; with her wrong assumption she thinks that she was 'the belle of the ball'; she asks everybody about her cooking. Even she fails to recognize others. Mistakenly she asks her husband Petey: "Is that you Stan? (pause) Stanny?" Even Goldberg seemed to her like Stanley. Again, Stanley has been posited himself as the master of Meg with his dominant language, but ironically enough he himself became the slave of Goldberg and McCann. His position is transformed. Lulu recognized Goldberg as a lover and herself as a beloved, but after their love-making she, in her utter disillusionment, reveals him as a play-boy and herself a whore. Thus, again and again recognition is replaced by misrecognition.

The menace in Pinter's play can be interpreted as Lacanian Real. In the Real stage there is a constant clash between the ideas. A sense of security inhabits in the family and their security rests on the relationship between the family members. The relationship is based on language. And it is language which is a threat to the characters of Pinter's play and to the subjects of Lacan. Bernard F. Dukore explains this:

"Because events and actions are unexplained, and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems capricious or malevolent. One can rely upon nothing. What is apparently secure is not secure. A haven does not protect... Linguistic absurdity may suggest the absurdity of the human condition."

What is haven for Dukore is language for Lacan. Pinter's characters can not catch the multiple dimension of language, thus they suffer from psychological lack. To them language appears as an ambiguous powerful weapon to dominate, and the characters struggle to get rid of the unknown power. And at last they submit and feel lost. The power is the voice of the Real. Goldberg's advice to McCann shows the significance of the command of language: "Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line...you can't go wrong". As they do not follow the line Pinter's characters have some developmental disorders. They suffer from psychosis or neurosis. Stanley's neurotic disorder is obvious as he can't posit himself into the Oedipus relationship. He is not interested to women in his normal sense. He does not like to make any friendly relationship with Lulu. In his utmost depression, not guided by the sexual desire, he prefers to rape her. Like Stanley McCann displays symptoms of neurosis. He has obsessional neurosis. He tears newspapers into strips. He makes plans and cancels them. He is not sure about the fact

that the task he has been given to execute is good or bad. It is like Hamlet's procrastination of killing the king. Goldberg also has a neurotic disorder of split-personality. His two names –Nat and Simey suggest his two personalities. He is a caring son and loving husband and also a cold blooded criminal. At a time, even he is confused about his position. He says: "I don't know why, but I feel knocked out. I feel a bit.....It's unknown for me." In this context Lacan's question is noteworthy as it shows a subject's effort to reach his or her identity in the symbolic order:

" 'I have been this only in order to become what I can be': if this were not the permanent high point of the subject's assumption of his own mirages, in what sense would this constitute progress?"

Goldberg and Stanley both are obsessed with their past. They live in their happy memories. Their recalling of past events symbolizes human longing for going back to the infant stage where there is no lack. And Pinter says: "Memory does not always tell the truth." So memory can be falsified and misleading as well. And it may trap a subject in between the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real Order.

To conclude I may say that Pinter's use of language, pauses, silences, his settings and his character sketches bring him very close to Lacan. They both give focus on language –how it is used. Pinter uses day-to-day language and shows how language can control the power and govern the society. Lacan also says that language is the main constituent element to form the identity of a person and he is more powerful who can use language more skillfully.

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