

## THE ART OF TAKING AWAY IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER: AN APPROACH

Mithun Dutta

Research Scholar

Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

### ABSTRACT

The plays of Harold Pinter are always self-revealing for their distinct characteristics in presenting the theatrical compositions of diverse complex issues of a new world order full of menace, tensions, insecurities and paradoxes. Sometimes a particular image or symbol like 'taking away' resonates throughout artistically to indicate multiple connotations that bring out the inner realities of an individual's predicament in contemporary situations. In Pinter's plays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*, it is reflective of the struggles and exploitations of an individual in a society through its various disciplinary strategies such as displacement, surveillance, dominance and reintegration. The recurrent image suggests a theatrical design that gives a hint of the playwright's latent political vision to draw our attention by concentrating on the inherent oppression and enforcement of an act of taking away.

**Keywords:** taking away, menace, displacement, oppression, reintegration etc.

Harold Pinter is one great playwright who has not only dominated the English stage after Samuel Beckett but makes a remarkable contribution as one of the seminal figures in the world's contemporary drama. The greatness of his plays or writings lies in the variety of themes and motifs that are unprecedented in the history of British drama as an artistic expression of man's complicity with the world around him and its politics. His plays are interpreted and researched from multiple points of view for their equivocal nature and open-endedness. But there are certain images and symbols which appear to be recurrent with a modified attitude that flows from one play to another. And this is realised when the American critic Pauline Kael once wrote that "Pinter's art is the art of taking away" (Billington: 315). The image of "taking away" is a bold and emblematic one that occurs frequently in Pinter's plays to express the theme of intrusion and oppression, imprisonment and betrayal, fear and anxiety hidden in the psyche of the characters who struggle to face the

contemporary world they inhibit. It becomes a strong metaphor metonymising the symbolic aspects of an apparently banal act that reverberates with its universal significances. Ezra Pound on aesthetic theory once wrote "It is better to present an image than to produce a voluminous work . . . An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Pound: "A Few Don'ts" 1918). It seems justifying that the image of 'taking away' has the capacity to reflect the complex innermost realities in Pinter's plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*.

The powerful image of 'taking away' comprises multiple layers of implications. Primarily it refers to a displacement, a dislocation from something or someone's fixed settlement. It is through this symbolic act of dispossession of one's own territory that creates a sense of menacing fear for territorial execution. It also exercises disciplinary actions to ensure the installation of a power structure that operates through its diverse distributions of strategic elements to produce social and political stability. Sometimes it tries to reintegrate into the prevalent system of those who have gone astray or have taken refuge to escape responsibilities that are imposed upon them. Thus the image of 'taking away' is menacing as well as disturbing in Pinter's plays as it threatens the sense of security from the hostile forces outside.

The symbolic image of 'taking away' can be sensed in Pinter's drama from his very first play *The Room*. Although there is no direct reference of this phrase in the play, it evokes sinister implications during several occasions as Rose assures herself to be safe in the room from all kind of dangers in the basement and outside. She claims "I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right . . . And we're not bothered. Nobody bothers us" (Plays One: 87). She also suggests some directions that would lead to achieve utter satisfaction and happiness like her: "We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean, why should I? We've got our room. We don't bother anyone else. That's the way it should be" (99). But her apparent self-confidence is shattered very next when she meets an aged couple - Mr. and Mrs. Sands - who tells her about a mysterious man living in the basement and who also informed them that there is a vacant room in the house that strangely coincides with the same room Rose lives in. A sense of fear for invasion and displacement immediately strikes in her mind as she remarks "This room is occupied" (102). The psychological fear that begins to loom large in Rose's mind is externalised when she is compelled to confront the mysterious man in the basement at the insistence of the landlord Mr. Kidd. As she faces Riley - a blind Negro - initially she refuses to recognise him and accuses him for disturbing her peaceful life she has earned in the room. But as he reveals her past - her father, her home and her nickname Sal, she appears to become more intimate with him until

he passionately urges her "Come home now, Sal" (109).

When her husband Bert arrives and gives a detailed account of his driving experience with a woman in curious prurient language, he encounters the Negro after watching him for some moments and derogatorily reducing him as "Lice" (110). He strikes the Negro, knocks him down and then repeatedly kicks his head against the gas stove. The Negro lies still as he departs and Rose exclaims "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (110). Her final cry is a sign of her identification with the blind Riley. Bert's immediate reaction by assaulting Riley physically provides a clue that connects his seemingly odd behaviour to the thematic relevance of 'taking away'. He resists in his own way the outsider's attempt to take her away to the same place from where she has perhaps escaped with him. So 'taking away' is also relevant to Bert who feels insecure the moment he faces Riley posing as a redemptive figure who demands Rose to reconcile and reintegrate with her past. His lack of confidence and a strong masculine jealousy in securing Rose provoke him to thrash the blind Riley as an act of resistance to his apprehension of taking her away.

It is Pinter's next play *The Birthday Party* in which the recurring image of 'taking away' receives more direct and artistic treatment with its various symbolic connotations. At the beginning of the play Stanley frightens Meg by telling that they are coming in a van with a wheelbarrow and they are looking for someone. Here 'they' are none but the mysterious and anonymous forces outside that produce a sense of menace for imprisonment and dislocation. When Stanley becomes more particular "Shall I tell you who they're looking for?" (18), Meg persuades him not to concentrate on its specific target, rather she dismisses his account by calling him a liar. It is the acuteness of her psychological fear that undercuts her apparent negation and her desire to change the topic. Her assumed complacency and self-congratulatory attitude are in sharp contrast to her intense feeling of insecurity and nervousness. It suggests that Pinter's plays seem very cool and serene on surface while there exists always the presence of some disturbing forces inside – "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet" (Plays Three: Introduction) – an earlier comment about his plays Pinter has made that he regrets later. And the irony lies in the fact that it is not Meg rather Stanley who will be targeted, interrogated, victimized and finally taken away for his "special treatment" by two mysterious outsiders.

In the final scene after Stanley is verbally tortured and made almost speechless to communicate his feeling, Goldberg and McCann decide to escort him with them in his altered look - well dressed in dark suit and white collar, and clean-shaven. His final appearance is suggestive of the oppressive metamorphosis he has undergone in order to neutralize and reintegrate his obstreperous instincts into

social and political conformity. But it is Petey who questions the motives of the two outsiders when they intend to take Stanley away from the house. Although he can't do much to prevent Stanley's final departure when Goldberg claims that they are taking him to Monty for "special treatment" (79) and also invites him to join them as there's plenty room in the car, Petey's final words are an emblem of resistance though weak and mild in Pinter's plays - "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do" (80). The unspecified identity of Monty to whom Stanley is taken away and the ominous smell of "special treatment" create an atmosphere of menace. It implies Monty as the head of the organisation in which Goldberg and McCann work as agents and the 'special treatment' to be a kind of oppressive strategy through which Stanley will be rehabilitated into social and moral compliance. So the play's final image of taking away of Stanley by two intrusive outsiders to their more authoritative chief becomes a key motif in understanding the play's inherent power hierarchy and its sinister implications.

Pinter's next most discussed work *The Homecoming* is considered as a remarkable departure from his earlier plays generally designated as "comedies of menace". But the play also employs the image of 'taking away' very powerfully in a particular scene that intensifies its symbolic significance to understand the play's overall implications. After returning with her husband to his home where all members are males, Ruth for the first time confronts Lenny, her husband's younger brother who gives his two different narratives of his attitude towards woman - in both of which he exploits women as a pimp or treats harshly. While Lenny's first fanciful story describes an encounter with a pox-ridden whore who was finally turned down by him as she was trying to take liberties and falling apart with her disease, his another story is about an old lady who was seeking his help on an ebullient occasion of snow-clearing that ends with undue atrocities. It is important to note that his first story reveals an act of cruelty against a younger woman, a whore and his second story depicts brutality to an old lady, a motherly figure. It suggests the conventional understanding of women by Lenny as a part of male dominated household in two terms - either whores or mothers. But Ruth is a strong woman who cannot accept the traditional roles that are imposed on her by the patriarchal system. Her identity as a wife, mother and most importantly as a whore subverts her position in the male household in which she becomes dominant by controlling and fulfilling the masculine desires. And such implications move to its climax when Lenny warns her to call him with the name given by his mother and asks her to give him the glass of water next to her, Ruth begins to tease him constantly:

LENNY: Just give me the glass.

RUTH: No.

*Pause.*

LENNY: I'll take it then.

RUTH: If you take the glass . . . I'll take you.

*Pause.*

LENNY: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH: Why don't I take you?

*Pause.*

LENNY: You're joking

*Pause. (Palys Three: 42).*

The apparently comical scene has certain serious designs that have signalled some broader aspects for the rest of the play. This is not just a battle for authority in which Ruth ultimately succeeds to dominate all the males subsequently started with Lenny. It implicates her possible role in the household that she is going to perform. It is an impression Ruth gives through her introduction to Lenny that she has the capacity unlike the women he exploits and tortures to control him by fulfilling his desires he has been deprived of. Perhaps she implies that if she has to play in the household of both mother and whore she will use her sexuality as a weapon than a total surrender to secure an apex position for herself within the patriarch. She can provide all the members emotional favour that they aspire but only at the cost of their total agreement to the terms she finally dictates. She is willing to offer the glass filled with emotional needs to one who demands it, but at the same time she has the power to take him in her confidence and total control. And it frightens Lenny when he understands the implied meaning of her speech. His inner fear of defeat and dispossession is further augmented by his deliberate attempt to describe her words as mere jokes. Lenny who appears dominant for his pride in the committed brutality against women is now challenged by invincible Ruth. She provokes him to sit in her lap and take a cool sip from the glass or lie on the floor so that she can pour it down his throat. She is ready to execute ambiguously her two roles - the affectionate mother and seductive mistress. When she asks Lenny "Why don't I just take you" (42), it suggests her self-conviction to insinuate herself in a completely alien situation that proves to be a shocking experience for Lenny who fears her arrival as an ominous sign of intrusion, defeat and degradation.

After the oppressive intrusion and battle is over with *The Homecoming* Pinter's focus shifts in the preoccupation with memory and his play *Old Times* is the climax of Pinter's 'memory plays' in which memory becomes a powerful strategy to assert the authority over the present. The play combines an evocation of powerful reminiscences with a seemingly naturalistic situation through a domestic conversation between husband and wife about a third character with whom the degree of intimacy is debated as both - the best friend and seductive mistress. After Anna admits before Deeley that his wife had always been a charming companion, she remembers her delightful days, those songs and her secret 'gaze' upon her friend. When Kate refuses to know the lines of that song Deeley has just mentioned, a fascinating exchange of lyrics continues between Anna and Deeley. And most interestingly, the phrase 'take away' consists of an important line of that song as it follows:

DEELEY (*singing to Kate*): You're lovely to look at, delightful to know . . .

ANNA: Oh we did. Yes, of course. We had them all.

DEELEY (*singing*): Blue moon: I see you standing alone . . .

ANNA: (*singing*): The way you comb your hair . . .

DEELEY (*singing*): Oh no they can't take that away from me . . .

ANNA (*singing*): Oh but you're lovely, with your smile so warm . . .

*Slight Pause.*

DEELEY (*singing*): I've got a crazy for me. She is funny that way.

ANNA (*singing*): You are the promised kiss of springtime.

DEELEY (*singing*): And someday I'll know that moment divine,

When all the things you are, are mine!

*Slight Pause.*

..... (265)

The song appears as a competition in which Deeley struggles to formulate images from his memory spontaneously to challenge Anna's demand over Kate. His emphasis on nobody can take her away from him expresses his weakness and a sense of insecurity that he can't rule out so easily. His masculine affection and possessiveness seem incompetent to counter Anna's poetic approbation for Kate. When the song ends Deeley tries to fill the silence with an engagement of subjective memory. He remembers his first meeting with Kate in a cinema during a film-show called *Odd Man Out* that ironically refers to his own situation. He describes his condition inside the cinema: "I would say I was at the dead centre of the auditorium. I was off centre and have remained so" (268). He emphasizes the

moment when she looked at him after he introduced a character Robert Newton and then he picked her up to a café where they sat with tea and discussed Robert Newton. He strongly presumes that “So it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart” (268). It suggests his lack of strength to combat Anna’s claim that grows stronger. His deliberate attempt to intensify his masculine capacity to have rescued Kate by taking her away from the hostile environment makes Kate as central to his narrative. But his own position was and it still remains off centre that symbolically indicates his own disappointments as being peripheral to Kate’s world, an odd man out. The fight over Kate between Deeley and Anna continues and it is further intensified when another song is introduced sometimes later in a different situation while Kate exits to take her bath inside leaving Deeley and Kate alone on stage:

DEELEY (*singing*): The way you wear your hat . . .

ANNA (*singing softly*): The way you sip your tea . . .

DEELEY (*singing*): The memory of all that . . .

ANNA (*singing*): No, no they can’t take that away from me . . .

Kate turns from the window to look at them

ANNA (*singing*): The way your smile just beams . . .

DEELEY (*singing*): The way you sing off key . . .

ANNA (*singing*): The way you haunt my dreams . . .

DEELEY (*singing*): No, no, they can’t take that away from me . . .

ANNA (*singing*): The way you hold your knife . . .

DEELEY (*singing*): The way we danced till three –

ANNA (*singing*): The way you’ve changed my life –

DEELEY (*singing*): No, no, they can’t take that away from me. (295-296)

Thus, the image of ‘taking away’ is vibrant and recurrent in the dramatic world of Harold Pinter. It becomes a powerful symbol that remains crucial to understand the core issues in Pinter such as dislocation and dispossession, invasion and evacuation, dominance and subservience, anxiety and punishment. Whether direct or indirect, the image of ‘taking away’ is frequent in Pinter’s entire career be it his early plays, memory plays and his last plays that are overtly political. The image becomes emblematic to incorporate into his plays an artistic combination of personal and political, domestic and global, banal and philosophical extending the horizon of Pinter’s drama with universal resonances. Such an image invites the readers and the audience continuously to contemplate on its thematic

relevance in the entire theatrical design that deals with the characters' motives, actions, desires and dilemmas – whether to retreat with nostalgic recollections or dare to confront the world full of existential angst and menacing terror. If they have decided to retire in a seemingly secure place there is no escape as the outside forces will encroach their territories to demand relentless submission and if needed, they will be taken away for better rehabilitation. Sometimes the forces are not from outside but the externalization of some psychological fears that arise from a deep feeling of anxiety, loss and failure to protect one's own territory from trespassing interventions.

Pinter's plays include certain symbols and metaphors that are indispensable to understand the crux and the quintessence of his dramatic milieu that embodies a vast range of contemporary themes and innovative techniques. The image of 'taking away' becomes one significant motif that directly links to the disorder and dismay of the unconscious. The use of this emblematic connotation in his plays either straightforward or circumlocutory enriches the scope and realms of Pinter's drama through his unique experimentation with the art of theatrical creation. It expands the boundaries of definitions and perspectives by providing a meta-theatrical situation that every individual experiences while trying to find meaning to his or her existence. With its symbolic preciseness and meaningful reinforcement the powerful image of 'taking away' tries to bridge the gap between artistic creation and interpretation, dramatic explicitness and incoherence, aesthetics and politics, representation and identification in the plays of Harold Pinter. Much like Ezra Pound, it becomes a poetic image that continuously invites us to explore new meanings and approaches that establish all possible relations to understand Pinter's theatre as a whole.

#### REFERENCES

- Billington, Michael. Harold Pinter. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. Print.
- Cahn, Victor L. Gender and Power in the plays of Harold Pinter. Eugene: Resource Publications. 1993. Print.
- Harold, Pinter. Harold Pinter: Plays One. London: Faber and Faber, 1991. Print.
- Harold Pinter: Plays Three. London: Faber and Faber, 1996. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. Pavannes and Divisions. New York: Knopf. 1918. Print.