

A STUDY OF MENACE AND VIOLENCE OF UNSPECIFIC FORCES IN *THE CARETAKER*

Dr. Mangesh R. Adgokar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

G. S. Tompe Arts, Commerce & Science College, Chandur Bazar

Abstract:

Harold Pinter is considered as one of the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the twentieth century. He is not influenced by the writer like Kafka, Beckett and Hemingway and the repertory experience, but the menacing environment of England after Second World War in which he is grown up and the experience of the middle class insecure life inculcate in him a permanent mark of a sense of the unspecific forces that gives him stimuli to write his plays. The concept of menace goes hand in hand with certain human feelings like fear, insecurity and hopelessness. Menace refers to an intrigue and sinister, feeling of characters who have unspecified motive to overpower others. It may appear in a number of ways - physical, psychological and mental. Pinter presents life in his plays trapped by the surrounding menace and 'an atmosphere of menace' which changes the life style of his characters. It is because of menace, his characters do not leave the room. They feel safe and secure in the closed room. Stanley remains in his seaside boarding house, Davies expects to live with Aston and Ruth is only character who tries to defend the menace. The present paper is an attempt to study of menace and violence of unspecific forces in *The Caretaker*.

Keywords: The Caretaker, Davies, Mick, Aston, menace, violence, room

Introduction:

Harold Pinter's thought of dramatic manifestation of menace in his plays is represented in the room where the man shrouds from the unknown forces of outside it. The composite dramatic image of his plays reveals that the life of individual is dominated by an imposed systematic menace which begins with invasion of intruders in the room. Pinter's early plays were called 'comedies of menace' by Irving Wardle, 'but the roots of this menace lay not with an unspecified or cosmic fear of disaster, but with the real threat of physical violence.' The menace in his plays 'operates on three levels, of physical violence, of the labyrinthine problems set by the outside world and of the dreaded loss of emotional security.' Martin Esslin finds that the real menace in Pinter's plays 'lies behind the struggles for expression and communication, behind the closed doors which might swing open to reveal a frightening intruder, behind the sinister gunmen and terrorists, behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself.'⁽⁵¹⁻⁵²⁾ According to Asli Tekinay, menace is the ultimate principle of life in his plays. He says that if the room is the protective womb, then the embryo rejects the traumatic experience of birth fearing that menace is the ultimate principle of life, while at the same time it is curious to know what the outside world of like. Critics like Martin Esslin, Arnold P. Hinchliffe, and Lucina Paquet Gabbard consider menace to be the hallucination of the guilty conscience of the characters. The menace the characters feel at the start of the play can be said to be real, because it proves to be true at the end. Though it is not possible to define its source in the beginning, it is all-pervasive and omnipotent throughout the plays.

Pinter no doubt influenced by the society in which he was grown up and which affected his day to day life more acutely and painfully because of his religion. Martin Esslin said that the existential fear in Pinter's plays is never just a philosophical abstraction, but it is ultimately based on the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London, of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler. His experience of violence makes him to invoke in the aggressions of his characters the innate cruelty and violence that lurks in humankind. Pinter also justifies his picture of violence in his plays in his interview with Bensky: 'The world is a pretty violent place, it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes our quite naturally. It means to me an essential and inevitable factor.[...] The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays. [...] I wouldn't call this violence so much as a battle for positions, it's a very common, everyday thing.'

There are only three male characters in *The Caretaker*, and at certain points there is intimidation between all of them. Possible anxiety is suggested at the very beginning when Mick leaves the stage before Aston enters with Davies. There is clearly a strange relationship between the two brothers. Davies seems ill at ease but gradually relaxed by Aston's kindness. However, Davies then adeptly questions him about the nature of the room, the neighbouring blacks, the half open window, the junk, the disconnected gas-stove. His snoring and gibbering in the night upset Aston and deprive him of sleep. The tramp's response is aggressive and he views Aston with increasing incomprehension. Pinter no longer deals with unexplained physical violence in *The Caretaker*, but he stresses more on the psychological violence and menace instead. Arlene Sykes says in this regards:

"In *The Caretaker* there is no longer explained mystery and no actions which cannot be accounted for in terms of familiar human motive. No longer is the menace a mysterious agent from without, or even a passive catalyst before whom the hero destroys himself; now Pinter sees the inhabitants of the room menacing the authority of each other, in their search for personal security.'

Davies' constant fear of a hostile world is reflected in his account of actual experience in the café, monastery and later of his dual name. 'They'd find out, they'd have me in the nick. (25) He beguiles Aston by his story of ill-treatment outside the world. His fears and prejudices concerning blacks, Greeks, Poles and foreigners are less his feeling of insecurity and more the menace from them because they treat him like dirt. When Aston coughs after fastening his trousers in the next morning, Davies wakes up suddenly in a terror of the unknown. The haven has become as frightening as the outside world:

DAVIES: What? What's this? What's this?

ASTON: It's all right.

DAVIES: (*staring*) What's this?

ASTON: It's all right.

DAVIES *looks about*.

DAVIES: Oh, yes.

ASTON *goes to his bed, picks up the plug and shakes it.* (28)

Aston couldn't sleep in the night because of the noise, a kind of jabbering that Davies supposed to be made in his sleep. Davies is upset to discover that he was groaning and jabbering in his sleep. He denies his claim arrogantly and vehemently blaming Blacks for the noise. He is constantly in fear to disclose his identity which stands between two names one that assumed and another of which document he kept in Sidcup before fifteen years. Aston asks him innocent question about his nationality, but he considers it as 'potential threats with ulterior motives.' Davies prevaricates and doesn't want to provide information about him. He is in fear that someone might use his dual identity to harm him. It is not difficult for him to remember his birth place, but he is not intended to reveal it anybody. Later Aston left the room leaving Davies alone. He opens and closes the door many times and each time looks out and turns swiftly. Lastly he locks the door with fear. He examines every object of the room. Martin Esslin expresses the terror of him. 'Davies is frightened by the electric fire, and the old gas stove, which is not even connected to the mains. When he is left alone in the room, Pinter has again succeeded in establishing, out of Davies' lack of self-confidence and his nervousness about the menace of these objects, an atmosphere of threat, mystery and horror.'(96) Mick enters the room silently watching Davies' inspection of the objects. The stage direction suggests that Mick threatens Davies with physical violence. Arnold Hinchliffe says that 'violence becomes the practical jokes played by Mick on Davies.'

Davies: Uuuuuuuuhhh! Uuuuuuuuhhh! What! What! What! Uuuuuuuuhhh!

MICK *swiftly forces him to the floor, with DAVIES struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring.* (41)

Mick seizes his hand and twists it, forces him to the floor. He gestures him to silence without giving him time to explain anything and then presses him down with his foot when he tries to rise. The first act ends with physical violence and direct interrogation on Davies, but the same interrogation continues in the second act which has similar type of menacing atmosphere. Mick repeats his questions thrice as if he didn't get them properly and pronounce it repeatedly after Davies as 'Jen ... kins' to create terror and fear for Davies. The tension between Mick and Davies is manipulated by the former and leaves him with fear. He verbally bullies him with two stories of his resemblance with certain persons which have meaningless conclusion. But when Davies tells him that he was brought here last night by the bloke, Mick changes his menacing tricks. He tries to convince him that everything belongs to him. He then points out to Davies that the bed he slept on last night was his mother's. When Davies, attempting to justify himself, declares that "she wasn't in it last night!" (52), Mick wrongly concludes that Davies was sexually involved with his mother and already tense atmosphere of the play reaches a dangerous

peak. By using technical real estate and banking jargon that Davies, quite obviously, does not understand, he only baffles and menaces him. His long description of the process for leasing his house threatens Davies. Even if Davies is not in a position to agree with contract of retable value, he menaces to get him in the nearest police station for arrest. 'Otherwise I've got the van outside, I can run you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving and stinking the place out.' (54) He continues with his interrogation and labels Davies as an old robber who is stinking the place out. But when Aston returns the room, Mick ends his menacing tone asking Aston about cracks on the roof. Aston brings with him Davies's bag to give him along with others belonging, but Mick doesn't allow Davies to get his bag. The game of bag begins with Mick's snatching it from Davies, but before it ends it passes rapidly from one of the characters to the next in endless round which not only a dumb show of menacing Davies, but also an indication of Davies' uncertain position in the room between two brothers. Davies gets his bag with the help of Aston, but the bag episode is also explicitly stated Davies' ubiquitous fear. When he realizes that Aston is desirous to keep him in the room, Mick being defeated before the stranger after bag episode without a word suddenly leaves the room.

Aston offers him the job of caretaker, but Davies being reluctant to do the actual implementation of the work doesn't plainly agree. He fears that anybody will come and ask him about his card which has only four stamps. His menace of unexpected intruders can be seen in his words, 'you don't know who might come up them front steps, do you? I got to be a bit careful.' ... 'they ring the bell called Caretaker, they'd have me in, that's what they'd do, I wouldn't stand a chance.' (68) Austin Quigley says that reiterating the multi-menaced nature of his and the consequent dangers of answering doorbells, he launches forth once more on his problems with insurance cards, unnamed agents and self-identification.

In the next scene Davies is in complete darkness, he tries to switch on the light in vain. He takes out matches from his pocket and lights it, but it goes out in a second. He searches the match box on the floor, but somebody kicks it. Davies stumbles breathing heavily and whimpers in fear. He sees the figure moving in the room.

Davies : Come on. Who's this? Who's this got my box?

Pause.

Who's in here?

Pause.

I got a knife here. I'm ready. Come on then, who are you?

He moves, stumbles, falls and cries out.

Silence.

A faint whimper from DAVIES. He gets up.

All right!

He stands. Heavy breathing.

Suddenly the Electrolux starts to him. A figure moves with it, guiding it. The nozzle moves along the floor after Davies, who skips, dives away from it and falls, breathlessly.

Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah! Get away-y-y-y-y!

The electrolux stops. The figure jumps on ASTON'S bed.

I'm ready for you! I'm ... I'm ... I'm! (70-71)

Later we are known that it is Mick who removes the light from the socket to plug the electrolux in it. He attacks Davies by pursing him around the darkened room with an electrolux to frighten him psychologically. Mick changes his tactics being friendly to ask him advice about his sluggish brother. He also promises him to offer the job of caretaker after giving the references. The shocking monologue of Aston at the end of the second act represents him as the victim of a medical treatment intended to 'live like the others'. Aston explains that he did try to resist but that his mother had signed he consent forms, and in an attempt to avoid treatment he tried to saw through bars and fights hospital personnel. Aston recounts the horror of his mental treatment which sounds like electric therapy. He tells it to Davies to empathy for his injustice in the past: 'They told me to get on the bed, and I knew they had to get me on the bed because if they did it while I was standing up they might break my spine. So I stood up and then one or two of them came for me, well, I was younger then, I was much stronger than I am now, I was quite strong then, I laid one of them out and I had another one round the throat, and then suddenly this chief had these pincers on my skull and I knew standing up, that's why I ... anyway, he did it.' (91) The shock treatment of Aston in the mental hospital maimed him mentally and physically. He keeps them responsible for his slow thought and headaches. Martin Esslin thinks that Aston's desperate effort to recollect bitter

experience in the mental hospital 'had been wildly heightened and exaggerated to form the subject matter of an entire play,' (104) but it the centre behind Aston's attitude and psychological approach towards the outside world. If it wouldn't happen with him, the play might not be engendered.

When Davies realizes that the owner of the flat is Mick and Aston is mere the sitting tenant, he turns against Aston to regain his security in the house. Davies complains to Mick about Aston's unfairly treatment to him and his strange behaviour with him. His irrational fear for unconnected gas stove right on the top of his bed is so frightening that he has to keep his eye on those taps every now and again. But later he told the same thing to Mick: 'What about this gas stove? He tells me it's not connected. How do I know it's not connected? Here I am, I'm sleeping right with it, I wake up in the middle of the night, I'm looking right into the oven, man! It's right next to my face, how do I know, I could be lying there in bed, it might blow up, it might do me harm! (95) His prejudice against Blacks in the beginning of the play turns into his fear for them who he is supposed to use lavatory and dirty the banisters. Even he menaces by Aston's long chat to himself. Aston wakes him pushing violently in the middle night on account of noise which he makes in his sleep. Further he says that Aston smiles at him while watching him, but he pretends to be asleep. He says, 'What the hell's he smiling at? What he don't know is that I'm watching him through that blanket. He don't know that! He don't know I can see him, he thinks I'm sleep, but I got my eye on him all the time through the blanket, see?' (101) The situation is funny enough, but the allusion to it is menacing on the side of Davies.

Davies gets confident after the offer of caretaker by Mick. His long speech against Aston is a grudge. He, annoyed at being wakened in the middle of the night threatens a benevolent person who provides him the place as a security, offers few bob and job of caretaker. He menaces him: 'All they got to do is get the word. They'd carry you in! They'd keep you fixed! They'd take one look at all this junk I got to sleep with they'd know you were a creamer. That was the greatest mistake they made, you take my tip, letting you get out of that place [...] You're half off! You can tell it by looking at you. Who ever saw you slip me a few bob? Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nuthouse! (107) Steven Gale said, 'Davies does become a menace to Aston's current mode of existence, however, and Aston is forced to throw out the man who would displace him in the security of the flat and in his relationship with his brother.'

The physical violence and brutality of Davies can be seen in his habit to carry knife with him for his safety in the insecure world. He twice pulls out his weapon quickly to protect him from impending menace. He draws knife first when Mick threatens with moving nozzle of electrolux along the floor after him in the darkness. The next time when Aston awakes him from sleep in the middle of the night because of his noise, he draws his knife from his back pocket. Later Aston calls him a stink and orders him to find somewhere, he points the knife at Aston's stomach and then to his chest. Aston doesn't move with his brutal and completely unpredictable act, it is Davies who is seen in his trembling hand and heavy breathing with fear. He doesn't hesitate to attack his benevolent protector who saved him from the violent attack of his fellow in the café. He doesn't realize the true nature of Aston rather he uses his innocent monologue of brutal treatment against him and tries every trick in the book to secure place in the house. Mick is right when he says him: 'Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. [...] You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time.' (119) This is the most pathetic condition of Davies where he is threatened calling again a wild animal for the word that always demoralized his living as dirt. Davies threatens the security of Aston, while Mick menaces Davies. Mick realizes the treachery of Davies against his brother. He rejects him from his dream palace and Aston expels him from his cluttered room because he becomes one of the most dangerous threats to his peace and security. But it is not the Aston who forces Davies out of the house, but as said by Martin Esslin, Mick plays the role of the snake to instigate Aston to banish Davies from his paradise. Even Steven Gale also agrees that Mick 'initiates a plan of attack whereby Aston will himself eventually reject the old man voluntarily and therefore will not turn against his brother for having banished his friend and so that banishment will not in itself make the tramp more appealing.

Pinter says about the ending of '*The Caretaker*' in his interview with Thompson, "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." He further becomes quite more explicit about the ending of this play: '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 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 using them before.' (2001)

Kenneth Pickering finds an obscure sense of threat in the entire play: “All the characters in *The Caretaker* feel threatened: Aston by the world outside and by the intrusion of Davies when he seeks to upset the social order; Davies, by authority, bureaucracy, the past, questions and by anything or anybody he doesn't understand; Mick, by Aston's introduction of Davies. Mick uses violence and language to threaten Davies; an obscure sense of threat from the outside broods over the entire play.”

Conclusion:

Pinter's *The Caretaker* is the universal experience of human beings to fight for life, for peace, for desire, for love and at the same time to avoid the fight. It expresses various elements of human conduct with their strength and weakness in the extreme situation of their life. He deals with the problems of the individual who is threatened by the outside world and hence lost his emotional security and secured place. They are the victims of conspiracies, the hostility of the organization and bullies. He emphasizes on the harassed victims of the social structure in *The Caretaker*. Personal happiness and seclusion are threatened by tensions between individuals or groups, forces him to play different roles and adopt the behaviour to suit a situation. The tensions may become compulsive fears in the life of the individual. Even the Nobel committee says about him that ‘Pinter uncovers the reasons for wanting to destroy the identity of others and the fear disguised as violence against those who stand outside the party, club or nation.’ Pinter derives the primary tension in his play by dealing with one of the most basic and primitive of human instincts—menace. His dramatic world has predominantly been a violent one in which the individuals are subjected to an unreasonable treatment of torture, caging and dehumanization. The man of his play is besieged by menace, turmoil of violence and isolation, as well as a state of hopelessness. The man in Pinter's play lives at the mercy of an unpredictable menace. The core of his drama is the withdrawal of him into himself and his defensive measure and reflexes. He exposes the presence of a menace which threatens, intimidates and destroys the individual, yet remains unidentified. In Pinter's *The Caretaker*, we find the existence of an unspecified menace as a universal predicament of mankind, which overpowers the individual and renders him completely helpless.

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