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PINTER AND BUDDHISM: A STUDY OF THE BUDDHIST CONCERN IN THE PLAY *THE
CARETAKER*

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ABSTRACT

The plays of Harold Pinter, particularly his early plays are generally considered as 'comedies of menace' and sometimes they are associated with the Theatre of the Absurd as they deal with the universal human existence in a contemporary world lurking with menacing horror and anxiety. Although Pinter is placed as a playwright who has extended and excelled in the genre of absurd drama after Samuel Beckett, his dramatic world is seldom identified with its connection to Buddhism in spite of his certain use of the statue of Buddha explicitly on stage. In the play *The Caretaker* a statue of Buddha, employed as a stage prop amidst the several bric-a-brac and finally thrashed into pieces, invites different outlooks to interpret his drama that always remains ambiguous and equivocal to establish a generalised meaning to the plays of Pinter.

Key Words: absurd drama, Buddhism, human existence, stage prop, ambiguous

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The paper intends to explore the possible implications and relevance of the statue of Buddha as one of the most important stage props that is destroyed into pieces at the end of Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker*. The playwright himself, when asked about the significance of the statue in his play, refuses to answer in clear terms and remarks quite sarcastically that the Buddha is a Buddha. Although several books are written on Pinter, it is nowhere mentioned of his connection with the ideas of Buddhism. Unlike his great literary predecessor Samuel Beckett who is sometimes congruously associated with the Zen philosophy of Buddhism for his existential dilemmas that are crucial in understanding his writings especially his fictions, Pinter has never accepted the influence of Buddhism in his dramatic world though he uses a statue of Buddha explicitly on stage. Therefore it becomes quite challenging for the critics and readers to decipher the intentions behind the statue of Buddha as a stage prop in the play. In order to find out the inherent meanings that are deployed through the statue of Buddha, one must consider the context and the circumstances in which it is placed and used. A thoughtful reading of the play can lead to certain clues that might be instrumental for understanding the thematic as well as the metaphorical significance of the presence of the figure of Buddha in the play.

The play *The Caretaker* is not just a play about the mutual fraternal love falling apart after the intrusion of a strange old tramp in the realm of two brothers who are finally reconciled by their mutual understanding while engaging themselves in a common intrigue to expose and deprive the credibility of an itinerant old tramp. Rather the play, as usual in Pinter, remains ambivalent from the very beginning if the attention is drawn at the typical stage direction with a number of old and discarded junk scattered over. The first sight in the room with various clutters – a kitchen sink, a step-ladder, a coal-bucket, a lawn-mower, trolley, boxes, sideboard drawers, a gas stove, a statue of Buddha – depict the messy atmosphere that suggest that whoever lives in the room must be lonely, shabby, gloomy and disorganised. There are also a fireplace, a couple of suitcases, a rolled carpet, a blow-lamp, planks of wood, a small electric fire, a pile of old newspapers and a bucket hanging from the ceiling that have captured the remaining space of the room. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the Buddha statue with the apparently unrelated litter creates a sense of uncanny manipulating our curiosity to emphasize the inherent contrast that can be helpful in understanding the inner lives and motives of the inhabitants of the place.

The Caretaker is a play in three Acts with three characters. The elder brother Aston who works as a caretaker of his brother Mick's household is a mentally retarded but kind and affectionate to an old tramp Davies whom he has rescued from a deadly fight at a café. He brings the old man to his room and offers him shelter and shares his bed with him. He shows the hospitality towards a stranger by providing him not only his immediate physical needs but with the emotional support that the tramp mostly desires. But instead of showing any gratitude to the person who saved him, Davies continuously complains almost everything he is provided and tries to exploit the situation by taking advantages of his seemingly humble savior. He tries to contemplate how to get himself 'fixed up' and while talking about the affluence of furniture in the room he suddenly picks up the statue of Buddha and asks Aston about it:

Davies: What's this?

Aston (taking and studying): That's a Buddha

Davies: Get on.

Aston: Yes. I quite like it. Picked it up in a . . . shop. Looked quite nice to me. Don't know why. What do you think of these Buddhas?

Davies: Oh, they're all right, en't they? (Plays Two: 15)

It is understood that the statue of Buddha has been artistically deployed to accentuate certain implications about the characters in the play. It suggests a possible explanation of seemingly generous Aston to be identified with the statue of Buddha emblematic for human kindness. Or is there an ironic underpinning of his apparently humble and compassionate behaviour that makes a sharp contrast with his possible involvement in the intrigue with his brother Mick at the end of the play to victimize the old tramp? Besides his liking of the statue of Buddha may link his desire for 'liberation' from the mundane job he is assigned to perform as a caretaker or be the way seeking solace for the unjust and torturous treatment he is forced to receive in a mental hospital through the electric shock therapy after which he has become silent and less communicative. The statue of Buddha perhaps gives him an emotional relief to his unavoidable human sufferings and through which he believes to attain his 'nirvana', the highest level of emancipation. The impression of oddly arranged stage with a statue of Buddha produces a kind of hyperreal visual image that evokes the jumbled content of Aston's confused mind.

The dramatic economy of the play is that Aston's failure to decorate the room into a conventionally well-furnished living space not only reflects his own confused psyche but gives a sharp contrast with his brother Mick who appears to be more dominant and possessive. This apparently incoherent relationship between two brothers gives Davies an opportunity to betray Aston's kindness and flatter Mick trying to secure a position in the household for which he becomes utterly desperate. Initially Davies allows himself to insinuate himself into Aston's favour, but as he sees that Mick has the actual power of the situation as the real owner of the house he switches all his allegiance to Mick, offering himself as Mick's caretaker. Davies behaves like a sychophant who fails to realize the trap made by Mick through his various strategies in which he is easily duped. Mick's epistemological manoeuvring over the old tramp through blunt accusations like calling him a liar, a barbarian or an imposter, deprives and reduces him as a mere victim. He chooses finally to revert to the

fraternal allegiance that pertained before Aston brought Davies to the house that must have left the tramp devoid of any expectation to be fulfilled. Mick's rage at Davies culminates at the smashing of the statue of Buddha when he hurls it against the gas stove and says passionately:

THAT'S WHAT I WANT! . . . Anyone would think this house was all I got to worry about. I got plenty of other things I can worry about. I've got other things. I've got plenty of other interests. I've got my own business to build up, haven't I? I got to think about expanding . . . in all directions. I'm moving . . . all the time. I've got to think about the future. I'm not worried about this house. I'm not interested. My brother can worry about it . . . I'm not bothered. I thought I was doing him a favour, letting him live here. He's got his own ideas. Let him have them. I am going to chuck it in. (Plays Two: 72)

The gesture leads to the climax of the play and raises several questions that are to be dealt with utmost attention to establish a link that connects the relevance of this act and widens the spectrum in which the dramatic situation is artistically presented. By destroying the statue of Buddha Mick implies the complete destruction of the tramp who tries to problematize the relationship between the two brothers that both of them have enjoyed before Davies enters into their household. It also gives a warning to the meek brother Aston that if he tries to resist his role as a caretaker and Mick's authority over him he might face more disastrous consequences than he has undergone earlier while mentally incarcerated in a hospital. Therefore Aston is to approve Mick's intrigue against Davies and when the gullible tramp is made helpless he faintly smiles at his brother but he notices the broken pieces of the Buddha lying on the floor. Aston abstains from responding to the pleadings of the poor tramp to and looks indifferent to the old man in spite of his earnest appeal seeking his help to reinsinuate himself for his favour. Aston's initial humane nature, emblematic for the kindness of Buddha, strangely fades away at the ending as the Buddha turns into pieces. It not only suggests a sharp contrast but perhaps signifies that so long Buddha with his philosophy exists in this world the humanity will survive amidst all the odds and sufferings but if Buddhism is renounced and destroyed by human beings the world is to be doomed with an existential crisis engulfing the whole world devoid of human fellow-feeling.

What is more interesting is that though the statue of Buddha is employed directly in the play *The Caretaker* as a stage prop, Pinter as a playwright is never associated with the philosophy of Buddhism like Samuel Beckett in his confrontation of existential dilemmas and paradoxes in a world with or without God as popularised by the Zen Buddhist scholar Paul Foster in his well-researched book *Beckett and Zen: A Study of Dilemma in the Novels of Samuel Beckett*. Foster has shown how Beckett's dilemmas in his fictions and his inevitable avoidance to resolve those dilemmas go parallel with Zen philosophy of One Mind and Nothingness in which one sits and contemplates his own fate without bowing to a God, without taking total comfort or despair and without killing himself for his sufferings. Beckett's men and women hesitate to make a 'great leap' as demanded in Buddhism to transcend beyond the anguished thought, careless diversion, misleading faith into One Mind, the ultimate Unnameable. In Pinter, the philosophy of Buddha or Buddhism may not be delved so deep like Beckett and merely floating on the surface by what the statue of Buddha stands for, but Pinter has attempted to explore the real meaning or relevance of a figure like Buddha in the real life situations, in the struggle for power and dominance, in human relations to the world full of menacing terror and anxiety.

So what does the statue of Buddha and its subsequent destruction symbolize in Pinter's play? The question haunts even after the play ends in a catastrophe in which the two brothers appear reconciled and an old tramp is entrapped and deprived of shelter, security, job which he was assured to be provided for. Is the elder brother Aston associated with the figure of Buddha for his generosity and kindness to a poor old man whom he has rescued but why then he becomes indifferent towards Davies at the end? Or what drives Mick to destroy the Buddha statue into pieces? Is he afraid of the statue of Buddha that was Aston's favourite but watching him also constantly and reflecting his motives? It seems that Mick's apparent confidence and self-imposing authority masks the feeling of insecurity and restlessness going inside him. His desperation in breaking the Buddha is an outcome of his inner weaknesses realizing his lack of control over others and his failure to establish himself at the strongest position unquestioningly. His act is an externalisation of his lack of self-confidence that he poses outside but ultimately leads to a contrast with what he strongly claims after destroying the statue about his lack of concern and indifference in running the household with his brother. Or does the arrival of Davies require fulfilling the need of a redemptive figure to reconcile the two brothers and to

make them realize that both of them are dependent to each other and part of the household. Is Davies playing the role of a surrogate father to provide emotional attachment that both of the brothers are looking for? It may be that Davies is the fatherly figure with his two sons with whom he shares his past and the story behind his assumed name to take them into his confidence and thereby to provide the emotional support that both the brothers are deprived of. Thus a multiple interpretations can be drawn in relation to the statue of Buddha in the play though neither of them can be established with utmost determination. In *The Caretaker* Pinter prefers to remain ambivalent and unverifiable but makes it open inviting several approaches in understanding the multiple roles and significances of the statue of Buddha used as a stage prop in the play.

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