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THE BATTLE FOR POWER BETWEEN THE DOMINANT AND THE SUBSERVIENT IN *THE DUMB WAITER* BY HAROLD PINTER

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter, the Nobel Prize Laureate is famous for his portrayal of the helplessness of the modern man, fighting a losing battle with a cruel and incomprehensible life, feeling the inevitability of decay and dejection. His plays brilliantly portray the modern human condition in which the meaning is no longer clear and is lost in the haze of scientific ambiguities and lost certainties. This paper makes an attempt to present the view that higher power destroys the individual's identity.

**Keywords:** Harold Pinter, political drama, one-act play, Pinteresque

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*The Dumb Waiter* was written in 1957 and was highly received by the critics. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century with religion losing more ground than ever before and familiar narratives of certainties lost, with science and its 'doubt culture' making serious inroads in the modern mind and techno-brimming life, the work of Pinter is even more important than before. *The Dumb Waiter* is a representative of this condition of modern man and in many senses is even more important than '*Waiting for the Godot*' by Samuel Beckett.

"Small but perfectly formed, *The Dumb Waiter* might be considered the best of Harold Pinter's early plays, more consistent than *The Birthday Party* and sharper than *The Caretaker*. It combines the classic characteristics of early Pinter – a paucity of information and an atmosphere of menace, working-class small-talk in a claustrophobic setting – with an oblique but palpable political edge and, in so doing, can be seen as containing the germ of Pinter's entire dramatic oeuvre."<sup>i</sup>

Though it is not clear in the play earlier, but becomes clearer and clearer with time, that the two characters of the play, Ben and Gus are hit-men. They are waiting in a room which is a basement. They are also waiting for their assignment, as is evident from Ben taking out his gun once and again and checking upon it.

The play begins with tactically meaningful but ultimately absurd dialogues. Ben is reading a newspaper and Gus is tying his shoes. The same action is repeated by both the characters over and over again, showing the monotony and dullness of life.

There is argument between Ben and Gus, over the semantics of 'light the kettle' and 'put on the kettle'. Gus keeps firing questions at Ben, who gets irritated as the questions keep getting sharp. However, the narrative never goes far from absurd and nonsensical. Here is one example of such a *non sequitur* sequence:

"BEN. Let me give you your instructions.

GUS signs and sits next to BEN on the bed. The instructions are stated and repeated automatically.

When we get the call, you go over and stand behind the door.

GUS. Stand behind the door.

BEN. If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

GUS. If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

BEN. But there won't be a knock on the door.

GUS. So I won't answer it.

BEN. When the bloke comes in--

GUS. When the bloke comes in--

BEN. Shut the door behind him.

GUS. Shut the door behind him.

BEN. Without divulging your presence.

GUS. Without divulging your presence.

BEN. He'll see me and come towards me.

GUS. He'll see you and come towards you.

BEN. He won't see you.

GUS (absently). Eh?

BEN. He won't see you.

GUS. He won't see me.

BEN. But he'll see me.

GUS. He'll see you.

BEN. He won't know you're there.

GUS. He won't know you're there.

GUS. He won't know I'm there.

BEN. I take out my gun.

GUS. You take out your gun.

BEN. He stops in his tracks.

GUS. He stops in his tracks.

BEN. If he turns round--

GUS. If he turns round--

BEN. You're there,

GUS. I'm here.

BEN frowns and presses his forehead.

You've missed something out.

BEN. I know. What?

GUS. I haven't taken my gun out, according to you.

BEN. You take your gun out--

GUS. After I've closed the door.

BEN. After you've closed the door.

GUS. You've never missed that out before, you know that?

BEN. When he sees you behind him--

GUS. Me behind him--

BEN. And me in front of him--

GUS. And you in front of him--

BEN. He'll feel uncertain--  
GUS. Uneasy.  
BEN. He won't know what to do.  
GUS. So what will he do?  
BEN. He'll look at me and he'll look at you.  
GUS. We won't say a word.  
BEN. We'll look at him.  
GUS. He won't say a word.  
BEN. He'll look at us.  
GUS. And we'll look at him.  
BEN. Nobody says a word.  
Pause.  
GUS. What do we do if it's a girl?  
BEN. We do the same.  
GUS. Exactly the same?  
BEN. Exactly.  
Pause."<sup>ii</sup>

However, Pinter has made the play work at another entirely different level. It is supposed that the basement in which Ben and Gus are staying is a store or a cellar of a restaurant and things have to be delivered from there to the customers out through the 'speaking tube' of a dumb waiter, who is in the next room but never makes an appearance. The waiter keeps delivering some food orders occasionally. Both Ben and Gus are mystified at why the orders are coming. Ben shouts in the 'speaking tube' that there is no food that they cannot supply any orders, which is odd again as they are themselves staying in the basement and hence are not supposed to supply any orders to anyone.

At one point, after many nonsensical dialogues, Gus leaves the room, presumably to have a drink of water. Just after he leaves, there is a whistle in the 'speaking tube' which indicates that a person, presumably the dumb waiter wants to talk. Ben goes and listens to the tube. There is an impression that the victim of Ben and Gus has arrived and Ben should get ready to kill him. He is instructed to stand in front of the door and kill the person who comes in, but when the door opens, Ben stares at Gus and Gus stares at Ben. It was Gus, whom Ben was hired to kill, completing the absurdness and the confusion of the play.

The play comes out beautifully as a 'drama of menace', in which man is at risk from unknown dangers.<sup>iii</sup> The play maintains a sense of dread and tragedy throughout. A comically tragic end helps in sustaining that impression and imprinting in the minds of the audience.

However, Pinter never stops at one layer in his plays. He invests his works with multiple layers of meanings and absurdities and hence one may find a seemingly absurd dialogue with meaning hidden inside the lines. Sometimes, the vice-versa may prove to be case as the play goes by. Sometimes there are layer within layers.

Pinter always hides social narrative, and societal criticism in his plays. *The Dumb Waiter* is also a political drama. It demonstrates that how an individual is annihilated by bigger powers, thus alluding to the relationship of an individual and a state. His plays are always about victimisation of the individual, the dispossessed and power of the state.

"Each of Harold Pinter's... plays ends in the virtual annihilation of an individual.... It is by his bitter dramas of dehumanisation that he implies 'the importance of humanity.'"<sup>iv</sup>

*The Dumb Waiter* is about the dynamics of power and the nature in which partnerships are formed and exist in this unequal world. And Pinter is not blaming a single individual, in this case Ben, for lording over the weaker partner Gus, but he is blaming the power situation in general which is naturally disadvantageous to the weaker part of the society: it may be an individual, a woman, a person from a minority, or a weaker person of seeming majority.

“It makes much more sense if seen as a play about the dynamics of power and the nature of partnership. Ben and Gus are both victims of some unseen authority and a surrogate married couple quarrelling, testing, talking past each other and raking over old times”<sup>v</sup>

The conversation between Ben and Gus and the eventual outcome of the play portray a perpetual tug of war between the stronger and the weaker sections of the society. This struggle goes on and somehow the weaker section survives as a whole. But for the individual it is always a tragedy.

“David Pattie considers *The Dumb Waiter* in relation to Bakhtinian notions of carnival, staging as it does a redistribution of resources from the powerless to the powerful and working on a truly visceral level as, via the titular device, food is sent upwards in contravention both of gravity and of normal digestive practice.”<sup>vi</sup>

### **Conclusion**

*The Dumb Waiter* is about the staccato rhythms of daily life portrayed beautifully in the music-hall drama of Pinter style in which cross-talk is used as a tool to portray the meaningless of life and on another level the power struggle between the stronger and the weaker sections of the society, between nature and fate on one hand and human beings on the other, between the mainstream persons and political opinions on one hand and marginalized sections and politically incorrect opinions on the other. The play works on many levels and on each level it is both informative and enjoyable. At its heart it is a battle for power between the dominant and the subservient.

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<sup>i</sup> Derbyshire, Harry. *Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter, Modern Drama, vol 53, no 2.* 2010, pp266-268.

<sup>ii</sup> Pinter, Harold. *Complete Works: Vol. 1.* New York: Grove Press, 1990. p. 158-160.

<sup>iii</sup> Gussow, Mel. *Conversations with Pinter.* London: Nick Hern Books, 1994.

<sup>iv</sup> Cohn, Ruby. *The World of Harold Pinter.* Tulaine Drama Review. 1962, pp55-7.

<sup>v</sup> Billington, Michael. *Harold Pinter. Faber & Faber,* 2nd edition, 2007, p89 et seq.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mdr/summary/v053/53.2.derbyshire.html>

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