

Postmodern Streaks in the Plays of Rameshwar Prem and Harold Pinter : Heirs to a Changing World

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Contemporary evaluation has its own special appeal. A contemporary critic can rise to what Matthew Arnold termed the "comprehension of his age" more effortlessly than his successors, because he himself is the part of the age. There is a certain immediacy in contemporary criticism "which considered verdicts armed with hind sight and propped up by years of critical consensus can never hope to possess."¹ This paper tries to compare the plays of Rameshwar Prem and Harold Pinter as both anticipate the beginnings of literary postmodernism. Almost all the features of postmodern theatre are present in the works of the Indian playwright Rameshwar Prem and British playwright Harold Pinter.

The term 'Postmodern' as we understand it today originated in the US in the late 1950s. It was originally taken from Arnold Toynbee's massive historical magnum opus *A study of History*, but gradually was filled with new contents until it has come to mean a plurality of languages, models, methods, not only in different works, but in one and the same work. Where modernist literature worked on time, literary postmodernism would work in time. If modernism means the assumption that literature approaches to the condition of poetry, postmodernism means the tendency to assume that literature is intrinsically narrative. In the works of both the playwrights, we see this presence of metanarratives in them.

In postmodern theatre, there are almost no characters. In an essay of 1983 pointedly titled "The Death of Character", theatre critic and scholar Elinor Fuchs² discussed a development in theatre that she considered to be the harbinger of postmodernism in theatre: a de-emphasis of the modern concept of psychologically consistent dramatic characters in favour of fragmented, flowing, and uncertain identities whose exact locations and boundaries can not be pinpointed. The characters in Pinter's plays as well as Rameshwar Prem's are always the persons who develop themselves during the course of the play. We are not given any previous accounts of them. To begin with, *The Room*, his first play, has the Negro Riley who comes as an emancipator of Rose, as a messenger from her father's house. He defies any concrete information about himself. In *No Man's Land* also Pinter does not provide the audience with any antecedents of his characters.

Spooner and Hirst are not defined by their past history which they may distort or their social status which they are liable to misrepresent. Similarly, in *Old Times* Pinter does not come up with any information to set up the necessary background of the characters. What he points out is that the mind has chasms, and that human subconscious is more or less impervious.

The same is observed when we look at the characters of Rameshwar Prem. The two men in *Ajatghar* are unidentified. They are not given any names. Nor do we know about their social hierarchy they belong to. We can't construe anything about them but just a situational aspect is revealed and we encounter how the two men confront this riot hit situation. Similarly the characters in the play *Camp* are also without any identity. They simply connect two nations on warring terms. Even the play *Charpai* does not throw ample light on the inter-relationship between the different characters of the family.

To a large extent, postmodern literature is about the loss of all the significant elements of literature, be they are classical or modern: not only characters and plots but also, rational understanding, language, reference to things and historical events. Like existentialism did earlier, postmodernism has stated the total loss of all traditional values, convictions, authorities. When Harold Pinter, during a rehearsal of one of his own plays, was asked what a passage meant, he answered: "We are not quite sure of the author's intention of language today"³. Pinter holds that people are not always ready or willing to reveal their mind or to allow others easily to peep into it. Pinter's dramatic dialogue reveals that the speech we don't hear under the existential predicament is indeed a necessary avoidance. Hayman rightly observes, "Pinter has capitalized in an Irwing Wardle way that no playwright had ever done before...on the face that real-life conversations don't proceed smoothly and logically from point to point."⁴ The short-length play *Victoria Station* depicts the conversation between a taxi-controller in some central taxi-cab station and the driver of one of the cabs let loose in the vast city of London. This dialogue closely resembles some pre-recorded disembodied voice. In this play, as its dialogue exemplifies, language has been relegated to the level of denigration. In this regard, his play *Landscape* calls for special notice. Here only two

characters Beth and Duff make the cast. Let's look at the note given by the director Peter Hall.

Note: Duff refers normally to Beth, but does not appear to hear her voice. Beth never looks at Duff, and does not appear to hear his voice. Both characters are relaxed, in no sense rigid.

Here the basic purpose of the language to communicate is defeated. The whole play is an articulation of the characters' desires, sanguinity and delusions.

"Postmodernist texts turned modernist worries about the limits of language into a chattering polyglossary. Where a writer like Beckett enacted the kind of shriveling away of language under the pressure of doubt, postmodernist texts were excited by the prospect of the illegitimate, the unspeakable, and the unknowable. They became exorbitant, exuberant; above all, they grew big."⁵

In many of his plays, Pinter takes some words and repeats them like a refrain as in the following verbal exchange between Meg and Stanley in *The Birthday Party*.

Stanley: Where's my tea? Meg: I took it away. You didn't want it. Stanley: ...You took it away? Meg: I took it away. Stanley: What did you take it away for? Meg: You didn't want it. Stanley: Who said I didn't want it? Meg: You did.

Here, the thing that is to be read between the lines is more important than the apparent meaning or information conveyed by this passage. It reflects the strong sense of inadequacy of language.

The same anti-literary language is used by Rameshwar Prem in his plays. His play *Mahajaal* depicts the colloquial language of Bombay. *Kuntha* also reveals the blighted life of a couple. Here also, the language is replete with repetitions suggestive of the depth of the drama underneath the seemingly inconsequential exchanges.

In postmodern, drama language has lost its denotative reference and so, Robert W. Corrigan could, as early as 1983, state the loss of meaning in post modern American drama as well: "Language may be used or thrown away. At times it is a text, at others, a pre-text. Sometimes it is inflected, sometimes it is not, and still other times it is little more than gibberish"⁶(Corrigan, 163)

In literary postmodernism, dialogue which used to be essential means of presentation in traditional drama has lost its importance: noises, pantomime and choreography indicate subtextual meanings. The use of songs and chorus in the plays of Rameshwar Prem target the postmodernism in his plays. The apt use of

songs in his play *Sangyaputra*, *Antarang*, and *Shatrasantaan* is quite significant. *Shatrasantaan* is a prominent play from the point of view of language as well as chorus: "Andhey hum, par behare kam Kurukshetra ke Mahasamar ko Dekhe kam, Jyada sunate hain Jo sunate hain, wo neeti hai Jo unate hai, wo reeti hai."⁷

Though the play is written on the pretext of the *Mahabharata*, the characters are given colloquial dialogues bordering at the absurdist idioms lampooning their divinity. The play is pervaded with songs sung by the slaughtered heads as well as the chorus. Look at the translated piece of chorus: "Look, look, just look at this bird...She is mocking at you...Men! Listen...This little bird is mocking at you-In this havoc of death, this bird-singing Life and only life - is mocking at you...!"⁸

Even the message of regeneration and the sustenance of life are conveyed through a beautiful song. The birth celebration of the eight new born babies in the Kuru clan is depicted through a song only. The play has a dramatic invocation by Ghatotkach also. Such devices used by the playwright are quite contrary to the dialogues used in the traditional plays.

Eric Hobsbawm⁹ talks of the spread of postmodernism, by 1990, to the different fields of philosophy, social science, anthropology, history and other disciplines that had not previously tended to borrow their terminology from the arts avant-garde, even when they happened to be associated with them. He says all postmodernisms had in common an essential skepticism about the existence of an objective reality, and/or the possibility of arriving at an agreed understanding of it by rational means. All tended to a radical relativism. This characteristic feature is also present in the plays of both Rameshwar Prem and Harold Pinter. Both the playwrights tend to avoid any preaching or give any solution. They just unfurl a static situation to be explored by the readers and audience. Most of Pinter characters are unreliable, in the sense that there is no bond of trust between different characters of the same play. *Betrayal* is a play that defies the time construct also. It starts in the spring of 1977 and ends in the winter of 1968. Here it is difficult to gauge when Robert takes over the sensibility of Terry and when Emma starts behaving as a whore. In *No Man's Land* as in *Old Times*, the shifting perspectives on the past, the feeble control the characters exercise on reality, and the truth they construct by their words, point to what C.W.E Bigsby has described as "a threatening world in which the desire for verification, the need for full knowledge and genuine communication is necessarily frustrated. Pinter's realistic perception is made through his explorations of the complex relationship between language, reality and human consciousness."¹⁰ Extending this point, Francesca Coppa, in the paper "Comedy and Politics in

Pinter's Early Plays", maneuvers our attention towards the surprising alliances in Pinter's plays: how exactly is Gus come to be Ben's next victim, why exactly is Flora attracted to the Matchseller, what exactly does Rose have in common with Riley? Pinter rarely provides these sorts of answers; he seems to be more interested in the fact of these alliances than the reasons for them.¹¹

Rameshwar Prem's plays also don't leave us any scope to favour a side. The readers/audiences are perplexed to witness the sufferings of war torn characters inhabiting a 'no man's land' in his play *Camp*. But then they start treating the only female character Ghauri as merely a commodity. We are just left watching the comedy of menace playing in the no man's land. His play *Charpai* is about a working class joint family where the only thing that comes to the surface is irritation stooping down to menace. The imperiousness and plaintiveness of the verbal exchanges show the harrowings of a nebulous quest. We don't know whether the old man is at fault or his son and daughter-in-law. The reality of their life is probably too vague to be deciphered through their verbal volleying. It only becomes absolute with the death of the old man. The reality of the two men in the play *Ajatghar* is also enveloped in mystery. This play is based on the quest of identity. The two men invariably change the guards of being attacking and at times defensive. They don't know each other's cast as well as the cast of the owner of the house. The only reality that dawns on them is the heinous riot and the fact that in this quagmire of communal hatred they are just helpless human beings.

Steven Conner, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* gives another definition of postmodernism: "Indeed, one definition of postmodernism might be: that condition in which for the first time and as a result of technologies that allow large scale storage, access, and reproduction of records of the past, the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present's disposal, and in which the ration between present and past has therefore changed."¹² This is most glaring in the plays of Pinter. His *Betrayal* and *Old Times* make frequent use of the past. The entire dramatic dialogue of *Old Times* suggests that one can never be absolutely sure about the existence of the past in terms as one recapitulates it. The play is dominated by the past, being reminiscent of LP Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*(1953) for which Pinter wrote the screenplay in January 1969. Its first line reads: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." It is significant that Pinter also wrote another screenplay in 1972 - *Remembrance of Things Past* - for Proust's epic novel *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. These two novels deal with the atmosphere of the past almost in the same manner as *Old Times*. Along with Proust and Hartley, Pinter concerns himself with mutability and the big question as to what past means to us. Pinter's concern has been

distinctly manifested through the verbal idioms he has used in the play. In the plays of Pinter, past is made present with the residual memories of the past; but memories are not absolute. They can't be relied upon. In none of the plays by Pinter, the information sought by a character from his memory is confirmed by the other character. Nobody seems to remember correctly.

Similarly, *Antarang* by Rameshwar Prem puts forward the juxtaposition of past with the present. Here the past is presented before us with the contemporary sensibility. We can decipher the political as well as cultural deflections of today peeping into the moral denigration of the past. In Sangyaputra also, the past of the fisherboy Bhokhla keeps haunting him, more frequently, as a dream in which his little boy flash upon his subconscious, starving and suffering. Here, past acts as the causal factor for the ultimate mental predilections of Bhokhla.

Another postmodern perspective is the progress in the area of sexuality. Steven Connor maintains that sex used to be proclaimed to be the secret, forbidden truth of human life. It is now the most manifest, ubiquitous, and compulsory truth. Sex can no longer be stopped or avoided...Sex has become the only and ultimate quality. Eros has become life. Sex has been subject to economic transaction, to buying and selling as a commodity, for centuries. Because sex has become so ubiquitous, so polymorphously perverse, it may lose its meaning. Repression energizes and recharges sex: indifference depletes it. This munificent exposure of sex is very much there in the plays of Harold Pinter. In his plays also, earlier the messenger of sex used to be the prostitutes but gradually in the later plays, sex seems to acquire an autonomous position of its own. His play *Basement* is more about sexual choices than anything else. Jerry is shuttled between her love Scott and his friend Tim Law and ultimately chooses Law as her sexual partner. Sexual politics has a prominent place in the plays of Harold Pinter. Misogyny is dramatized in most of his plays. His overtly political plays have sexual abuse as the prominent punishment for the women. In the *Mountain Language*, the young woman is goaded into becoming a prostitute to gain favours from the authorities to meet her husband who is a prisoner there. In *One for the Road*, Gila is constantly raped and Victor is asked obscene questions his wife. The New World Order has two men who are talking bad things about the wife of the victim. Rameshwar Prem is also postmodernist in the sense that he is more vocal about sex in his play *Shastrasantaan* than most of his contemporaries in Hindi Drama. His language is very straight forward and he has not hesitated in giving colloquial idioms to the characters. Duryodhan plans to rape Draupadi and he uses lewd language about her and ending up making her a whore. Similarly, Kunti also berates against Indra and gives vent to her frustration in most blatant terms. Her

dialogues reveal that everybody is more interested in lust without giving a fig for the mortality.

Steven Connor maintains that the postmodernist work in theatre has come to mean work that no longer conforms to assumed definitions of what should happen in a poem or play. Some of his work failed to conform because it deliberately fell short or failed to meet the minimum requirements of a genre. Peter Handke's "Offending the Audience" is a telling example of this. Other examples of postmodernist theatre refused to allow themselves to be recognized as theatre by going in the other direction, the direction of excess. The play *Kaalpatra* by Rameshwar Prem was especially written for the girls of Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi. During the production of the play, right from the lighting to direction, everything was conducted by girl students. In this play, narrative technique is used to throw light on the hypocrisy of the political leaders. Similarly, sometimes in Pinter also, the language slips in pure mime, as shown by the opening scene of *The Caretaker* and the concluding scenes of *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*.

Another feature of postmodernism is its concern with the local and with the irreducible multiplicity of the things which are local. Postmodernism deals as much with emergent as with residual forms of social and cultural practice and renews concern for personal responsibility, individual creativity and social engagement, but it does so primarily in local social contexts. Austin Quijley quotes Pinter: "I'm only concerned at the moment with accurate and precise images of what is the case. I can no longer write a play about a family and what happens to it, except that in *One For the Road*, I remind you, the man, woman and child are actually husband, wife and he's their child. Therefore, in a rather odd way, that play is about what happens to a family."¹³

Political thinking for Pinter audiences involves not so much questions about occupying the right or left on the political spectrum or commitments to one political party or another. But a requirement to explore the complexities of local social exchange in terms of local social contracts, both those invoked by the characters and those emerging from their interaction. Deborah's experience in *A Kind of Alaska*, domestic violence in *Ashes to Ashes* and the voice of the dead father in *The Voices*, all reflect the extension of the personal to the social and universal parameters.

Taken as a whole Pinter's dramatic output may be described as one which, having made an immense contribution to postmodernism's deepening and enlarging of the field of the political, has eventually, since the mid-1980s, come out on the other side with plays which are informed by postmodernism yet at the same time increasingly denounce and renounce

potentially quietest conception of language and subjectivity.

Back here in India, "as a postmodernity, making a fetish of plurality and revival of local cultures, threatens to replace modernity in the first world, which sets the pace for the third, the debate in India on the right degree of decentralization is likely to get even more tangled."¹⁴ Since independence we have been hearing the cliché 'Unity in Diversity.' With the first glimmer of post modernity, someone ought to summon the nerve to make it stand on its head. Diversity in unity will make for better sense today. Prem's plays hinge on this celebration of the local and diversity is shown to have prominent position in his plays: *Ajatghar* has a locale entirely different from *Sangyaputra*; *Mahajaal* has a flavoured locale that is entirely different from that of *Raja Nanga Hai*. Camp's hostility of the two characters against each other, resonates the universal truth extending not only beyond the boundaries of the local but also beyond the boundaries of everyday human experience. Prem's plays wonderfully reflect the adumbration of postmodernism in India. A more searching look at the problem of nationalism, which is a modern heresy from the point of view of most old civilizations, will indeed reveal that this is precisely one of the ideologies threatening to overwhelm all of them today.

From a negative term that described a slackening of creative energies, postmodern has developed into a positive affirmation of the values of a plurality of different intercultural and intracultural orientations and ways of life. In the public area of economics, postmodernism implies diversification, adaptation to special conditions and pluralisation of forms of organization. One simple but important point is that pluralism is historically a postmodern phenomenon in the theatre. The latest illustration can be the role of Emma in the *Betrayal* being enacted by Indian actress Shabana Azami for the Singapore Theatre Repertory. In the personal area of human relations feminism has swept away preconceptions of gender roles; deviant forms of sexual relationships have become accepted not only out of permissiveness but out of the conviction that they can result in successful lives. John Stokes says in his paper, *Pinter and the 1950s*:

In *The Collection*, Pinter takes the clichés of homosexual life and underlines them with broad emphasis so that almost any line begins to resonate with a possible double entendre 'You're supposed to be able to use your hands', 'a wow at parties', 'an opera fan', 'a man's man'. Phallic competitiveness is matched by tropes of deceptive, dangerous female attraction which raise the level of erotic intensity to the point where it topples over into comedy and the game becomes too obvious for words."¹⁵

It is ironical but true that both Pinter and Prem are not given their due in their own countries. Pinter is appreciated more in USA and Eastern Europe than in England. Steven Conner tries to find the answer: "It may also reflect another English trait, a distrust of anyone who is not a politician or political commentator yet who takes politics seriously and is prepared to shoot from the hip."¹⁶ The same is true of Prem; he is given accolades in Africa, America but Indian people seem to be wary of him. May be because he dares to call, spade a spade may be because he never shrunk from taking up a cause, may be he is not 'worldly wise' enough to be a commercial success. It is the high time now when the academic syllabi should be revised and the tendency of including age old traditional plays should be curbed a little to give space to such plays that immediately relate to our contemporary sensibility.

This paper perhaps seems to acquire significance because it attempts to focus on the postmodern need for the integrative and unifying aspects of multiculturalism. The two playwrights who form the subject of this paper have been chosen carefully as they seem to voice the similarities of concerns regardless of geographical and cultural distances. As such it has been part of the endeavour to understand, record and perhaps interpret this from the point of view of contemporary relevance.

Note: There is serious dearth of critical works on Rameshwar Prem's plays. Our sole dependence was on our personal interview of Prem taken on 28.12.2004 and an article written by him in the Hindi Daily Rashtriya Sahara, published on 17.03.2002 and also on our own analytical insight. This also gave us a boost to undertake this research paper to sing about the unsung hero.

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