



Harold Pinter's Anti-War Poetry: A Critique of War

VIJAY CHAUDHARI

North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon
Maharashtra, India

Abstract:

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) was a remarkable poet-playwright of the post-war era. In the words of Billington, Pinter's official biographer, "Pinter was the most influential provocative and poetic dramatist of his generation". For Contemporary society, the World War II brought despair and rootless life to be lived. The dehumanization overwhelmingly was executed in the society in the post-war period. The present paper attempts to interpret Pinter's War Poetry in the light of war activities executed by America. Harold Pinter won Wilfred Owen Prize in 2004 for his War Poetry and the Noble Prize for Literature in 2005. Pinter, as a political activist, had been always on the side of human rights and against torture or violence. His war poetry can be interpreted as a critique of war and hypocrisy governed by America. It symbolizes the disgrace upon the innocent dead who died during war and brutality of the political authorities who exploited war as a weapon of power to gain national peace. It can be exemplified through the poems like God Bless America, American Football, Deaths, Meeting, After Lunch etc.

Key words: disgrace, war, dehumanization, violence, peace, dead

Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) was an original talent in the phenomena of post-war drama whose contribution as a playwright of absurdist tradition has been remarkable. To his

credit Pinter has more than 30 plays. Moreover, he was also an accomplished actor, poet, writer, director, and political activist for radio, television and film. Personality wise Pinter had been extrovertly outspoken and often in favour of human rights. He was awarded Wilfred Owen Prize for Poetry in 2004 for his War Poetry and the Noble Prize for literature in 2005. Pinter in his last phase of life established himself as an outspoken political activist who is observed in his political plays and War Poetry. Looking into the history of first world war a few English poets , including Owen, Sassoon, Brooke, Rosenberg, Sorley, Gurney, Thomas, Blunden, Binyon, McCrae, Grenfell, Seeger, Kipling and other have contributed good collections of war poetry reflecting realistic picture of the war. The present paper attempts to interpret and analyze Harold Pinter's philosophy about war and his political activism against war, violence or torture to protect human rights. His war poetry can be observed under the light of war exploited by US which gives an idea about the disgrace executed about the dead ones and the victims of political oppression.

Pinter's Political Activism

Pinter had been a very active pacifist who begins with his oppose to the cold war when he was 18. Billington recorded that Pinter's political awareness was fuelled in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a mixture of personal relationships and public experience (2007, 287). Moreover, he was a supporter of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (1959-1994) and an active member of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the United Kingdom. Also he was actively involved in various peace or anti-war movements. Evidently, Pinter has publically shown his pacifism and favour for human rights and universal peace through his campaigns against war and public speeches at various occasions. In 2001 Pinter was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Florence, where in his speech he

poignantly attacked Serbia bombing of NATO in 1999 and manifestations of US foreign policy.

I have been particularly interested in the term “humanitarian intervention” as used by NATO to justify its bombing of Serbia.(...) The bombing of Nis, far from being a ‘mistake’ was, in fact, an act of murder. It stemmed from a ‘war’ which was in itself illegal, a bandit act,(...)we are told, were taken in pursuance of a policy of ‘humanitarian intervention’...civilian deaths were described as ‘collateral damage’. (...) George W. Bush ...in the great American presidential tradition by referring to ‘freedom loving people’...Prison is a great industry in the United States...The word ‘freedom’ has resulted in torture and death. I am referring to Guatemala, Turkey, Israel, Haiti, Argentinian, and Chile, killed in all cases...by United States... (Roy 2001, 47-48)

Pinter’s fight against violence, created through US Foreign policies, continued. In an acceptance speech of honorary degree at University of Turin (27 Nov. 2002) stated:

“I believe...US will attack Iraq not only to control Iraqi oil, but because the American...bloodthirsty wild animal. Bombs are its only vocabulary.” (Pinter 2002)

His hard-hitting speeches show his political activism and involvement in peace movement.

Pinter’s Anti-War Poetry

Pinter as a poet has been influential in recent years before his death in 2008. On 28 February, 2005, in an interview with Mark Lawson on the BBC Radio programme Front Row, Pinter announced publicly the he would stop writing plays to dedicate himself to his political activism and writing poetry. His poetic voice can be classified basically into three periods; early poetry, Irish period and anti-war poetry. His early poetry essentially dealt with mental landscapes, Ireland and Yeats has immensely given shape to literary sensibility and creativity

which changed his poetic style. The third period includes anti-war poetry which Pinter uses as a platform to speak out against wars as Pinter revolutionized his privacy and remodeled his art into a more public activity.

Pinter has indeed increasingly turned to poetry as his favored genre, publishing a collection, entitled *War*, in 2003 which expresses his passionate opposition to the Iraq conflict. *War*, winner of the Wilfred Owen Award holds special weight for Pinter as it is given for both the poetic and political qualities of an author's work. His concerns about the social repressions in the contemporary world have documented itself in his mature poetry in which he has charted the relationship between the individual and the collective. Wilfred Owen proclaims about truthfulness of a poet, "All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful." (Owen 1917)

Pinter's collection titled 'War' contains eight poems which is nothing but Pinter's reaction to the war activities executed by US and Britain's foreign policies especially against Iraq, Afghanistan and Serbia. Pinter as pacifist has done critique upon brutality of war in his anti-war poetry which can be further interpreted under various approaches as social, psychological, philosophical and symbolic. His poems as *God Bless America* (2003), *American Football* (1991), *After Lunch* (2002), *The Bombs* (2003), and *Death* (1997) can be symbolized as a picture of disgrace upon the victims of war.

Brutal Image of War/Violence

Pinter's anti-war poetry is marked with brutal images of War. War is decided by those who is least inflicted by it. Knudson argues,

Human nature is fundamentally a capacity for action, not a fixed mode of conduct. It may lead to peace or to war as the human will dictates...war is an ineradicable phase of human life is derived from what may be called the dynamic theory of

the state. According to this theory the state in its essential nature is might or power. It recognizes no authority, moral or otherwise, above itself. Its own might makes right (2011, 27-28)

The above extract gets fit into American war policy which led to invasion in Iraq. Pinter's poem '*God Bless America*' gives an idea about it.

The riders have whips which cut.
Your head roll onto the sand
Your head is a pool in the dirt
Your head is a stain in the dust
Your eyes have gone out and your nose
Sniffs only the pong of the dead
And all the dead air is alive
With the smell of America's God. (Pinter 2003, np)

Pinter denounces American foreign policy in *God Bless America (2003)* – a poem which describes the joyful 'Yanks in their armoured parade', galloping across the world in streets where the gutters are clogged with the dead. Pinter portrays the heads rolling onto the sand with horrid images of eyes that have gone out and the nose that only sniffs the odour of the dead while 'all the dead air is alive with the smell of America's God' (Dilek, 130). The direct use of language in the poem gives an idea about Pinter's anger towards brutality of war and despair of modern imperialism. The use of connotative language symbolizes Pinter's criticism upon dehumanization of war. In the above stanza, the term 'riders' may refer to the angels (soldiers) of American God (Administrator). Again, Pinter has depicted the brutal picture of war in his poem *After Lunch (2002)*.

And after noon the well-dressed creatures come
To sniff among the dead
And have their lunch
And all the many well-dressed creatures pluck
The swollen avocados from the dust
And stir the minestrone with stray bones... (Pinter 2003, np)

Here again Pinter refers 'the well-dressed creatures' to soldiers and 'lunch' to act of killing. In a very sophisticated way Pinter satirized cruelty executed in War as Soldiers' have their lunch in the form of dead bodies. Pinter has compared those dead bodies with avocados (a pear-shaped fruit) and minestrone (soup of variety of vegetables). Pinter's protest against war continued with another piece of verse i.e. *The Bombs* (2003).

Which suck out the last of our blood
All we have left are the bombs
which polish the skulls of the dead ... (Pinter 2003, np)

The poem dexterously represents the image of 'bomb' as the source of direct violence. This cruel source of violence has destroyed the body and the only thing survived during the war is bomb. Ironically, Pinter has criticized the function of bomb which leads to destruction and it does not differentiate between the innocent and the enemy. In 'Meeting', written after the Afghan war and as a premonition of the coming invasion of Iraq, he imagines 'the long dead' (perhaps from Vietnam, Hiroshima and Auschwitz) walking out to embrace 'the new dead' (Brown). The French Prime Minister, Dominic de Ville Pin at the award function of the Legion d'Honneur, France highest honour, praised Pinter's poem *American Football*: 'With its violence and its cruelty, it is for me one of the most accurate images of war, one of the most metaphors of the temptation of imperialism and violence' (Crown 2007, 11).

Disgrace of Dead /Democracy

Pinter's anti-war poetry is a reaction to the inhuman act or policy against humanitarianism which leads to the disgrace upon the dead or victims of war. Pinter's questioning in his 'Death' (1997) symbolizes disgrace about the dead ones.

Who was the father or daughter or brother
or uncle or sister or mother or son

of the dead and abandoned body?...
Did you wash the dead body
Did you close both its eyes
Did you bury the body
Did you leave it abandoned
Did you kiss the dead body... (Pinter 2003, np)

Pinter voiced about absurdity of war and cruelty through his various speeches and interviews.

The 3,000 deaths in Afghanistan are never referred to. The hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children dead through American and British sanctions which have deprived them of essential medicines are never referred to...The effect of depleted uranium, used by America in the Gulf war, is never referred to... The 200,000 deaths in East Timor in 1975 brought about by the Indonesian government but inspired and supported by America are never referred to. ..The 500,000 deaths in Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Argentina and Haiti, in actions supported and subsidised by America, are never referred to. The millions of deaths in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are no longer referred to. The desperate plight of the Palestinian people, the central factor in world unrest, is hardly referred to. (Pinter 2002)

Democratically, it can be further interpreted that Pinter's assault shows disgrace to other human beings at country level which claims to be more democratic. Pinter further satirized US and UK administrators,

“Freedom, Democracy and Liberation, These terms, as enunciated by Bush and Blair essentially mean death, destruction and chaos.” (Pinter 2004)

Pinter in his small poem ‘Democracy’ vocalizes,
There's no escape.
The big pricks are out.
They'll fuck everything in sight.
Watch your back. (Pinter 2003, np)

The obscene words used in the poem shows Pinter’s anger and pacifist approach in the poem. He criticizes American hypocrisy—

The disclosures of torture in Iraq should come as no surprise to anybody. The Americans have been exporting torture for years. They have been teaching torture techniques to military representatives of various dictatorships at Fort Benning in Georgia for a very long time. Fort Benning was called the School of Americas but was actually known as the ‘School of torture’. They practice it themselves at home, in the vast gulag of prisons across the United States where over two million people are held in custody, the majority black. (Pinter 2004.)

Attacking Bush, in his hard hitting Speech at House of Commons Pinter is reported to have said, “Bush has said: we will not the world’s worst weapons to remain in the hands of the world’s worst leaders”. Quite right, Look in the mirror chum. That’s you.”

In his acceptance speech of Wilfred Owen Award in 2005 expresses his discontentment about democracy,

We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery and degradation to the Iraqi people and call it “bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East”. But, as we all know, we have not been welcomed with the predicted flowers. What we have unleashed is a ferocious and unremitting resistance, mayhem and chaos...I believe Wilfred Owen would share our contempt, our revulsion, our nausea and our shame at both the language and the actions of the American and British governments. (Pinter 2005)

Pinter’s various interviews and hard hitting speech exposes about pseudo-democratic activities executed by US and UK which has led to disgrace upon victims of war and democracy.

Urge for Universal Peace

Pinter as a pacifist was always in the favour of human rights against torture, oppression or violence. In his later phase of life through his anti-war Pinter was more vocalized about universal peace under his political activism against American and Britain war policies. Kant states that Peace is not the absence of conflict but it is the ability to cope with it (Puri and Heiko 2007, 40). Pinter strongly opposed the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War, the United States' 2001 War in Afghanistan and the 2003 Invasion Iraq. His collection of poems 'War' was the result of his rage about war and urge for universal peace. Pinter steps with optimistic writing to spread message of universal peace in his 'Weather Forecast' he greets the putative 'New American Century' with an apocalyptic vision in which the banality of everyday life is punctured by the realisation that: 'This is the last forecast.' (Brown 2003). As Owen urged for peace in a letter to his mother, "I am more and more a Christian. . . Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill." (1917)

Pinter's new breath of peace runs as T.S.Eliot's urge in 'The Wasteland'. The last line of the poem in Sanskrit (Shanti Shanti Shanti) gives message of peace to the world. Pinter also more or less hopes for in 'Weather Forecast',

In the evening the moon will shine
And be quite bright.
There will be, it has to be said,
A brisk wind
But it will die out by midnight.
Nothing further will happen... (Pinter 2003, np)

Ironically, Pinter exposed oppressive acts of US and UK which shows nothing but his voice for world peace,

The "Special relationship" between the USA and the United Kingdom has, in the last twelve years, brought about the deaths of thousands of people in Iraq, Afghanistan and Serbia.

All this in pursuit of the American and British “moral crusade”, to bring “peace and stability to the world.” (House of Commons Speech, October 2002)

His poem ‘The Old Days’ blows the voice of peace,
Just kill them.
Well, my wife wanted peace.
And so did my little children.
So we killed all the lefties
To bring peace for our little children.
Anyway there was no problem.
Anyway they’re all dead anyway. (Pinter 1998, 193)

Justifying his acceptance of Wilfred Owen Award on 18th March 2005, Pinter expressed,

What would Wilfred Owen make of the invasion of Iraq? A bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of International Law. An arbitrary military action inspired by a series of lies upon lies and gross manipulation of the media and therefore of the public. An act intended to consolidate American military and economic control of the Middle East masquerading – as a last resort (all other justifications having failed to justify themselves) – as liberation. A formidable assertion of military force responsible for the death and mutilation of thousands upon thousands of innocent people.... I believe Wilfred Owen would share our contempt, our revulsion, our nausea and our shame at both the language and the actions of the American and British governments. (Pinter 2005)

Referring to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in a public reading Pinter “blamed millions of totally deluded American people for not staging a mass revolt” and said that “because of propaganda and control of the media, millions of Americans believed that every word Mr. Bush said was ‘accurate and moral.’”(Chrisafis and Tildan 2003)

Conclusion

Pinter in pacifist tradition along with his poetic qualities has demonstrated how little concern powering countries may have for the dignity of other human being and how open to manipulation and negotiation are all social positions that we take for granted. His anti-war poetry more often is a critique upon war which also specifies Pinter's 'humanitarian intervention' towards torture or oppression. He has been peace-loving in his anti-war poetry though the diction is more direct and repetitive to criticize the brutality and absurdity of war. So Michael Grayer, chairman of the Wilfred Owen Association describes his poems as "hard-hitting and uncompromising, written with lucidity, clarity and economy" (Crown, 2008). Pinter's anti-war poetry gives hints about his political activism & outspoken qualities which open the doors for further research. Ultimately, Pinter's contribution is unsurpassed as a poet-playwright which will be in the memories forever of the coming generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Billington, Michael. 2007. *Harold Pinter* (previous ed. *Life and Works of Harold Pinter*, 1996). London: Faber and Faber.

Brown, Mark. 2003. "What is it Good For?" Book Review of 'War'. *Socialist Review*. (Book Rev. of War by Harold Pinter) <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=8575>.

Chrisafis and Tilden. 2003. "Pinter blasts 'Nazi America' and 'deluded idiot' Blair." *The Guardian*. Wednesday, 11 June 2003 14.41 BST <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/jun/11/books.arts>.

Crown, Sarah. 2007. 'Harold Pinter receives top French honour.' *Guardian Unlimited*. 18 January 2007, 11. (The award

was established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to reward both soldiers and civilians for exceptional merit or bravery).

Crown, Sarah. 2008. "Pinter in verse: a selection of his poetry." *The Guardian*. 26 December 2008.

<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/26/pinter-poetry>

Dilek, İnan. 2009. "Harold Pinter as a Poet: Compassion and Truth." *Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Sayı: 19, 123-132.

Knudson, Albert C. 2011. *The Philosophy of War and Peace*. New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press.

Puri, Bindu and Heiko Sievers. 2007. *Terror, Peace and Universalism, Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Kant*. New Delhi: OUP.

Owen, Wilfred. "Minds at War." *Wilfred Owen's Psychological Journey*

http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/minds_p1.htm

_____. "Letter to his mother, May 1917." <http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html>

Pinter, Harold. 2006. *The Essential Pinter: selections from the work of Harold Pinter, including "Art, Truth & Politics," Harold Pinter's Noble Lecture*. New York: Grove Press.

_____. 2003. *War*. London: Faber and Faber.

_____. 1998. *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics*. New York: Grove Press.

_____. "Wilfred Owen Award acceptance speech." 18th March 2005

<http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/wilfredowenprizespeech.html>

. Accessed on 17 August, 2013.

Pinter's honorary Doctorate Speech given at Turin University – 27 November 2002

<http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/turinunispeech.html>.

Retrieved on 21 March 2013.

Pinter's Speech at House of Commons on October 2002.

<http://www.haroldpinter.org/politics/houseofcommonsspeech.html>, Retrieved on 21 March 2013.

Pinter's Iraq debate. "Imperial War Museum." 23 September 2004.

<http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/takesidesoniraq.html>.

Prasad, GJV. 2005. "Harold Pinter: Poet-Playwright of Peace and Violence." *The Indian Express*. 14 December 2005.

Roy, Arundhati et al. 2001. "Humanitarian Intervention." In *War is Peace*, edited by Ken Coates. Nottingham: The Spokesman, The Russell Press Ltd.