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Creeping Silence: Power and Subjugation in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *An Off-Day Game*

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Abstract: Harold Pinter's first full length play *The Birthday Party*, a theatrical experiment of the comedy of menace, deals with a number of serious issues like power, violence, hegemony, subjugation and disintegration of language as its main themes. Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *An Off-Day Game*, a movie based on a best seller short story of the same title by Unni R, a well-known writer in Malayalam, explores issues like power, subjugation, political corruption and discrimination on the basis of colour and caste. The paper discusses the treatment of issues of power, violence and subjugation in *The Birthday Party* and *An Off-Day Game*. It also examines how Stanley Webber, the protagonist of the play, and Dasan, the central character of the film, are tortured and subjugated by the dominant characters who can very well be taken as representatives of the hegemonic state or power in the play and caste in the movie respectively. Noted for unjustified torture, continuous harassment and the aggressive ways, these dominant characters represent the tyrannical authority and unquestioned power of any system of hegemony.

Keywords: Power, Hegemony, Violence, Subjugation, Authority, State, Caste

Harold Pinter's 1957 play *The Birthday Party*, modelled on a woman and her tenant who lived in a filthy apartment that he chanced to meet during a theatrical tour in Eastbourne, deals with a number of issues like hegemony, power, violence, subjugation etc. The filthy apartment in Eastbourne becomes the model for the rundown boarding house and the woman and her tenant the models for the characters Meg Boles and Stanley Webber respectively in the play. The play can be taken as an ideal instance of comedy of menace with ample "Pinteresque" features like ambiguity, dubiousness, disintegration of language, violence and humour.

Like Pinter's play, Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's 2015 movie *An Off-Day Game* (originally titled *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali* in Malayalam), based on the best-selling short story of the same title by Unni R, one of the acclaimed writers in Malayalam, brings to focal attention the much disturbing societal issues like power, subjugation, violence and discrimination on the basis of caste, colour and gender.

In *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Jacques Derrida explains how a written text creates its own meaning in a particular moment after losing its structural unity. In a way, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Sanal Kumar's *An Off-Day Game* are artistic demonstrations of Derrida's theory. Instead of celebrating becomingly the birthday of the protagonist Stanley, an unemployed musician in thirties who is the only one lodger at Meg Bole's rundown sea side boarding house, Pinter's play stages a terrifying depiction of a series of interrogation and prosecution on the protagonist by two strangers called Dermont McCann and Nat Goldberg. Whereas in *An Off-Day Game*, the gathering of five friends to enjoy an off day becomes an occasion for the exhalation of the dominant nature of four of them from elite caste background to subjugate and torture the fifth one who was obviously not so.

When the two strangers, McCann, an immoral Irish Catholic or a defrocked priest in thirties and Goldberg, a Jewish gentleman in fifties who wears a mask of outward charm and polite manner, appear in the play and suggest all of them to celebrate the birthday of Stanley who, if at all, prefers to celebrate it alone, *The Birthday Party* becomes a clear instance of a typical "Pinteresque" play. With a number of disquieting uncertainties, silence, meaningless utterances and a feeling of surveillance, the play becomes a comedy of menace. Instead of conducting the birthday party of the central character as a communal activity with a cordial gathering of all kith and kin, the play brings about an occasion for the isolation and disintegration of characters like Stanley, Meg and Lulu.

Taking advantage of an election day holiday, five friends namely Dasan, Vinayan, Asokan, Dharman and Namboothiri retreat to a bungalow in a hilly region. But as the party continues, it becomes an occasion for the four friends who belong to the upper caste sections of the society to harass the fifth friend, Dasan, obviously from a lower caste or a weaker section of the society. As the party goes on with drinking and

singing, the four persons come out of their roles in the society and start involving themselves in some menacing deeds ostensibly giving expression to their ulterior desires lying latent in the secret folders of their psyche. Their upper caste privilege gives them the power and dominance that they exercise on their victims such as Dasan who are historically and circumstantially compelled to live in the margins of the society without the dignity of a human being. In spite of being an active member of a well-known progressive political organization, Dasan fails to come out of his lower caste identity resisting the dominance and power imposed on him by his upper caste friends. As his name “Dasan” which means “slave” suggests, he is destined to live as a slave in the movie.

When an argument among the friends occurs on climbing the jackfruit tree to pluck jackfruit and killing the rooster to prepare some spicy dish that they were so fond of consuming as they drink alcohol, it is Dasan who, without his consent, is unanimously proposed for the tasks by the four representatives of caste hegemony. When he resists, Dharman, the leading figure among the upper caste characters, says that he is the mentally and physically strong among them. In a sense it's a trap made by them to mitigate Dasan's resistance. In fact, their stance is that they are not the people to do such menial jobs, rather, they are to be involved in things which demand intellectual potentials and refined skills.

In *An Off-Day Game*, the privilege of birth in the upper caste is the ground or basis for their being dominant, hegemonic and inhuman in their attitude to the lower strata of the society that the four upper caste friends betray in their dealing with their friend whereas in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, the reason or ground of this dominance is not that much clear. Stanley is always afraid of the interference of some “they” in his life. Stanley who dreams of playing as a musician in great cities as part of a world tour, lives in Meg's sea side boarding house as a refugee. He is reluctant to come out of the four walls of that room as if he is under the surveillance of a big boss. This can be taken as Pinter's observation on America's attempt to bring the weak nations under its control acting as a big boss or a world economic power in the period of Cold War.

In both the works under consideration, the victims lack the power to fight against these injustices. In the play, Stanley and Petey are independent but they feel they don't have the power to stand against greater forces like state or government. This is obvious in the scene in which Goldberg invites Petey to go with them. Goldberg asks Petey: “Why don't you come with us.....” And Petey replies: “Don't let them tell you what you to do Stan.” (Pinter 92)

In the movie, the victim Dasan raises his voice against the injustice and torture meted out to him. It is viewed as an expression of his frustrated self by the victors. When he expresses his personal opinion on caste politics in a casual discussion on the role of caste in politics, Dharman reacts saying: “This is your being

self-conscious about your black skin and low stature.” To this, Dasan could only retort with anger saying: “Whenever I say something, he will come up with the black thing.” (*An Off-Day Game*)

Sanal Kumar Sasidharan observes in an interview:

Through my movie, I have tried to draw a parallel between India’s political system and the game that the five men play. We have a wonderful constitution which encourages us to change our mindset. But we are not doing that. We are averse to change. We are playing our own games within the ambit of the constitution. (Bhaskaran 7)

In the play as well as the movie, the writers depend on certain peculiar games as tools for exposing the latent ways in which the psyche of the characters who exercise hegemony over the weak ones work. In the play, Meg suggests a game named “blind man’s buff” as part of the celebration of the birthday of Stanley. She suggests it when she is nostalgic of her childhood days, but the two prosecutors namely, McCann and Goldberg, utilize it as an opportunity to derail and harass Stanley who is on the verge of a mental break down. When McCann gets the chance to make Stanley a ‘blind man’, he deliberately breaks his glasses. This is tantamount to disarming Stanley. When light comes back, Stanley is seen spreading over Lulu who is lying on the table unconsciously. Everybody takes it as Stanley’s attempt to rape Lulu. Then the two strangers take the role of prosecutors and start to interrogate Stanley as if he had a criminal past of killing his wife or cheating an organization. This interrogation and torture which arise out of this ‘innocent’ game, lead Stanley to a state of paranoia and soon he becomes a totally dehumanized individual.

If it’s a blind man’s buff in the play, it’s a role play which decides the end of the victim in the movie. Just as a reminder of their childhood period, the five grown up friends decide to play the roles of the king, the judge, the minister, the cope and the thief. But when they play it in adulthood without the innocence of children in their childhood days, it becomes a menacing game to the audience. In the game, the character Namboothiri who is on the extreme top of the caste ladder, takes the role of the judge in the supreme court who is the final word of justice in a democratic nation like India. Then comes the character Dharman who decides to play the role of the king who rules over the nation on behalf of others. Vinayan who is very much diplomatic in nature in the movie takes the role of the minister in the game. The role of the cope comes to Asokan who is the vehement supporter of Victorian morality. And at last, Dasan, the victim, gets the role of the thief. When the cope fails to identify the thief in the first two attempts – in the first attempt he mistakes the king for the thief and in the second the minister for the thief - he manages to be excused from being punished by bribing the judge and the king. When he identifies the thief in the third attempt, Dasan who plays the role of the thief gets punished. He is executed by the other characters considering it the meet punishment for treason. To question the ruler is treated here as equal to questioning the nation itself. There is

pin drop silence in the movie as it gathers momentum creating the terrifying mood in which it ends with the scene showing the hanged body of Dasan. In an interview published in Hindustan Times in 2016, the director observes:

An Off-Day Game talks about power play. In the game which is played out in my film, when the cope finds the king guilty of a crime, a way is found out of this messy situation through bribery. But when one of the five friends, a dark-skinned man, perhaps belonging to a lower caste, is caught, he has no means of escaping from punishment, which is utterly unjust and cruel. (Bhaskaran 7)

Hegemony and subjugation are brought clearly into focus in the play and the movie when the behavioral patterns of the dominant men are dealt with. In the second act of the play, Goldberg who has the attractive appearance of a polite innocent man asks Lulu, an innocent girl in her twenties, to sit on his lap and enters her room in the midnight. Then he abuses her as a whore as seen in the line “You have profaned the soil.” (Pinter, 54) This can be seen as an instance of hegemony and power being applied on a female character taking advantage of a sense of gender superiority. Whereas the other dominant character, namely McCann, assumes the role of a Catholic priest all of a sudden to express his dominance over the much younger and vulnerable character Lulu. This can be treated as an expression of religious hegemony. In an interview with Anna Ford, Pinter observes:

I think that plays like *The Birthday Party* are metaphors really. But I think, when you look at them, they are much, much close to an extremely critical look at the authoritarian postures. Not only state power, but to family power, religious power, but power used to undermine, if not destroy the individual or the questioning voice, or the voice which simply went away from the mainstream and refused to become the part of an easily recognizable set of standards and values. (Ford 88)

Sasidharan invites the attention of the viewers when the camera moves to cover Vinayan’s attempt to flirt with Geetha, the only female in the movie, who acts as a cook in the bungalow. Unlike Lulu who fell in the trap of Goldberg, Geetha takes a strong stand against this attitude of the upper caste men who treat lower caste women as objects of their sexual satisfaction. She not only rejects the flirtation of Vinayan, but also vigorously resists the rape attempt of Dharman. She goes even to the extent of slapping on the face of Dharman and warning him by throwing the knife on him. When Vinayan asks her whether she voted or not, she replies “No, Politics is a male game.” (*An Off-Day Game*). Through this statement, she expresses her politics on life clearly. She is portrayed as a confident character who strives vehemently to keep her dignity

as a lower caste woman unmaligned, despite the fact that she is struggling hard to make the two ends of her life meet.

Even language plays a role in imposing power and hegemony on the down trodden sections of the society. The version of language spoken is a criterion to identify the characters as superior and inferior. While interrogating Stanley in the play, McCann and Goldberg use language skillfully which lets them pass easily as representatives of superior classes. They have a dominance over the victim who is unable to use language properly, or, in other words, in their version. (Mostoufi 147) When the prosecutors ask some riddle-like meaningless questions, Stanley who is a representative of the weaker section of the society fails to raise his voice, loses presence of mind and to a certain extent loses his identity itself. The interrogators' questions like "Why did the chicken cross the road?", "Is the number 846 possible or necessary?" etc. land Stanley in a state of utter confusion and before long he moves to a state of insanity. It can be seen as part of the policies of the authority or state to brand those who rebel against them or who question the injustices of those who have power as abnormal, anti-national or seditious. Stanley might have been a rebel at loggerheads with the authorities from whose persecution he was seeking a shelter at Meg's lodge.

From the beginning of *An Off-Day Game*, the dominant male characters use sexually abusive language, even in casual talks. When Namboothiri who doesn't have the habit of taking liquor in the day time starts to drink, Dharman comments "Chastity has been lost. Don't worry, you can wear the attire after some time." (*An Off-Day Game*) Here Dharman treats a woman who has lost her chastity in a rape and the indecent habit of drinking liquor equally.

Though *An Off-Day Game* is a movie that criticizes the hegemony and violence on the basis of caste in India, its stand is ambivalent and dubious in some scenes. The abusive language of the male characters in the movie betrays their attitude towards women. In one scene, the causes of democracy in man-woman relationship and consent for sex are championed through the dialogues of Vinayan. Likewise, the opposition of Namboothiri, who represents the very highest step of the caste ladder, to the reservation for the down trodden caste and community in education and job, is also an instance of the dubious double stand the movie takes.

The violence and torture Stanley is subjected to by the prosecutors in the play and the execution of Dasan by the upper caste men in the movie persuade us to look for parallels in the unfortunate murder of George Floyd in police brutality in the U.S. city of Minneapolis on 5th May, 2020.

In short, an analysis of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *An Off-Day Game* in the theoretical premises of power and violence brings to view how power controls every aspect of

human life like language, diverse conditions from sanity to madness, sex and even the brutal victimization of those who belong to the down trodden sections of the society. In all certitude, one can say that *The Birthday Party* and *An Off-Day Game* are artistic expressions of the dark realities of the social orders that prevailed in two different milieus in two different ages exposing ailments of similar nature.

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