

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

24th November marked the second death anniversary of Harold Pinter, the British intellectual best known as a playwright. Kolkata is not indifferent to Pinter, although Utpal Datta didn't like his work. Pegasus Press has brought out a slim volume of four plays in Bangla, adapted from Pinter's *The Mountain Language, the Hothouse, A Night Out, and From Ashes to Ashes*.*

Pinter is usually claimed by the Left as one of their own, though he himself thought he detested politics :

"...and politically there's no question of my getting involved because the issues are by no means simple-to be a politician you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way. Ultimately, politics do bore me, though I recognize they are responsible for a good deal of suffering. I distrust ideological statements of any kind.I don't care about political structures-they don't alarm me, but they cause a great deal of suffering to millions of people."

One perversity of the human condition is that the protagonist is often made to live a life contrary to what he professes sincerely and without hypocrisy. Pinter didn't like fascists and as a student in the East End of London, he had to deal with belligerent fascist gangs, carrying broken bottles. He refused to fight in the 2nd world war:

"There was never any question of my going when I was called up for military service three years later: I couldn't see any point in it at all. I refused to go. So I was taken in a police car to the medical examination. Then I had two tribunals and two trials. I could have gone to prison-I took my toothbrush to the trials-but it so happened that the magistrate was slightly sympathetic, so I was fined instead, thirty pounds in all. Perhaps I'll be called up again in the next war, but I won't go."

Ever since the forcible removal of Allende, the duly elected President of Chile, Pinter became a fighter for human rights, and visited Turkey with Arthur Miller during the 1985 troubles over there. He opposed the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and was scathing against both Iraq wars on many occasions, one being the delivery of a speech in the UK House of Commons of the British parliament in 2003. He called George Bush Jr a war criminal and was hardly more civil to Tony Blair. Earlier, in John Major's time, Pinter relinquished his knighthood. While receiving an honorary Doctorate at the University of Turin, he said that the USA believes that only the three thousand who died in the raid on the WTC are truly, lamentably dead, and the deaths of thousands of people in Afghanistan and thousands of children in Iraq are of no account.

If detesting politics takes a man to such a resolution of one of his dilemmas, maybe more people should start detesting politics.

Harold Pinter defied labeling. He was too concerned about individuals and himself as an individual, to be a totalitarian of any variety, Left, Right or Centre. Almost classical in his concern with craft and form, construction and structure, he was a disciplinarian, not an anarchist, not a post-modern at all. The central truths of his plays were bitter, but they were there to the despair of the absurdists. He says, "Something people don't realize is the great boredom one has with oneself..." But his life and work contradict this fearful ennui he talks about-maybe he was afraid of it.

What is at the core of his work? The delineation, through situations and characters and their inter-relationships, of an ever present quest for dominance and the concomitant threat of violence.

"The world is a pretty violent place, it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor..... The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays. I wrote a short story a

long time ago called "The Examination," and my ideas of violence carried on from there. That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would try to undermine the other person's dominance. A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be.I wouldn't call this violence so much as a battle for positions; it's a very common, everyday thing.Everyone encounters violence in some way or other."

He worries about creating living characters, true characters. To him that is what makes or breaks a play. There is, of course, the point of the play, "its central truth." But, he is worried to death about becoming didactic or missionary while making the point, always grappling with the problem of keeping the audience "glued" to the play:

"I have occasionally out of irritation thought about writing a play with a satirical point. I once did, actually, a play about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical, and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters; they really didn't live at all. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally-for the only time, I think-trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live. Whereas in other plays of mine every single character, even a bastard like Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, I care for."

Harold Pinter was an arena where a great artist fought a man with great concern for his fellow beings. Out of this fight emerged some of the best plays of the last century. □

[* Harold Pinter *obolombone Char-ti Natak* by Siddhartha Biswas, Pegasus Press, 2009. Acknowledgement: Interview by Larry Bensky in 'the Paris Review'.]