

Effects of Oppression on Mental Health

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Abstract

Oppression affects the mental health of the oppressed people. There is a well-established link between the wellbeing of a person and the environment he lives in. An oppressive environment will have an adverse effect on the mental wellbeing and cause several disorders. Harold Pinter has made his mission to fight against oppression especially the political oppression thrust on common people by the governmental institutions. His plays testify his crusade against oppression. Also, his protagonists reveal severe mental disorders caused by the oppressive environment they face. This article seeks to study the effects of political institutionalized oppression on the mental health of the characters in the plays of Harold Pinter.

Keywords

Delusion, Fear, Mental Disorder, Oppression, Survival.

Introduction

Harold Pinter had first-hand experience of political oppression in his childhood. He witnessed the effects of World War personally. He was a Jew and lived through the fear of Nazi terror. The wars had such an impact on Pinter that he refused to have a part in it as a conscientious objector. Later he made it his mission to fight against oppression. Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta in the obituary published in Frontline magazine state that, "To the heritage of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet, Harold Pinter (1930-2008) added an atmosphere of deep menace and claustrophobia" (n. p). The obituary also quotes the Nobel Prize announcement in 2005 which appreciates Pinter as a writer "who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms" (n. p). His plays depict the effects of state's oppression on the oppressed individual's mental health.

Methodology

The methodology used here is textual analysis and character study. The text chosen is the play of Harold Pinter: *The Birthday Party*.

Stanley in *The Birthday Party*

Stanley Webber, the protagonist of *The Birthday Party*, is a character with severe neurotic disorder. He comes to a seaside town and never leaves the lodge for a year now when the action begins. The reason why he stays there for a prolonged period of time is unknown. But it is

obvious that he has been hiding himself from his oppressors. They eventually trace him and come in search of him. Finally, they even manage to take him away.

Discussion

Stanley shows signs of mental disorder. Symptoms of mental disorders need not be persistent but could be sporadic. Symptoms of psychiatric disorder include agitation, anxiety, depression, mania, paranoia, psychosis etc. Of these several disorders Stanley seems to possess at least a few.

Stanley behaves childishly and engages in playful conversation with Meg until he hears that two gentlemen are visiting.

Meg. ... I've got to get things in for the two gentlemen.

A pause. Stanley slowly raises his head. He speaks without turning.

Stanley. What gentlemen? (19-20)

The pause in between is suggestive of a striking change that is happening in Stanley. The erstwhile playful Stanley suddenly becomes serious and extremely agitated. The impending arrival of the two gentlemen causes anxiety in him. He raises questions repeatedly as to who they were and why they were coming.

Stanley (grinding his cigarette). When was this?

Meg. Last night.

Stanley. Who are they?

Meg. I don't know.

Stanley. Didn't he tell their names?

Meg. No.

Stanley (pacing the room). Here? They wanted to come here? (20)

Stanley is seen grinding his cigarette and pacing the room up and down which clearly indicate his apprehensions. Moreover, he does not even know who is coming. Yet, he is scared of their arrival.

Stanley appears to have lost interest in everything.

Lulu. Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible.

Stanley. Awash wouldn't make any difference.

Lulu. Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me, looking like that. (26)

When he understands that there is nothing, he could do to prevent the two men from visiting them, the feeling of anxiety gives way to a kind of depression. "Silence. He groans, his trunk falls forward, his head falls into his hands." These are signs of desperation. As a means of escaping impending horror, Stanley resorts to escaping into delusion.

He looks at her, then speaks airily.

Stanley. Berlin. A night club. Playing the piano. A fabulous salary. And all found.

Meg. How long for?

Stanley. Yes. Then we pay a flying visit to ... er...whats is name....

Meg. Where?

Stanley. Constantinople. Zagreb. Vladivostock. It's a world tour.

Stanley who has played the piano at a concert only once, according to his account, which may or may not be true, willingly suspends all rationality and drowns in the delusional world. The

reason for Stanley's disorders seems to be oppression. He is accused of having escaped the institution. The kind of oppressive treatment he was meted out with at the institution is not revealed in the play. But, his distrust of the totally unknown strange gentlemen turns out to be justified. The distrust and the feeling of persecution he displays is definitely not unrealistic. It does happen so as he feared.

Meg treats Stanley as a kid. Though he does not feel like a kid, he allows her to treat him like one.

Meg. ... Stan! I'm coming to fetch you if you don't come down! I'm coming up!
I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm going to get you! (13)

Stanley acts like a kid perhaps to satiate Meg's desire for a kid. He is entirely aware of her disposition towards him. He is also aware of the sexual overtures in her behavior. He tolerates it and even puts up a show of enjoying it or at least not minding it. He finds himself secure in Meg's house because she hasn't discovered that he knows it all. His intention was to dissolve in obscurity which he finds is possible in the boarding house of Meg and Petey. Sanity is not tolerated by the system and hence Stanley wears the mask of insanity at times and ignorance at other times. Yet, agents of the system arrive to threaten him into insanity. He is modified into an automaton. He asks Petey, "What's it like out today? (14) Stanley does not even venture out of the house. Though he is a man in his late thirties does not seem to have any profession.

Meg. Did you sleep well?

Stanley. I didn't **sleep at all.**

Sleeplessness or insomnia is a disorder which is associated with several psychiatric issues.

The symptoms are not always persistent. They are seen now and then. There's normality at other times. Mental disorder does not mean that the person should be a lunatic or always displaying the signs and symptoms. They are in fact quite normal people who tend to break down or give away their composure. Feeling insecure or unsafe aggravates or instigates mental disorder. Oppression is a key factor causing mental disorder in Stanley. The character of Stanley could be taken as a perfect example of how oppression could affect the mental health of a person.

Stanley. Let me – just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in the house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here. (A little less forceful.) Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss? (45)

The above stated speech is one of the rare occasions wherein Stanley shows remarkable clarity which is strikingly in contrast to his babble shown below.

Goldberg. What do you think? Eh, boy?

Stanley begins to clench and unclench his eyes.

Stanley. Uh-gug ... uh-gug ... eehhh-gag ... (On the breath.)

Caahh **Caahh....**

The dissimilarity is too obvious, the reason for the sudden change is also obvious. The oppression Stanley faces in the hands of Goldberg and McCann causes such a dramatic change in him. Oppressive environment definitely triggers the mental disorders.

The oppressed are subjected to violence. The scary thing is often the oppressed become perpetrators of violence themselves. When they reach a breaking point, they break down into a heap of nervous wreck damaging themselves and those around them. Stanley, in his frustration tries to kill Meg and rape Lulu. He feels compelled to ascertain his existence. He feels compelled to reveal that his power is no less than that of other individuals surrounding him. When he feels powerless, he resorts to establishing that he is powerful. And the way he has seen power is only in the way of physicality. Hence, he too resorts to exhibiting physical power. He cannot take it out on Goldberg or McCann, so he takes it out on Meg and Lulu. It might also be that it is only to these people that he wants to show that he is a powerful person. He simply transfers the violence he receives to them.

The psychological effects of oppression could be well studied from the character of Stanley. According to The International Re-evaluation Counseling Communities in a statement published in its Draft Liberation Policy Statements 'normal' is a term which has been misconstrued,

"Normal" consists of a collection of oppressor patterns (usually white, male, middle- and owning-class, heterosexual, Protestant, able-bodied, age thirty to forty-five). If you are anything else, you are not "normal." People who carry many oppressor roles often end up with heavy "normal" patterns. (p. 2)

However, oppressors are not normal people. They too are mentally affected. Dr. Chittaranjan Misra in his paper *Theatre against Brutalism: Pinter's Political Plays* reveals how oppressors are also affected by oppression, and oppressors are mentally affected by the oppression they enforce. In his words,

Mountain Language, a play depicting brutalities not only shows the miseries of the victims but at the same time shows how the soldiers in the play do get some fun out of torturing the prisoners. Pinter himself speaks about the context that sometimes torturers become easily bored and to kill boredom they inflict pain on the victims to keep their spirits up. (p. 3)

The same can be said of the oppressors in the play *The Birthday Party*.

Identity crisis, insecurity of being the odd one out and mental health are all interrelated. Dr Ian Ashman and Caroline Gibson have quoted Laing in their research paper *Existential Identity, Ontological Insecurity and Mental Well-being in the Workplace* to define an ontologically insecure person as "Precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question" (p. 7). They also quote the Director of the Society for Laingian Studies:

The term schizoid was not restricted only to extreme forms of psychosis because most everyone experiences some degree of schizoid splitness at times in their lives. The defensive behaviour of 'normal' — that is ontologically secure — individuals differ only in degree, not kind, from that of ontologically insecure people. (p. 8)

Thus the difference between normal and not so normal is not huge. Yet, the nonconformists are considered as schizoid and mentally affected because of the oppression they are subjected to.

Conclusion

Mental disorder does not mean that the person should be a lunatic or always displaying the signs and symptoms. They are in fact quite normal people who tend to break down or give

away their composure. Feeling insecure or unsafe aggravates or instigates mental disorder. Oppression is a key factor causing mental disorder in Stanley. The character of Stanley could be taken as a perfect example of how oppression could affect the mental health of a person.

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