

## The Praxis of Revolt and Revolution in Pinter's *The Lovers* (1962)

Basila Husnain

### Abstract

This study examines the praxis of revolt and revolution in Pinter's play *The Lovers* (1962). The initial Absurdist critique of Pinter's plays failed to gauge their socio-political relevance. Later critics tried to comprehend his work in the template of political allegories. Pinter fought against such monolithic interpretations and "such final definitive". Despite all this opposition, the personal and the political remains a key dilemma in his works on the basis of which Pinter is considered a part of Revolt Theatre. However, in this thesis, I demonstrate how Pinter could not be constrained in any of the existing divisions of Revolt Theatre because he does not only challenge the boundaries of the established forms of revolt but also introduces a new dialect of revolution. Pinter's plays are not entirely based on the existing dichotomies of Revolt Theater: Man v/s God, Man v/s System or Man v/s Man revolutions but his plays position the actual possibility of change in the realm of Intimate Revolt, which is the border between the individual and social. It is a concept proposed by Julia Kristeva in series of her Revolt books. Therefore, this research proposes Pinter as the pioneer of fourth form of Revolt Theatre which can be termed as the Intimate Revolt.

Through this analysis of Pinter's play from the original perspective of Intimate Revolt we can understand the postmodern idea of Revolt and its expression in literature. Also in doing so, this work proposes to trace the progression of Revolt Theatre from "Existentialist Revolt" to "Intimate Revolt."

**Keywords:** Intimate Revolt, psychic life, interpretation, threshold, society of spectacle.

Pinter portrays the complex relationship of politics and individuals in his plays. He was easily considered as part of the existing long tradition of Revolt Theatre. No doubt the representation of “political” in his plays is the crux of all meanings and interpretations. Since Pinter has been overtly active in national politics his works naturally got labeled and confused with “political theatre” also known as Radical Theatre at times. Although he proclaimed in a speech at National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in (1962) “I've never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory”(ix). Despite such proclamations his constant defiance against tags was met with incredulity by critics. Many critics like Penelope Prentice came for defense of Pinter's play against such reductive readings in her book *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic* (1994) Prentice supports Pinter's status as a postmodern playwright par excellence rather than a theorist.

The postmodern society cannot abide by the same or uniform meanings of political. It is a time of breaking free from the monolithic discourses and to invest multiplicity of meaning in the ever-changing realities of the world of internet and web. In this scenario Pinter's work survives and thrives as a dramatist which can only be attributed to its contemporary relevance. Pinter's politics is quite coherent with the idea of postmodern society and by studying it through Kristeva's theory of Intimate Revolt we can understand the new expression of Revolt Theatre blooming in the works of Harold Pinter. Despite considerable work being conducted on Pinter's plays from many angles like psychoanalytical, linguistic, socio political there has not been any research so far to regard Pinter as the pioneer of the fourth form of Revolt Theatre, the Intimate Revolt. By analyzing Pinter's plays in the light of Kristeva's theory of Intimate Revolt this paper addresses a huge research gap.

Firstly, in order to understand the meanings, implications and application of the term “Intimate Revolt”, I will contextualize the tradition of Revolt Theatre of which Pinter is assumed the latest prophet. Robert Sanford Brustein in *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama* (1964) defines Revolt Theatre as the theatre of “modern dramatists where myths of rebellion are enacted” (Burstein 5). For “the rebel dramatist is one who dreams— and puts his reality in such an important theme in the modern drama” (Ibid 14). Eventually in the tradition of the Revolt Theatre we see how God is assumed dead, institutions are shattered by Ibsenian characters. Now the Existentialist rebel has nothing but this own existence to challenge. This became the great theatre of Existentialism and Absurdism practiced by Strindberg, Beckett, Ionesco, Albee and many more. But this exhausted form is “probably not the last or final phase of the Revolt Theatre. It maybe the final phase-but it is not the conclusion of the modern drama” (Ibid 32). Hence, this brings us to the question Burstein asks at the end of his Introduction to the Revolt Theatre, “is this the end of modern Revolt Theatre?” It is for this very purpose that I chose Revolt as the key idea of my study because if we aim to understand Pinter’s work in its entirety we need to contextualize his work within the existing tradition of Revolt Theatre but in doing so we must strive to understand his unique contribution to the Theatre of Revolt. The exploration of the praxis of revolt and revolution in Pinter’s plays enables us to find the suitable idiom of our contemporary idea of revolt and revolution.

The social and political unrest, the drama of conflicts, which keeps haunting our TV screens and world, can be translated with the help of Pinter’s works. After all he is not only representative of the postmodern form of revolt but also as an artist who

has the power of consoling if not curing. There is more than one common aspect in Pinter's work and Kristeva's theory of Revolt. Beginning from the era, Post modernism, to which they both belong I shall discuss how Kristeva's notion of Revolt is actually an emulation of Pinter's unique Revolt. Thus the theory of Intimate Revolt has already found its representation in Pinter's Theatre of Revolt. To substantiate the point several comparisons are drawn between Kristeva and Pinter's political ideologies and their manifestation in their works. Julia Kristeva's relationship to modern and contemporary social and political discourses is complex, ambiguous territory. Though she has claimed that the "problem of the 20th century was and remains there habilitation of the political" (Keltner 68) and that our world is a "necessarily political" one (Keltner 235), exactly how her works are to be related to social and political thought is difficult to clarify. Her constant reluctance to define politics in the conventional sense serving the fetish of given ideologies resembles Pinter's effort to let the "play speak for itself". To draw yet another parallel, I think the primary reason for this is that both Kristeva and Pinter are obviously political in their interests but both use the term "revolt" in a unique and unprecedented sense. Pinter's practice of revolt is as unique as Kristeva's concept of Intimate Revolt but both are concerned with the "psychic life of the individual in modern society" (1). Thus there is an irrefutable parallel between Pinter and Kristeva as they both are concerned with the psychic life of individual, language and the new possibilities of Revolt in terms of meanings as well as representation.

Pinter as well as Kristeva propose a revolt against this complacent and "uninterrupted" order, the normalizing order. In simple words Kristeva declares

“interpretation” as a revolt. This idea finds its representation in Pinter’s works and his imploration against all “tags” and “labels”. His work invites the audience to construct his own meanings, revolting against the pre-constructs offered by the critics. Politics and language are crucial to Kristeva as well as Pinter’s work. However in both their works these terms are manifested and practiced in multiple ways, never abiding to any fixed context.

So, what exactly is Intimate Revolt? Intimate Revolt is Kristeva’s term for the revolts that are defense of the individual’s psychic life against the numbing effect of the society of spectacle. In her essay, “The Powers of Horror”, Kristeva proposes that the society is seen as nothing but a discourse created by individuals through their psychic life. If the individual lets his mind bombarded by images, as is happening in our times, he is reduced to nothing but an automaton. He loses the ability to experience life, change, time and hence the other. The other here implies social norms and political realities too. In order to prevent the individual from such “dead” life and ensure a mobilization of minds at large in a society, one must turn to Intimate Revolt. It is this form of revolt that guarantees individual’s life as conscious beings comprised of subjectivity and living in a clock time. Kristeva’s concern for the Intimate is not a concern for the private individual in opposition to what is more properly “social” or “political”. Rather Kristeva’s concern with the Intimate is a concern for a border or threshold that is at once the border of affectivity and discourse, the social bond, and historical being (“The Powers of Horror” 2).

Subjectivity is essentially a concept that combines the psychoanalytical I with the social Self. It is a subject which is formed at the threshold of the semiotic and symbolic. Thus the moments where the subjectivity stands challenged are the moments of the Intimate Revolt where the semiotic and symbolic drives fail to create meaning. But in its positive usage, intimacy is conceptualized as the process of the production of meaning. Thus at one level we can say that the subjectivity is a subjective- symbolic dynamic of the advent and loss of meaning. It is the crisis of meaning and subjectivity is experienced in three concrete moments of intimacy: abjection, loss and love. These are the true experiences where temporality, subjectivity and meaning stand challenged.

But these moments of intimacy are also moments of open possibilities, change, transformation and re-turn. By re-visiting the boundaries of subjectivity, “I” the subject is able to change, transform, revolt and recreate meaning. Since, as Keltner proposes that Kristeva's theory of subjectivity is also theory of meanings we can approach these concrete moments of Intimate Revolt from another perspective that is the aspect of “meaning making”. The advent and loss of meaning define my subjectivity, my position as a speaking being in a society is primarily dependent on my ability of meaning making. The symbolic order does not create meanings in the consumer culture of the modern society but repeat empty representation of unreal “reality”. This is so because for “creating meaning” true genuine “experience” is needed but our society of spectacle is so engaged with “consuming images” that we barely allow the “individual” to experience the reality. Instead of becoming a subject with dynamic subjectivity, individuals are reduced to mere automatons who lack the power of meaning making. Hence, they are incapable of bringing about any change in the socio-political scenario.

The media friendly consumer culture of technocrats finds “alter ego of the society of the spectacle” (Keltner 29).

Therefore, in order to bring about change, revolt and revolution in our society, we need to create room, “space” in Kristeva’s language for meaning making. This space lies at the threshold of semiotic and symbolic, a moment of Intimate Revolt where the subject must engage with the process of meaning making in order to hope for a future. This process of re-visiting his subjectivity, recreating meaning is defined as an Intimate Revolt which is also a concept of temporality rather than ethics. Thus we return to Kristeva’s description of the word revolt which does not mean discarding of old tradition in exchange of new, an act of rejection but a re-addressing past values in order to create a better future.

Kristeva proposes three key avenues of Intimate Revolt: subjectivity, meaning and temporality. It is through the disruption of the meaning of the subjectivity and temporality that the individual’s psychic life can be brought back into the realm of “experience”. In other words, for modern man to live in the real time he must be wrenched from the dead time of spectacle.

The disruptive temporality in Kristeva’s sense is expressed in the form of “depression”, “dejection”, “melancholia” and “love”. These become the moments of experience that forces the individual to narrate and thus bring it in the order of the symbolic. First site of revolt for Kristeva is Time. Time in Kristeva’s world is inseparable from subjectivity. In her book *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000) she writes:

This subjectivity is coextensive to time – an individual’s time, history’s

time, being's time – more clearly and more explicitly than anywhere else...Likewise, various modalities of time lead us not to imagine an end of history as some have been able to do in the United States or Japan but to try to bring new figures of temporary to the fore. (Kristeva 9)

In her book she engages with the works of writers who are “attentive to the drama of subjectivity and to different approaches of time” (ibid 9). In “New Forms of Revolt” Kristeva postulates that “today, mental life knows that it will only be saved if it gives itself the time and space of revolt: to break, to remember, to re-do.” These new figures of temporality disrupt the complacent experience of the time of automaton by offering the individual “an experience” “unknown, surprise, pain, or delight,” (ibid 11). In *Black Sun* (1987) Kristeva describes the time in which we ordinarily live as the time of discourse. This time of proper is the time of “subject/object” it is the normal time of “the speaking being” in the symbolic order. She calls this possibility of temporality as noon time which is a moment in time that has stopped being meaningful. It is this possibility of time which Kristeva presupposes as a site for revolt. Keltner writes about this time in her book *Kristeva: Key Contemporary Thinkers* (1994):

Contrary to ordinary time, the temporality of melancholia/depression is characterized by the absence of a future and a hyperbolic past that refuses to pass by. Melancholia / depression lack a future horizon and confront a traumatic, affective ‘space’ one may only characterize with the adjectives ‘too much’ ‘too much sorrow or too much joy’. (60)

In my research, however, I explore only the Intimate Revolt expressed on the sites

of two concrete experiences: Abjection and Loss / Melancholia. There are several examples of such depressed or melancholic characters in Pinter's plays. We see that Pinter's characters are usually living in this disruptive temporality. Memory, past and future are important tropes in Pinter's plays. Now using Kristeva's model of temporality we can see this interruption of time not as a lacking but as a moment filled with the possibility of revolt, revolution and change.

*The Lovers* was published in 1962. It is a one act play generally performed with *The Collection* (1961) by Pinter as both the plays deal with the theme of role-plays and games. The main character, Richard and Sarah, the husband and wife perform roles of lovers to sustain the spark of their cold marriage. But eventually, Richard's male ego proves a hurdle in the smooth game play. Yet it continues as arrangement but with a certain "change".

In this play, from the beginning, the binaries of "symbolic and semiotic" are clearly drawn. The male and female subjectivities represent the traditional division of semiotic and symbolic. As the play opens, we see the stage divided into "two areas". One is the "living room", where the main character, Richard, the husband and Sarah, the wife, engage as "lovers". They adapt pretense by choice in order to save the otherwise cold marriage. Apparently, the other part of the stage is the "bedroom" where they perform their original roles of husband and wife without actually performing the traditionally ascribed role as is expected of husband and wife in a bedroom (149).

Already there is an obvious statement of "confused" identities of the characters within the symbolic order which is further enhanced as the "traditional" woman doing her duties as wife, "emptying and dusting" (149). It is evident from the following

passage that Richard is clearly sure of their roles as husband and wife, a role imposed by the society:

Sarah: I find the thought of dinner fatiguing. I prefer not to think about it.

Richard: That's rather unfortunate. I'm hungry.

Slight Pause.

You hardly expect me to embark on dinner after a day spent sifting  
matters of high finance on the City.

She laughs.

One could even suggest you were falling down on your safely duties. (176)

Later we see how she transforms into an adulterous woman through the question put to her by her husband Richard who asks “is your lover coming today?” For Richard the other woman is “simply a whore, a functionary who either pleases or displeases” (156). Although Sarah can’t really get accustomed to this role which is evident from her broken sentence where she censors the word whore as she exclaims “But, quite honestly, I can’t really believe she’s just...what you say” (156). It is this division or boundary of identification of the other, which strengthens his subjectivity but as the play proceeds, this boundary becomes more and more fluid until he exclaims that “I cannot go with it, it’s killing me” (Pinter 169). His desperation is evident as he goes on insisting “it’s got to stop. I cannot go on” (169).

On the other hand, the wife who symbolizes the semiotic does not draw such exclusive boundaries and hence she is less threatened by the dissolution of the borders.

We can see her mentioning her husband to her lover, Max and vice versa without any hesitation. Although she continuously tries to ascertain Richard's reaction to which she knows it might be offensive. She keeps on asking him, "you are happy, aren't you? You are not in any way jealous?" (161), for her the fluidity is not alarming. She thinks that "things are beautifully balanced" (161). It is so because she is not afraid to admit her expectations of love and sexual gratification as she describes both her lover Max and husband Richard as "terribly sweet" and "very loving" (160). This however, is very "nauseating" for Richard (160). Nausea is the obvious pointer of the feeling of abjection.

Abjection is the loss of identification with the symbolic and is a fear of the semiotic. It is a boundary where subjectivity and meanings seems to collapse. In order to live the subject "I" needs to identify with the symbolic and detach with the "other". Richard fails to demarcate the boundaries of his subjectivity and starts feelings intimidated by the "other" Max inside him, the extreme image of abjection. Consequently, he feels threatened by the liquidating boundaries; he experiences revolt as he expresses his aggression towards both the semiotic that is the law of mother, the female as he tries to resurrect his masculine image by expressing his desire to meet the lover, after all, he says "we're both men. You are just a bloody woman." (170). And at the same time he experiences revolt against Max too who seems "mad" (170) to him now as he represents the "other" in I, the abject.

All the balance and harmony of meanings collapse at once through this dialogue, the dialogue which is form of a subject's participation in the process of meaning making.

As the audience deals with this shock, confused identity, the whole play/ stage becomes a place beyond the symbolic and meaning. The couple takes up the role of lovers under pre-planned arrangements and with consent. A close reading of the play suggests, Richard is unable to explore and sustain his sexual desires as he feels challenged as a symbolic being by the powerful semiotic drives which are symbolized in the form of his wife's aggressive sexual needs. In order to retain his subjectivity, he completely blocks or separates the semiotic language from the symbolic language which is apparent in his unwillingness to his wife. Since he has a clear demarcation of identities which corresponds to his sense of being. He clearly states that the role he imagines for his wife as a lover is not that of a mistress which might appear as her "double". For him, the opposite of a docile traditional wife is a garden slut. He claims that there is a world of difference. For him the wife is an object he can possess and thus belongs to the symbolic where she can be defined as the other with respect to "I" which is his status as subject. This consolidates his subjectivity, for instance he says:

Richard: Great pride, to walk with you as my wife on my arm. To see you smile, laugh, walk, talk, bend, be still. To hear your command of contemporary phraseology, your delicate use of the very latest idiomatic expression, so subtly complied. Yes. To feel the envy of others, their attempts to gain favour with you, by fairs means or foul, your austere grace confounding them. And to know you are my wife. It's a source of a profound satisfaction to me. (75)

In order to restore the law of the father, Richard re-defines, re-evaluates the moment

of this Intimate Revolt, a moment of collapse, by introducing “the children” which then ensure his place in the symbolic order. This form or moment of Intimate Revolt is informed by subject's willing and active participation in the process of meaning making. Thereby, re-vitalizing his psychic life and helping him resume the boundaries of his subjectivity by performing his role in the process of meaning making.

Notably, Kristeva suggests that symbolic and semiotic are always at once part of the subjectivity. We see Richard resuming his game of “the lover” although he questions to whom the house belongs “either to me, or to you or to another”. It is through this question and support of the semiotic order represented by his wife who willingly adapts the role of a “slut” to offer conformity to his subjectivity and adapting to “change” which is the demand Richard keeps on repeating at the end. This desire for change can be seen as a desire to break free from the constraints of the symbolic order or the law of the father but it is at the same time an epiphanic moment offered to him by “experiencing” abjection as Max, a meaningless image. Since sexual desire comprises the pre-language state, it must be infused in the symbolic order, legitimated instead of disowned in order to have a revitalized subjectivity (induction of individual in the symbolic order).

In the end temporality as a site of Intimate Revolt is highlighted by the constant mentioning of time by the two characters. Their routine, as well as roles are divided by the clock time which is a new modality of time. Because one role and relationship belongs to the social or symbolic function that of husband and wife whereas the other to that of the semiotic world since sexual desire is pre-symbolic in nature. Eventually the complex temporality becomes a site of crisis and a portal of Intimate Revolt as the

evenings of the lovers start encroaching upon the time of legitimate love of husband and wife which is the temporality of symbolic order. So we see in the following passage, Richard asks Sarah whether she forgets about him while being with her lover or does she recalls him at times:

Sarah: Only at...certain times.

Richard: Of course.

Sarah: How could I forget you?

Richard: Quite easily, I should think.

Sarah: But I'm in your house.

Richard: With another. (154)

The house here becomes the law of the father that is the reminder and defense of Richards' role as the legitimate patriarch unlike the lover who belongs nowhere.

Then as the play progresses we see the encroachment of symbolic temporality over the semiotic. As Max asks Sarah as to what time her husband would come back or when she reminds Max that she's a married woman. Such instances of the moment of crisis of temporality eventually leave Richard tired and exhausted of the arrangement as he expresses his desire to get out of it. For instance, Richard asks "Doesn't he get a bit bored with these damn afternoons? This eternal tea time? I would. To have as the constant image of your lust a milk jug and teapot. Must be terribly dampening" (160). And here for example he says as a lover, Max, "I played my last game" (171).

Even Sarah finds this crisis of time difficult as she says "I wish you'd stop this

rubbish, anyways" (170). As she is unable to understand the moment of non-time where she stands at the threshold of crisis and must make her way out or take a de tour. Then as they introduce the role of lovers as the play ends at night which is the time of husband and wife, the symbolic temporality somehow gets infused with the semiotic desire thereby resolving the crisis. Hence, in line with the theoretical framework the close reading of play shows how Sarah and Richard are eventually able to re-evaluate and re-define their subjectivity at the verge of dissolution of meaning and temporality.

Pinter's plays become a piece of art that is politically charged but not in the traditional sense as it steers clear of all didactics and propaganda. The play becomes a form of resistance against the dead time of spectacle that merely "represents" and does not leave room for "expression". In fighting against the "explaining away" the reductive critiques, Pinter is able to restore the essential of "experience" to the plays. The audience / reader will be able to and actually have been looking for interpretation instead of definite conclusions. If anything, this is the exact need of the extremist psyche of today's individual which is constantly being fed with images of violence and prejudice. The binaries of self and other have become cruelly strong and current global politics is nothing but a power game between these two binaries. Through Intimate Revolt, that is shaken, confused, mitigated and questioned subjectively, art like Pinter's work can develop a more empathetic understanding of the other and self.

### **Works Cited**

Bennett, Michael Y. *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Bensky, Lawrence M. "An Interview with Pinter." *Pinter in the Theatre*. Ian Smith (ed). London: Nick Het Books. 2005, p.63

Brustein, Robert Sanford. *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama*. Boston, Little, Brown, 1964.

Nobel Lecture. Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html).

Cusac, Anne Marie. "Harold Pinter Interview." *The Progressive*. Norman Stockwell, 26 Dec. 2008. Web. 29 Oct. 2016.

Kristeva, Julia, and Toril Moi. *The Kristeva Reader*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1986.

Kristeva, Julia. *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, NY: Columbia U Press, 2010. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. "New Forms of Revolt." *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2014, pp. 1–19., doi:10.5195/jffp.2014

Keltner, Stacey. *Kristeva*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010. Print.

Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic : The Erotic Aesthetic*. New York: Garland, 2000. Print.

Pinter, Harold, and Mel Gussow. *Conversations with Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1996. Print.

Pinter, Harold, and Michael Scott. *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming; A Casebook*. Hounds Mills: Macmillan, 2000. Print.

Pinter, Harold. *The Lovers*. London, Cambridge University Press, 1962.

Sjöholm, Cecilia. *Kristeva and the Political*. London, Routledge, 2005.