

The Decentered Subject: Memory Plays of Harold Pinter

- Mufti Mudasir

Abstract: The present paper attempts to explore the treatment of memory by the Nobel laureate and one of the most prominent postmodern playwrights, Harold Pinter. It tries to situate some important plays of Pinter, also known as memory plays, against the theoretical background of postmodernism and the concomitant shift in the conceptualization of human subjectivity. A close textual reading of these plays is carried out to show how Pinter succeeds in laying bare the condition of decenteredness of characters by departing radically from the conventions of realistic drama. In fact, as the paper demonstrates, Pinter should be seen as one of the first playwrights to treat the idea of memory in a characteristic postmodern manner.

Keywords: memory, human subject, monologue, postmodernism.

One of the most remarkable features of postmodern theatre and now a familiar feature of narration on stage is the treatment of past through the memories of characters. This exceptional preoccupation with memory finds expression in various dramatic techniques which exploit the structures of repetition, regression, amnesia, simultaneity and deliberate evasion. In an important critical examination of the treatment of memory in postmodern drama, *Memory Theatre and Postmodern Drama* (1999), Jeanette Malkin has the following insight to offer:

Within postmodernism, I contend, there has occurred a shift in the way we remember, and hence in the way culture, and for our purposes, the theatre, represents and reenacts remembering. Where once memory called up coherent, progressing narratives of experienced life, or at least unlocked the significance of hidden memory for the progression of the present, this kind of enlightenment organization has broken down in postmodernism and given way to nonnarrative production of conflated, disrupted, repetitive, and moreover collectively retained and articulated fragments. This shift in the workings of memory is reflected in plays shaped through fragment, recurrence, and imagistic tumult. (1999:4)

Harold Pinter is certainly one of the earliest playwrights to deal with questions of memory in a characteristic postmodern mode stated by Malkin above. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pinter wrote some powerful memory plays. Whereas Pinter's earlier plays dramatized situations of menace, struggle for power and the dominance of hegemonic discourses, the memory plays reveal a growing interest in the

issues related to the characters' past. Instead of dialogues informed by menace and subjection--a recurring feature of the early plays--there is an increasing emphasis on monologue as the characters try to retrieve their past by means of attenuated and unreliable memories. This leads to a virtual abandoning of a communicative relation between the characters as they become obsessed with their origins. Once within their own memories, the characters travel through time and space, struggling at every moment to find meanings and closures. Moreover, Pinter exploits the dramatic potential of pauses and silences to disrupt the linearity and point to the *aporias* and gaps inherent in the notion of origins, meanings and ends. In these memory plays which include *A Slight Ache* (1961), *The Dwarfs* (1963), *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Old Times* (1971) and *No Man's Land* (1975) there are unmistakable signs of departure from the realist tradition in terms of plot and character. The slender plots comprise various scenes connected with each other by means of the shaky reminiscences of the characters. As the private realm of the characters is narrated and theatricalized through monologues, the mimetic illusion gets disrupted. These devices also challenge the notions of a unified and coherent self and the availability of the past in the present.

Both *A Slight Ache* and *The Dwarfs* present situations in which the human subject has already internalized the elusive external menace and is struggling under the burden of a growing sense of its dissolution. This overwhelming sense of disintegration jeopardizes the foundational premise of the subject's connection with the external reality. Its sense of reality is hence as flimsy and ruptured as its sense of a self. In *A Slight Ache* the presence of the silent matchseller who never utters a word throughout the play provides an interesting twist to the play's dramatic quality as the dialogue virtually changes into monologue when both Edward and Flora address him in their long speeches. Edward attributes different and contradictory actions to him as his very behaviour is indescribable. "You're laughing", "You're crying", "You're moving". The central question echoed by Edward, "who are you?" illustrates the problem of fixing the identity of a character. Edward admits that he looked at the matchseller from all angles and with all kinds of glasses but failed to arrive at any conclusion. It is not that the matchseller changes himself to prevent Edward from 'knowing' who he is; instead, his static condition on the stage suggests an omnipresent source of ambiguity. The character of the matchseller also foregrounds the problematical nature of presence and absence. The very binarism of presence/absence is dramatically subverted through the matchseller's 'present absence.' The play's ending that shows the abrupt and unexplained change of roles between Edward and the matchseller with the former turning blind and falling to the ground and the latter moving out with Flora, disrupts the audiences' expectations used to the resolutions of the realist plays. Again, this dramatic device suggests a subversion of the narrative closure pointing towards the dislocation of the spectacle by means of causal dislocation. The end does not naturally flow out from the middle as in the traditional realist theatre

but breaks from it rather radically. The technique itself problematizes the epistemological foundations of realism in art. *The Dwarfs* carries further the concerns of the earlier plays especially in its focus on the unresolved nature of questions surrounding identity and truth. Len appears in a series of monologues and is obsessed with imagining that there are dwarfs present in his yard. His fantasies are juxtaposed with the realistic details that Mark and Pete talk about. In fact, the play can be seen as consisting of a series of dialogues that are vaguely connected. The setting of the play switches forward and backward from Len to Mark's house, thereby blurring a definite distinction between Len's fantasies and reality. There is little point in attributing Len's fantasies to some psychological disorder because the play eschews any suggestion of mental illness. Instead, it seems more plausible to see Len's monologues exemplifying the problem of subjective perception. Len finds it difficult to have a fixed opinion of himself as he is quite aware of the flux in which he is inevitably situated:

For me, you see, I don't grow old. I change. I don't die. I change again. I am not happy. I change. Nor unhappy. But when a big storm takes place I do not change. I become someone else, which means I change out of all recognition, I am transformed from the world in which I suffer the changes I suffer, I retreat utterly from the standpoint where I am subject to change, then with my iron mask on I wait for the storm to pass. (1961:112)

From this, Len moves on to utter a long speech during his conversation with Mark on the impossibility of certitude about the alleged essence of the human self. Len's speech is reminiscent of Beckett and Ionesco's characters stripped off of any sense of concrete individuality:

The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps, clearly enough. But who are you?...who you are, or appear to be to me or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number. Where am I to look, where am I to look, what is there to locate, so as to have some surety to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You are the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? (1961:112)

The words "you are the sum of so many reflections" echoes the postmodern contestation of the notion of the ontological self. The notion is an illusion created by the subject's situatedness in the field where the 'other' exercises its power on it. *Landscape* opens with an important stage direction which suggests that no proper communication is taking place between Beth and Duff and that they are probably not even talking to each other:

Duff refers normally to Beth, but does not appear to hear her voice. Beth never looks at Duff and does not appear to hear his voice. Both characters are relaxed, in no sense rigid. (1969:7)

The play contains no onstage action, it does not even explore any static situation. Rather the entire focus is on the process of constructing the past through a questionable memory exercise. The virtual abandoning of dialogue further narrows the play's focus on the subjective recreation of the past. The play opens with Beth remembering being on a beach with her lover whose identity is left entirely unclear. Beth's fractured narrative describes her past with which she is obsessed. Duff, on the other hand, seems to try to enter into a dialogue with her. His attempts, however, evoke no response from her:

Duff: Do you remember the weather yesterday? That downfall?

Beth: He felt my shadow. He looked up at me standing above him.

Duff: I should have had some bread with me. I could have fed the birds. | Beth: Sand on his arms.

Duff: They were hopping about? Making a racket.

Beth: I lay down by him, not touching.

Duff: There wasn't anyone else in the shelter. There was a man and a woman, under the trees, on the other side of the pond. I didn't feel like getting wet. I stayed where I was. *(Pause)* Yes, I've forgotten something. The dog was with me. | Beth: Did those women know me? I didn't remember their faces. (10-11)

The two monologues appear like two parallel narratives with almost no interrelation. Even these narrative accounts betray their precarious and uncertain character as in the case of Beth who first talks of two women turning and staring at her on the beach, but then corrects herself; "two women looked at me, turned and stared. No. I was walking, they were still. I turned" (12). Later, she concludes that she was mistaken about the women and the beach was empty. Thus memory, the site of constructing the past, is itself shown to be attenuated. It cannot claim to offer an objective and true account, nor is its process of selection incontestable. In fact, the nature of the workings of memory and perception premised upon it is commented upon by Beth in these words:

Beth: I remembered always, in drawing, the basic principles of shadow and light. Objects intercepting the light cast shadows. Shadow is deprivation of light. The shape of the shadow is determined by that of the object. But not always. Not always directly. Sometimes it is only indirectly affected by it. Sometimes the cause of the shadow cannot be found. (15)

The play thus offers no clue, in realistic terms, about the origin, motivation and action of characters. Its bare plot and decentered characters illustrate the postmodern challenge to realism. *Silence* shares with *Landscape* the techniques like the virtual abandoning of the plot, the precedence of monologue over dialogue, the fluid nature of the memory and disruption of linearity. The stage direction makes it clear that the three characters Ellen, Rumsey and Bates occupy three areas with a chair in each area. Only on two occasions one of them rises and crosses to another. Besides, the division of the stage into three areas offers three perspectives referring to three time sets. The first time set shows the

characters' reminiscences about the distant past when Ellen was a child and Rumsey a young man. The second time set covers the time when Ellen had become a young woman and fallen in love with Rumsey. The third time set refers to the present, when each of the characters is old and living an isolated and lonely existence. The dramatic technique employed by Pinter in this play allows him to present the whole play in the form of interior monologues. Martin Esslin has aptly remarked that "the story is presented simultaneously from three different points of view and from two, perhaps three, different points in time" (1979:182). Ellen's remark, "Yes, I remember. But I'm never sure that what I remember is of today or of yesterday or of a long time ago" (45), reflects the underlying theme of the play. All the three characters exhibit a curious relation with their respective pasts. They are stuck in it and abandon all attempts to break free from it, but their only relation to it is through tenuous memories. While they seek to establish some kind of relationship with the past, the very attempt is frustrated because of the precarious nature of memory. *Old Times* involves three characters, Deeley, his wife Kate, and Kate's friend Anna. The play opens with a dramatic device which shows all three characters on stage which is shrouded in dim light creating the impression of vague unreality. As the stage gradually brightens, Deeley and his wife Kate appear in the foreground talking about Anna who lurks rather mysteriously in the background. From the conversation between Deeley and Kate, it appears that Anna had been Kate's room-mate and friend. Kate's reminiscences about Anna and her relationship with her illustrate the idea of the past as it is constructed in the present. In the course of these reminiscences the precarious nature of memory and the elusive character of identity are constantly foregrounded as one description is soon followed by its contradiction. The progress of the narrative is disrupted by a sudden flashback in time as Anna comes to the foreground and joins the conversation. This technique allows showing the simultaneous presence of past and present on the stage. Anna aptly comments on the process of recollecting the past: "there are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place" (1971:32). She continues to dominate the stage in spite of Kate's occasional remarks that are aimed at presenting her version of what had happened in the past. Anna's narrative of Kate's past, which is self-confessedly a construction rather than a recollection, has a manipulative effect on Deeley who now confronts Kate with an equally constructed story of his acquaintance with Anna: Deeley: We've met before, you know, Anna and I. We had a scene together. She freaked out. She didn't have any bread, so I bought her a drink. (1971: 68)

Deeley's tale ends rather ambiguously suggesting the mingling of Kate and Anna's identities: Deeley : ...she thought she was you, said little....May be she was you. May be it was you, having coffee with me saying little.... (69). Deeley's remark indicates the fluidity of the subjective perception as the certainty underlying the visual perception withers away.

Old Times by its unique use of the interpenetration of the old memories with the static present on the stage, offers a critique of the assumptions underlying the notion of stable subjectivity. The play exploits the notion of time as it is perceived by the subjects who are situated within it. Traditionally, narrative has been intimately related with the linear flow of time demonstrating the exercise of constructing meaning by means of a process that imposes categories of origin and resolution on an amorphous phenomenon. The memory plays in general, and *Old Times* in particular, demystify the supposed naturalness of this process by problematizing the relation of time with narrative. The flow of time expected to unravel the plot in the direction of resolution is obstructed to challenge the teleological underpinnings of linearity. *No Man's Land* exploits concerns like negotiating relationships while remaining within the overall design of a memory play. For this purpose it draws upon the dialogic potential as well as the individual memories of the characters. The play explores a static condition focussing on two male characters Hirst and Spooner who narrate tales to each other. The apocryphal nature of these tales becomes evident quite easily. The two appear to be men of letters attempting to discover their identities as poets. The dialogue between the two covers topics like language, the nature of experience, virtue and love. But what remains prominent throughout their conversation is the problem of perception of what constitutes reality, especially the past, and how to negotiate with it. Spooner alludes to it in this way: Experience is a paltry thing. Everyone has it and will tell his tale of it. I leave experience to psychological interpreters....I myself can do any graph of experience you wish. (20) Spooner professes to have cut himself from the past for the present. "I am interested in where I am eternally present and active." But he undercuts his own assertion by saying that "the present is truly unscrupulous." What follows in the play can be seen as revealing the irony in Spooner's assertion that he is 'free' from the past since all he does is narrate to Hirst his past and its power to shape him:

Spooner: I have never been loved. From this I derive my strength have? Ever? Been loved?...I looked upon once into my mother's face. What I saw there was nothing less than pure malevolence I was fortunate to escape with my life. (1975: 26)

As against Spooner, Hirst recognizes that the past remains with him and he cannot escape it. It is however interesting to note how he moves from a conviction of knowing it very well to calling into question its very existence:

Hirst: My true friends look out at me from my album. I had my world. I have it. Don't think now it's gone I'll choose to sneer at it, to cast doubt on it, to wonder if it properly existed. No. We're talking of my youth, which can never leave me. No. It existed. It was solid, the people in it were solid, while....transformed by light, while being sensitive....to all the changing light. (45)

From this firm conviction about the past as 'solid' to questioning its existence is indicative of the problem that Pinter's characters find

themselves beset with:

Hirst: It's gone. Did it exist? It's gone. It never existed...what was it?...Bright men, through leaves.... it was blending. I remember it. I've forgotten....The sounds stopped...There's a gap in me. I can't fill it. There's a flood running through me...They're blotting me out....I'm suffocating. It's a muff. A muff, perfumed. Someone is doing me to death...She looked up...I remember nothing. I'm sitting in this room. (46)

The decentered subject suddenly becomes aware of the absence in him. His memory, the only source of connection with his past, is foundering and so is the notion of the stable identity premised upon it. Hirst's perception of the past through a doubtful memory is reverberated in his equally shaky account of his dreams: I was dreaming of a waterfall. No, no, of a lake. Something is depressing me. What is it? It was the dream, yes. Waterfalls. No, no, a lake water. Drowning. Not me. Someone else. (43). He continues: What was it? Shadows. Brightness, through leaves. Gamboling. In the bushes. Young lovers. A fall of water. It was my dream. The lake, who was drowning in my lake? (44) The virtual commingling of memory, dream and the real world in the play offers an example of how the distinct boundaries of the real and the fantastic and the actual and the dreamy are blurred. In fact, apart from this, the play's ending suggests a kind of arresting of movement of time into a stasis. Spooner declares this condition to Hirst: You are in no man's land which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent. (95) These plays thus illustrate a severance with the present for an ominous recollection of the past. The surface dialogue in whatever little degree it is dramatized, offers to be a strategy to delve into the past. The past however is available only in a fragmented and contradictory narrative form and has to be constructed from its traces. The very fluidity of this construction is suggested by the dream like character of memories.

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