Chapter - XII

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Having completed the study of Pinter's full length plays from the point of view of their portrayal of post-war traumatic mindsets obtaining particularly in the entire European milieu and specifically in the British society, it is now time to look into the critical appraisals of the enigmatic phenomenon designated as Pinter.

First of all, it is incumbent upon the present researcher to sort out the typical predisposition that invited so much sympathetic as well as apathetic criticism. In dealing with Harold Pinter's full-length as well as other shorter plays the most important feature that strikes one is the slender material contained in his plays. In the short one-act plays it appears appropriate. But in full-length longer plays it makes the show rather emaciated leaving the audience dissatisfied. Taking up the full-length plays one by one it is possible to show how the plays are built up on tensions created upon very flimsy grounds. The Birthday Party finds Stanley Webber being hunted out by Goldberg and McCann; and by making him dead drunk and a nervous wreck they take him away from the cozy hideout of the so called shabby lodging house of Meg and Petey. The boozy
party arranged by Goldberg turns out to be not only vulgar but a deliberate vilification of Stanley. The Lulu episode is farcical enough as she falls a victim to Goldberg's sexual appetite, who is almost like her father in age.

In *The Caretaker* there are only three characters - two brothers Mick and Aston, and Davies whom Aston rescued from a brawl in a restaurant and brought home. The action takes place in a room of a house belonging to Mick who wanted to change this rather dilapidated house into a fashionable penthouse. He depends on his brother for the job. Aston who had a past history of being treated in a mental hospital for some mental derangement, is now engaged in building a shed in the garden as a preparation for the work of the penthouse. He offers Davies the post of the Caretaker of the house. But Davies didn't have any idea or experience of such a position. When Aston goes out leaving Davies alone in the room, the latter starts ransacking the rather dishevelled room in search of any valuables he can lay his hands on. Davies, thus, appears to be a dubious character light-fingered enough totally incapable to prove himself worthy of the trust that Aston endowed upon him. When Davies was thus engaged Mick comes in and overpowers him making him sit down on the
floor. Mick also offers him the post of the caretaker, if he so likes. But this three-act play finally ends with Davies being driven out by both the brothers as they discover that he attempted to play each of the brothers against the other. This is all that happens in the play.

**The Homecoming.** Pinter's next full-length play is again built upon a situation and no story worth the name. The play opens with some small talk between Max, the retired butcher, his two sons Lenny and Joey, and a cousin Sam. Late at night Max's eldest son Teddy arrives with his wife Ruth on his way back to America after their European tour. His father and brothers have not met his wife as he married her just before leaving for America where he was a Professor. Ruth had a past history of being a nude model before her marriage. The play ends with Teddy going away leaving Ruth behind who was offered position of part-time prostitute by Lenny, a pimp. The only rather sad incident that happens in the play is Sam, Max's cousin, drops dead after revealing that Jessie, Max's wife was sexually enjoyed by the latter's friend Mac Gregor in the back seat of his car.

Pinter's next full-length play *Old Times* came six years after **The Homecoming.** It recounts the tale of a couple Deeley and Kate, starting with their discussion
about Anna, Kate's friend, who has informed them that she was coming to pay a visit to her old friend Kate. It ultimately transpires that Deeley knew Anna before his marriage with Kate; and the whole play has practically no story excepting the revival of the past when Deeley was enamoured of both Anna and Kate. Mark Batty surmises:

With Old Times, Pinter demonstrated how the past and memory are exploitable as tools for gaining advantage, and added them to the arsenal of verbal equipment that his catalogue of characters had at their disposal when confronting one another. The past is presented as possessing fluid, amorphous qualities that ultimately belie any attempt to construct present certainty from them. (Batty: 52-53)

No Man's Land, Pinter's next full-length play came four years after Old Times. Hirst, the one-time famous poet now fallen into desuetude, brought home an eloquent but broke writer Spooner (Batty:54) whom he met in a pub. Together they recount their past when both of them were students at Oxford. After quite some fond remembrances of their happy past of flirting with a number of girls and writing poetry, Spooner offers to become Hirst's Secretary which was flatly refused by his young
protectors Foster and Briggs and tacitly supported by Hirst. The play ends with Spooner’s declaration that Hirst is rotting in a no man’s land to which Hirst happily supports with a drink. This is all that happens in the play.

_Betrayal_, Pinter’s last but one full-length play, seems to be having some story as compared to the earlier ones. And the inverted technique reveals the story of how a publisher’s wife betrayed her husband in having an affair with his best friend, a literary agent, for seven long years. The publisher husband also had extra-marital affairs all along. The play ends with the proposed divorce between the publisher and his wife. That’s all that happens in the play.

After _Betrayal_ Pinter remained engaged with the writing of eight screenplays and these, according to him, were not mere transcriptions of the concerned novels, but were acts of imagination. Only after fifteen years he was capable of writing his own original full-length play _Moonlight_. In this play we find a greater reliance on a compact plot as compared to his earlier plays with scanty plots. In _Moonlight_ one finds Andy the father-figure in his death bed, raving against his ungrateful sons and the world at large. His only daughter, who is dead, surrounds him and appears to be meeting him in
the kitchen at night. The two sons, Fred and Jake when
informed by their mother about the condition of their
father, seem not to recognize the voice of their mother
and thought that some customer was having some
complaint against the services of their laundry. The play
ends with a soliloquy of Bridget standing in moonlight.
Andy's friend Ralph, who was a referee for amateur
football matches in weekends and his wife Maria also
had affairs with both Andy and his wife Bel. They
introduce a lot of humour in the play.

The scanty action of all these full-length plays have
instigated even sympathetic critics to opine that Harold
Pinter's plays are simply acting exercises for actors.
When he was asked by Mel Gussow if any 'bad things'
said by critics had interested him, from memory he
quoted Dennis' view that the plays were

'simply acting exercises for actors.....And that was
it. There was absolutely nothing else. There was no
content whatsoever, merely postures for actors
being sad or happy or whatever.' Pinter went on to
say that he was fascinated and troubled by this
account. I think one can see why. It's so near the
truth.' (Worth: 96)

But Peter Hall, who directed a number of stage plays,
screenplays by Pinter and had a long association with Pinter which he described as a “Pragmatic situation” takes a different view:

Certainly there is a fact. Why, in *The Homecoming* is Lenny so obsessed from the word go with destroying his father? Talking about his cooking and his rotten meals and so on. Now that must not, in my view, be played with any kind of heaviness; but the underlying feeling is one of absolute naked hatred......and a good deal of Harold’s tone has to do with that very veiled kind of mockery. (Batty: 160-161). The problem there is that the biggest bastard in a houseful of bastards is actually the man who at first sight appears to be the victim - that is, Teddy, the brother who brings his wife home. He is actually locked in a battle of wills with his father and with his brothers and of course, with his wife, during which, in some sense, he destroys his wife, and his father, and himself rather than give in. He is actually the protagonist. (160)

The two quotes from the words of a man who was hobnobbing with Pinter over twelve years, obviously shows that in his full-length plays Pinter was dealing with situations that successfully portrayed the post-war milieu particularly against the cockney background.
If it was so hollow as to become mere rants for actors - paroxysms without any sustained value, could Pinter elicit such responses from sensitive critics like Margaret Atwood:

A comet, but a comet shaped like a hedgehog or a burr. Not a cozy presence: not comforting, not cuddly, not flannel. Prickly, bothersome, mordant and dour. Always unexpected: coming upon you sideways with an alarming glare.

But always itself, this body of work we now call Pinter. A singular accomplishment. It has spawned its own adjective Pinteresque. (Batty:155)

Or, everything said and done, could Harold Pinter have bagged the Nobel Prize in 2005 by throwing dust into the eyes of all associated with the Nobel Foundation? In the Presentation Speech Per Wastberg stated:

With his twenty-nine plays and about a hundred he has directed or acted in he has made the theatre his own domain. His figures barricade themselves in unpredictable dialogues. Between the lines of unresolved threats, it rolls and stings. What we hear are signals for everything we do not hear.

The abyss under chat, the unwillingness to
communicate other than superficially, the need to rule and mislead, the suffocating sensation of accidents bubbling under quotidian, the nervous perception that a dangerous story has been censored—all this vibrates through Pinter's drama.

His characters are at the mercy of each other on the periphery of life. Their identities, backgrounds and histories are vague, and different versions exist depending on who is remembering. They seldom listen to each other but it is precisely their mental deafness that makes us listen. Not a word passes unnoticed, nor can we relax a single minute. Atmospheric pressure fluctuates as secrets unroll and shift the distribution of power. (www)

It is difficult to resist quoting from this speech that deals very succinctly with practically all the salient features of Pinter's Plays:

Pinter, the tailor's son, scissors language, allowing the action to originate from the voices of and rhythms of the characters. Thus there is no given plot. We do not ask: "What will happen next"? Rather, "What is happening"?

The words are instruments of power. Words are repeated until they resemble truth. In a time of
over-information, Pinter frees words from describing reality and makes them reality itself, at times poetic, more often oppressive. At the end, it is only through language that we can erase our destiny and recreate it. (www)

This is how the topmost body of connoisseurs in the field of art and literature has opined and decided upon the phenomenon called Harold Pinter that significantly traversed the theatrical arena of London, Great Britain, Europe, and even America for more than half a century. Indeed, the present researcher has taken the key from this Nobel Presentation speech to decide upon his title: “Inside out: Harold Pinter’s treatment of Psychic Trauma of Post-war Sensibility.”

In all the full-length plays of Pinter the characters lived a traumatic existence that emerged out of the shadows of the past clouding the present and eclipsed the prospects of their future. As Nigel Alexander pointed out:

There is no future for the characters created by Harold Pinter. In play after play the curtain comes down on a terrible state of stasis in which the only possible development for the individuals concerned is, at best, continued stagnation,
at worst, putrefaction. (Past, Present and Pinter: 39)

And Nigel Alexander continues to point out that the most distinctive feature of Pinter's dramatic technique is this steady elimination of the future by the slow revelation of old times.

'... The menacing atmosphere of the play is a product of the way in which the spectator is left prey to the pity and terror naturally associated with an unexpected visit to the inhabitants of inferno.' (40)

Hence, as has been analyzed with regard to the plays of Harold Pinter, the menacing atmosphere leading to traumatic mindsets has quite successfully, been portrayed in Harold Pinter's plays.