Chapter — II

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Basic motif of the present treatise being the psychosomatic disposition created in the minds of the Britishers caused by the tensions of the years of strain and stress during the first half of the century, it is necessary to map out the specific details of the inevitable reactions to socio-political transmutations that convulsed the very fabric of English indigenous disposition. For this it is necessary to come to grips with the nature of the English people so as to grasp the exact nature of the vertigo of traumatic experience. To comprehend the basic foundation upon which the very grain of British character depends, one needs delving into their history and geography a bit. Much of the subsequent paragraphs may appear to be too naive. Yet for the purpose of clarity one must indulge into such tautology.

First and foremost, let the terrestrial location be studied as the geographical situation of a country accounts for quite a lot in shaping the character of its inhabitants. Great Britain, United Kingdom, or British Isles, as the country is variously called is a small group of islands located on the north western part of Europe
separated from the main land by a narrow channel called the English Channel. North Atlantic Ocean surrounds it from all sides and often penetrates deep into the land creating fiords. The whole country consists of England, Ireland and Scotland, of which Ireland is cut off from the main island by the sea making it a separate island altogether. Scotland lies on the northern part of the main island and is mainly full of forests and hills. The total area of Great Britain is less than a big province of the Indian subcontinent.

Yet this small country could build up an Empire stretching all over the globe and enjoyed the status of a major power for centuries. Indeed one wonders at the exceptional quality of this nation to acquire such a status in world politics. Surrounded by the mighty ocean on all sides which often made deep insertions into the main land, it became almost obligatory on the part of the English nation to become expert sailors constantly fighting with the sea. This naval supremacy was one of the main reasons behind the success of the English nation to build such a vast empire. Till late the English Navy was second to none. The mighty ocean was thus the main factor in building up the strength of the English character.
The next geographical feature that contributed substantially in building up the English character was the mines that provided sustenance to a sizeable portion of the English people. The mines, like the sea, were full of perils that had to be faced with courage and fortitude. Both the sea and the mines taught the Englishmen to cling close together in times of need and bound them with exceptionally strong bonds. The indomitable courage to live in the midst of precarious day to day struggle for existence, and the tenacity to rise above hazardous circumstances through a strong united propensity to glorify oneself and the nation at large became the inevitable trends of Englishman's character.

Apart from these geographical factors the societal values that helped to shape the British character were based upon a faith in the stable universal transcendental order that served to provide the solid base upon which the normal day-to-day life of individuals seemed to rest. On the religious front the varied manifestations of Christianity available in the British society were easefully accepted to build an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and understanding. All these qualities braced with a sense of glorious past helped the Britishers to build those unique qualities of character that enabled the people of this small country to become one of the major
political and economic powers of the world for centuries before the two devastating World Wars of the early years of the twentieth century. The stubborn stamina to absorb severe shocks and the single-minded devotion of everyone to gather whatever remnant remained after the destructions of the Wars and the gradual shrinking of the expanse of their empire with its concomitant cessation of inflow from the worldwide hinterlands to build up their past glorious status, saved the English nation from sinking to ignoble depths in world ranking. It is difficult to resist a quote from Prof. Cazamian that emphasized this aspect of British character: "To the obsessing peril of international crisis, England opposes a self-control which cannot break, a quiet resolution." (Cazamian: 1381)

Mention must also be made of another significant factor that afflicted and harrowed the minds of the Britishers grievously on account of the devastating wars. This was the indiscriminate slaughter of a number of promising talents at the prime of their youth. In practically all fields of human activity several youths were ruthlessly cut down by the cruel hands of two harrowing wars thereby thwarting the dreams of brighter days to come. In the literary sphere a number of gifted writers lost their lives impoverishing the glorious
tradition of English literature for years to come. To mention only a few, Wilfred Owen, Alun Lewis, Keith Douglas, Sidney Keys were all sacrificed at the altar of World Wars. The loss of these exceptional talents not merely attenuated the bright promises of splendid works that could have enriched the storehouse of world literature, but have seriously dampened the spirits of those literary artists who survived the ravages of war. Prof. Cazamian summed up the effect as: 'This age would correspond with the year of convalescence that follows the shock of an operation, or an organic disease'. (Cazamian: 1382)

This trenchant remark brings us close to the very essence of this dissertation in using the terminology of physical ailment suggested by the expression 'trauma'. The purport of the analysis of Harold Pinter's major full-length plays that would appear in the subsequent pages is to expose the physical anguish that promoted his characters to talk and behave in the way they did in the plays. Notwithstanding the rather odd situations in which Pinter places his characters, they appear to be real flesh and blood counters in their harrowing existence akin to lying on a bed of thorns.

As has already been suggested in the previous chapter, exposing the depths of an anguished existence
often leads one to ugly menacing portrayal of subconscious provocative instigations strong enough to dislodge the equilibrium of human existence resulting in absurd meaningless gestures and behaviour. From a different point of view such oddities of talk and gesticulations may appear farcical. Hence the mixture of comedy and menace. But to call a spade a spade, the comic mien is nothing other than a placebo that when punctured makes the trauma doubly painful and harrowing. The poignancy of such placebo effects is akin to Kafkaesque shudders.

As a matter of fact, Kafka and Hemingway were Harold Pinter’s favourite authors. It is quite natural that Pinter’s plays would inhere qualities and demeanour of Franz Kafka. Subsequent pages of this thesis may have occasions to further such analogies.

To sum up, the psychosomatic disturbances created in the minds of the Britishers by the two cataclysmic World Wars were mainly that of frustration that made them acutely conscious of the phoney nature of their cosy Victorian complacency. Their sense of supremacy as one of the major political and economic powers of the world suffered a serious jolt. This was indeed a difficult pill to swallow for the common mass. Though they tried to keep their faces up in spite of the setbacks, such
gestures often appeared farcical and ludicrous. But these burlesque gesticulations were more pathetic than humorous.

Before this background study is brought to an end one would like to cite an episode or two to illustrate the effect of the war years upon the minds of the affected people particularly with specific reference to the values and aesthetic sentiments obtaining among the intellectual elite.

"What humanity can endure and suffer is beyond belief, the battlefields- the obliteration of all human endeavour and achievement and the human achievement of destruction"... 'This is what Sir Edwin Lutyens had seen as a non-combatant on the Western Front. And it proved typical of the future reactions of those remembering or contemplating the wasteful devastation of the war'. (Sanders:13)

These remarks of Sir Edwin Lutyens on visiting the battlefields of north-eastern France in July 1917 quoted by Prof. Sanders were indeed typical of future reactions. And the trenchant phrase 'Western Front' reminds one of the remarkable landmarks in war novels Eric Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front. Indeed, Lutyen's reaction "destruction is bettered by the poppies
and wild flowers that are as friendly to an unexploded shell as they are to the leg of a garden seat in Surrey," brings to one’s mind that touching scene where the young soldier, discovering a small flower just beyond the ridge of the trench in which he was hiding, tried to reach it and was shot dead the very moment he stretched his hand towards it. The researcher still remembers that poignant scene in the film Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front was indeed the turnaround in man’s attitude towards warfare. All along up to the First World War fighting for one’s own country was eulogized and was thought to be almost a crusade to save one’s rights. Patriotism and martyrdom were considered supreme virtues to be emulated. But the picture of devastation and destruction painted in Remarque’s novel changed the standpoint altogether making deliberate killing unsupportable and destruction of structures created by years of effort and toil is no doubt an inhuman and heinous outrage against basic human values.

The touching scene of the young soldier’s attempt to reach out for the small flower underscores another aspect which appears to be more significant from aesthetic point of view. Young soldier’s craze for that petty flower in an atmosphere of death, devastation, & arid wastage emphatically demonstrates that even in the
midst of an atmosphere charged with dread, alarm, and apprehensiveness man’s yearning for all that is good and beautiful is not dead. Sir Edwin Lutyen’s graphic image of the poppies, wild flowers and the unexploded shells and legs of a garden seat indicates the same disposition. And this aspect of human nature is far more valuable for the sustenance and growth of human civilization than the so-called important grounds for fighting forwarded by few war-mongering political leaders.

A writer’s sensibility would naturally be deeply affected by the disturbing circumstances agitating the minds of the people whom he tries to portray. Drama, being a more public genre than any other literary type, inevitably reflects these rippling commotions shaking the minds of the characters either directly or implicitly. And Harold Pinter was no exception. With deft hands he remarkably exposed the gnawing overtures of his dramatis personae.

Delineation of this background studies would remain incomplete without the mention of another factor that had a direct bearing upon the shaping of Harold Pinter as a playwright. This is the personal family atmosphere that served to make the indomitable spirit of Pinter as a rebel against the global atrocities leading to the two devastating World Wars.
Harold Pinter was the only child of Jewish parents living in London. His parents belonged to East European Ashkenazi Jews who settled in England in the first years of the twentieth century. Though Pinter enjoyed a contented and comfortable working class upbringing supported by the father having a tailoring firm in Stoke Newington, he was acutely conscious of a deep-rooted abhorrence towards the Jews obtaining among the Britishers. This apathy towards the innocents was at the background of his brave act of registering himself as a ‘conscientious objector’ in the National Service call-up in 1948. The quality that singled Harold Pinter out among the contemporary playwrights was his stubborn adherence to his beliefs. Even in the prevailing atmosphere of belligerent atrocities Pinter held on to the basically humane attitude of almost atheistic sentiments of a genuine attraction towards all human beings as well as for all life upon this planet of ours.

Yet one must remember another very significant aspect of Pinter’s personality. Pinter firmly believed that it was no business of a writer to incorporate views, political or any other, into his writings. In fact, he hated didactic writings and has made this clear not only in his writings but in many interviews and sayings that he had the opportunity of delivering.
This Jewish family background helped Harold Pinter to develop a basically stubborn humanistic attitude that speaks out loudly enough to be missed in play after play. In fact, Pinter did not bother much about religion and called himself ‘a very unreligious person’.

Such a predisposition led Pinter to appreciate Noam Chomsky’s severe criticism of belligerent war-mongering politics of the war years. Often he burst out vehemently against the inhuman attitude of the so-called political leaders who were responsible for creating the pugnacious atmosphere that resulted in the two devastating World Wars that caused so much loss to life and property all over the human world. A warm-hearted compassion for all life and all that is good and beautiful upon this planet of ours, is what makes Harold Pinter so popular a playwright.