CHAPTER 3

PINTER AND POSTMODERNISM: POWER, MEMORY AND POLITICS
As illustrated in the introduction, Pinter’s plays have invited a wide variety of critical responses. From the time Martin Esslin presented Pinter as the foremost representative of the absurdist tradition in England, the playwright has been subjected to various analytical studies. After Austin Quigley’s seminal study which conclusively revealed the limitations of the traditional approaches, it is now generally accepted that Pinter’s plays defy the logic of critical approaches based on the realist assumptions. This is duly reflected in the works of those critics who have primarily focussed on the use of language by Pinter. Richard Gilman’s remark that ‘in Pinter’s world, language is the play,’¹ may be an overstatement but certain important studies including Almansi and Henderson’s *Harold Pinter* (1983) and Marc Silverstein’s *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* (1993) have taken up the exclusive study of language as a key to the understanding of Pinter. Although it is evident that the studies of Quigley, Almansi and Henderson, and Silverstein point towards the primacy of language in Pinter’s plays, none of them employs the critical paradigm of

postmodernism as illustrated in the first two chapters of this thesis. It is, therefore, worthwhile to undertake an analysis of Pinter's plays to demonstrate the validity of applying postmodern critical tools to his drama.

From a postmodern point of view, Pinter's obsession with the cultural construction of the human subject, the inevitably decentered nature of the self, and the role of power in constructing various discourses, are of central importance. In dealing with all these, he foregrounds the centrality of language as the basic dramatic device. There is an overt subversion of the conventional dramatic categories suggesting a challenge to the representational status of the drama itself. In a characteristic postmodern manner, there is a simultaneous inscription and contestation of these conventions. Language, plot and character are employed but only to lay bare their problematical status as categories of representation. A pertinent example of this is provided by the futility of tracing the origin of Pinter's characters and their motivation to action, on which the playwright has himself commented as follows:

The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and
what is unreal, nor between what is true or what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.²

He further elaborated the idea in these terms:

[There is] the immense difficulty, if not impossibility, of verifying the past. I don’t mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday one can I think treat the present in the same way. What’s happening now? We won’t know until tomorrow or six month’s time, and we won’t know then, we’ll have forgotten or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the same time of its birth. We will interpret a common experience quite differently, though we prefer to subscribe to the view that there’s a shared, common ground, a known ground. I think there’s a shared common ground all right, but that it’s more like quicksand. Because ‘reality’ is quite a strong, firm word, we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled, and unequivocal. It doesn’t seem to be, and in my opinion it’s no worse or better for that.³

These remarks of Pinter provide valuable insights into his concerns as a playwright. Pinter is precisely interested in showing that our


assumptions about reality are more problematical than we suppose
and his plays explore the complexity informing the aspects of
reality, self and language. The dramatic mode Pinter adopts
challenges the assumptions of realism in theatre by subverting its
premises of plot, character and language. One of the prominent
features, for example, is the way in which characters often use
language, not to communicate, but to obfuscate, coerce and
manipulate. The characters, especially in the early plays,
deliberately evade communication by resorting to different
linguistic tactics like repeating the question asked, distorting its
sense or playing a pun upon it. Pinter himself, while discrediting the
application of the ‘failure of communication’ thesis to his plays,
remarked that, “I feel.....that instead of any inability to
communicate, there is a deliberate evasion of communication.”4 The
dialogue between Ben and Gus in The Dumb Waiter is a dramatic
elucidation of Pinter’s remark:

   Ben : If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
   Gus : How can you light a kettle?

4 Quoted in Martin Esslin. The Theatre of the Absurd. Harmondsworth, Middlesex:
Ben : It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!
Gus: I've never heard it.
Ben: Light the kettle! It's common usage!
Gus: I think you've got it wrong.
Ben (menacing): What do you mean?
Gus: They say put on the kettle.
Ben (taut): Who says?

*They stare at each other, breathing hard. (Deliberately) I've never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.*

Gus: I bet my mother used to say it.
Ben: Your mother? When did you last see your mother?
Gus: I don't know, about-
Ben: Well, What are you talking about your mother for?

*They stare.*

Gus: I'm not trying to be unreasonable.

I'm just trying to point something out to you.

Gus: Yes, but-
Ben: Who's the senior partner here, me or you?
Gus: You.
Ben: I'm only looking after your interests,
Gus, you've got to learn, mate.
Gus: Yes, but I've never heard-
Ben (vehemently): Nobody says light the gas!

What does the gas light?
Gus: What does the gas-?

Ben (grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length):

*The Kettle, You Fool!*  

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Another such instance is the conversation between Mr. Kidd and Rose in *The Room*:

Rose: What about your sister, Mr. Kidd?
Mr. Kidd: What about her?
Rose: Did she have any babies?
Mr. Kidd: Yes, she had a resemblance to my old mum, I think taller, of course.
Rose: When did she die then, your sister?
Mr. Kidd: Yes, that’s right, it was after she died that I must have stopped counting...
Rose: What did she die of?
Mr. Kidd: Who?
Rose: Your sister.

*Pause*
Mr. Kidd: I’ve made ends meet.  

The early plays which include *The Room* (1957), *The Dumbwaiter* (1960), *The Birthday Party* (1957), and *The Caretaker* (1959) illustrate how Pinter both inscribes and subverts the realist tradition in theatre. While they depict real life characters speaking natural language, the overwhelming mystery surrounding their origin and actions subverts realism. J.R. Taylor comments upon this feature in Pinter’s plays:

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The situations involved are always very simple and basic, the language which the characters use is an almost uncannily accurate reproduction of everyday speech (indeed, in this respect Pinter, far from being the least dramatist of his generation, is arguably the most realistic), and yet in these ordinary surroundings lurk mysterious terrors and uncertainties and by extension, the whole external world of everyday realities is thrown into question. Can we ever know the truth about anybody or anything? Is there any absolute truth to be known?  

But more importantly, it is through the treatment of the issue of power as it operates in the social discourse to construct human subjectivity that these plays subvert realism. One of the pivotal assumptions of realism in art is that the human subject possesses an essence prior to and independent of the cultural and linguistic codes. Pinter’s plays radically contest this assumption by dramatizing the processes through which human subjectivity is constantly reproduced by various cultural and linguistic codes thereby challenging the notion of an essential and transcendental self. This idea finds dramatic treatment in *The Birthday Party* in Stanley’s construction by the cultural codes which find expression

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through a rigorous investigation by Goldberg and Mc Cann. Stanley
betrays his past by means of certain reminiscences that indicate how
he comes to see himself as an individual. Describing his concert as
a pianist he says:

I once gave a concert...Yes. It was a good one, too. They were all
there that night. Every single one of them. It was a great success.
Yes. A concert. At Lower Edmonton. I had a unique touch.
Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and
said they were grateful.\(^8\)

Stanley’s statement ‘they came up to me’ underlines how he comes
to identify himself as a subject within the field of the Other.
Stanley’s attenuated sense of a concrete self becomes increasingly
manifest as the play develops to a point where the initiative is taken
over by the two intruders, Goldberg and Mc Cann. The dialogue
reveals Stanley’s subjection to the interrogation by the two and a
gradual disintegration of his self. But more importantly, it also
reveals how the linguistic codes perform the function of subject

\(^8\) Harold Pinter. *The Birthday Party and Other Plays*. London: Metheun,
1960, pp-32-33. All the subsequent references to *The Birthday Party* are from
this edition and are given in the parenthesis. *B.P.* stands for the title of the
play.
construction in the first place as the hapless victim of a verbal
assault gives in to the dictates of outside forces:

Goldberg: What makes you think you exist?
McCann: You're dead.
Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live... You're dead. You're a
plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing
but an odour. (B.P.62)

This passage illustrates Stanley's virtual annihilation by the two
intruders. In the third act of the play, however, we witness the power
of the social discourses that write the human subject through a
rigorous process of inscription:

Goldberg: We'll make a man of you.
McCann: And a woman.
Goldberg: You'll be re-orientated.
McCann: You'll be rich.
Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.
McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.
Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.
McCann: You'll be a success.
Goldberg: You'll be integrated.
McCann: You'll give orders.
Goldberg: You'll make decisions.
McCann: You'll be a magnate.
Goldberg: A statesman.
McCann: You’ll own yatchs.
Goldberg: Animals.
McCann: Animals. (B.P. 93-94)

The passage demonstrates the intimate relation of the subject with subjection and offers an illustration of how the human subject is inscribed and reinscribed by discourses that operate within intricate power structures. Stanley loses himself to the inscribing process carried out by Goldberg and McCann showing how the notion of a unified and autonomous self is an illusion.

A similar process is at work in *The Caretaker* where the intense struggle for power is shown in a verbal twist when Mick enters the room and takes the entire initiative into his hands, dictating terms to Davies in order to establish control over him. Mick plays a linguistic game of coercion upon Davies forcing him to repeat his answers thereby reinforcing his dominance over him.

Mick: What’s your name?
Davies: I don’t know you. I don’t know who you are.

*Pause*

Mick: Eh?
Davies: Jenkins.
Mick: Jenkins?
Davies: Yes.
Mick: Jen...Kins...What did you say your name was?.
Davies: Jenkins.
Mick: I beg your pardon?
Davies: Jenkins.

Pause
Mick: Jen...kins. ⁹

The verbal assault to which Davies is subjected by Mick disintegrates him further and he is reduced to the state of virtual annihilation. All attempts of Davies to evade, lie, prevaricate are shattered by the superior tactics employed by Mick whose persistence lays bare the inner vacuity of Davies. The false fronts of Davies are ruptured to reveal the absence lying within. Mick finally has total control over Davies who now complies to be ‘written’ by his dictates.

Mick: .......You’ve been in the services, haven’t you?
Davies: The what?
Mick: You been in the services. You can tell by your stance.
Davies: oh....Yes. Spent half my life there, man.
Overseas...like....serving...I was.

Mick: In the colonies, weren't you?
Davies: I was over there. I was one of the first over there. (Ctr. 50-51)

In fact, Mick outplays Davies at every point forestalling his attempts at evasion and self-defense:

Mick: I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations, most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. (Ctr. 73-74)

In an important sense, Mick's statements are a commentary on the characters of most of the early plays of Pinter. Nothing that the characters say in these plays can be taken at face value. Pinter, almost at every stage, exposes the difficulty of maintaining whatever is said or done. This strategy not only challenges the realist assumptions of neutrality and objectivity of representation but also dislocates the linear narrative of the plays. It also hints at more than a persisting discrepancy in human relationships, constituting a technical tool to challenge the idea of representation in art. The realist assumptions of neutrality and objectivity of
representation become difficult to maintain for whatever is said or
done is largely actuated by a desire to deceive, manipulate, control,
dominate and conceal. Mick, Aston and Davies engage in a
complex relationship but by the end of the third act neither any
motivation nor any specific design in their actions is available to us.
Instead, dialogue itself is foregrounded to the level where it
becomes possible to see the conflation of power and language.

While *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* both illustrate
the process of the subject’s construction through anonymous
cultural codes disguised as overt coercion, *The Collection* (1962)
and *The Homecoming* (1965) offer a powerful dramatic exposition
of the role of power in constructing the female subject in patriarchy.
*The Collection* offers an exposition of the patriarchal power
structures. While conversing with James, Bill generalizes about
women in this way:

> Every woman is bound to have an outburst of wild sensuality at one
time or another. That’s the way I look at it, anyway. It’s part of their
nature.\(^{10}\)

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Bill’s remark points towards the underlying ideological underpinnings of the play as a whole. Patriarchy, which encapsulates the four characters’ view of themselves and reality, is the dominant discourse of the play. This becomes obvious in the play’s central quest: whether Stella has been a faithful wife or not. The ideological construction of the female subject in the patriarchal discourse inevitably figures as offering extremely limited choices to women. *The Collection*, like *The Homecoming*, depicts how patriarchy creates the possibilities of representational apparatus by which the female subject is forced into the binarism of wife/whore.

At the centre of the play is the question whether Stella has been faithful to her husband or not. Patriarchy assigns the role of the faithful wife to the female and any transgression of this category by her leads her into the other category which is that of the whore. The theme of sexual betrayal itself presupposes a cultural identity of the female where her desire has to be rigorously kept under surveillance to protect the interests of patriarchy. The female, constructed as wife by the patriarchal discourse, assumes this role as ‘natural’, oblivious that the discursive category of wifehood
ensures the perpetuation of patriarchy by making her the reproductive agent of the husband.

Bill's statement that ascribes a 'natural' transgressive character to female sexuality is an apt commentary on the process of naturalizing the fictional. The 'truth' about women, so manifest in their desire, is their tendency to transgress the lawful boundaries and tread into the unlawful territory. This tendency threatens the patriarchal discourse from within, since it poses danger to the cultural construction of family which is the site of producing and reproducing the 'normal' human subjects.

In a characteristic postmodern manner, The Collection makes it possible to see the representation of the female subject, desire and body within the dominant patriarchal discourse and offers to see the fictional nature of the supposedly natural, thereby de-doxifying the inscription of femininity. Stella's sexuality is foregrounded as a textual category that comes to be constituted by James and Bill's projection of their desires on the body of Stella.

Linda Hutcheon, explaining the common concerns of postmodernism and feminism writes:
The body cannot escape representation and these days this means it cannot escape the feminist challenge to the patriarchal and masculinist underpinnings of the cultural practices that subtend those representations.\footnote{Linda Hutcheon. \textit{The Politics of Postmodernism}. London: Routledge, 1989, p.138.}

It is, however, in the last scene of the play---in Stella’s response to James’s conclusion that she did not betray him with Bill but just talked to him in the lounge---that a potential site of resistance to patriarchy is hinted at. Stella looks at James neither confirming nor denying his belief. Stella’s silence exemplifies the postmodernist impulse of subverting the patriarchal hegemony by a refusal to comply to its imposition, while resisting being drawn into a full-fledged feminist agenda by stopping short of an explicit denial of James’s belief. \textit{The Collection} ends on a postmodern note of exposition of the patriarchal cultural codes without substituting them with equally ideological feminist ones.

This idea finds a more elaborate and powerful treatment in \textit{The Homecoming} which however does not portray the allegedly threatening and trangressive female sexuality tending to subvert
patriarchy by sliding into whoredom, but opens out a possibility to see the inscription of female sexuality by the two discourses, namely patriarchy and capitalism. The female in this play is compelled to transform herself into a commodity to ensure the financial stability of a family solely consisting of males and hence to ensure the perpetuation of both these hegemonic discourses.

Before Ruth, Jessie, Max’s wife and the mother of his three children had performed the role of the archetypal female, playing wife and mother simultaneously, to produce and construct the ideologically positioned individuals in the family. Jessie, as Max tells Ruth, had been responsible for whatever their children had learnt:

Max: ...it was Jessie who taught boys everything they know. She taught them all the morality they know. I’m telling you. Every single bit of the moral code they live by was taught to them by their mother.12

The mother, thus, is shown to be the site and agent of constructing the subjects who have internalized the representations and

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12 Harold Pinter. *The Homecoming*. London: Methuen, 1965, p.61. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. *H.C.* indicates the title of the play.
discursive codes of the most acceptable and by that definition the most dominant ideological categories. The ideological function of the mother ensures the perpetuation of patriarchy so well dramatized through the roles of Lenny, Joey and Teddy. It is, however, through the character of Ruth that the play offers a perspective to analyse the role of power in representation. The representational practices that are embedded in the patriarchal configurations of power relations produce the hierarchical division between the sexes. This is hinted at in a dialogue between Lenny and Ruth in which Lenny relates a long story about a lady whom he describes as a prostitute and who had made him a certain proposal. Lenny states that he might have considered the prostitute’s proposal seriously had she not been afflicted with a dangerous disease:

Lenny: This lady had been searching for me for days. She had lost tracks of my whereabouts. However, the fact was she eventually caught up with me, and when she caught up with me she made me this certain proposal. Well, this proposal wasn’t entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. I mean I would have subscribed to it in the normal course of events. The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox. So I turned it down. (H.C. 47)
When confronted by Ruth as to how he knew she was diseased, he answers:

How did I know?

Pause

I decided she was. (H.C. 47)

Lenny’s remark illustrates the idea of power that inheres in representation. The power to narrate, describe and represent the other, in this case the female subject, by voices implicated in the dominant discourse is thus brought into focus. What remains normally concealed is the process that transforms mere representation into reality and Lenny’s remark may be seen as an exposition of this process. It is by focusing on how the family takes on Ruth that the ideological positioning of the female gender is made explicit by the play. The first reaction of Max on seeing Ruth is that of rejection compounded with anger, ‘who asked you to bring tarts in here?’ (57). Despite Teddy’s insistence that Ruth is his wife, Max is dismissive of her and straightaway calls her a whore:

I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honour...Take that disease away from
Max’s remarks about his wife Jessie are suggestive of a virtual conflation of wife and whore in the patriarchal discourse, which also points towards an inherent contradiction in patriarchy. On one hand, patriarchy itself depends upon a distinction between the two for the very idea of family and parenthood; even the notion of a centered and grounded human subject depends upon this distinction. On the other hand, however, the distinction is itself disrupted, if not entirely erased, by the patriarchy that inscribes it.

As the play progresses, the family takes to Ruth more affectionately than before. Joey, Lenny and even Max make advances towards Ruth which she does not repel. Her acquiescence in the role that the family wants her to perform as a source of entertainment for them is noteworthy. The need to inscribe Ruth as a sex-object for the family is overtaken by the need to inscribe her as a professional whore who can ‘work’ for the financial betterment of the family:

Lenny: Eh, Dad.
(Lenny walks forward.)

I’ve got a better idea.

Max: What?

Lenny: There’s no need for us to go to all this expense. I know these women. Once they get started they ruin your budget. I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t I take her up with me to Greek street?

Max: You mean put her on the game?

Pause.

We’ll put her on the game. That’s a stroke of genius, that’s a marvelous idea. \(H.C. 88\)

Lenny even draws in Teddy, asking him to get people from across the Atlantic to visit Ruth:

Lenny. You could be our representative in the States.

Max. Of course. We’re talking in international terms!

By the time we’ve finished Pan-American’ll give us a discount. \(H.C. 90\)

Having decided to put Ruth ‘on the game’, they put this proposal before her through Teddy:

Teddy: Ruth....the family have invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As a....as a kind of guest. If you like the idea I don’t mind. We can manage very easily at home....until you come back. \(H.C. 94\)
What follows from here on is an apt commentary on the inscription of the female subject as a fetishized commodity in a culture driven by capitalist consumerism. Ruth accepts the proposal to become a prostitute but wants certain things according to her choice. She demands a flat with three rooms and a bathroom and other kind of conveniences. Ruth’s commodification is carried out in this way:

Lenny: We’d finance you, to begin with, and then, when you were established, you could pay us back, in installments.
Ruth: Oh no, I wouldn’t agree to that.
Lenny: Oh, why not?
Ruth: You would have to regard your original outlay simply as a Capital investment.
Lenny: I see, All right. (H.C. 93)

The play ends when Max, the head of the family and the spokesman of patriarchy collapses to the ground after a series of interrupted outbursts.

Max. (To Ruth). You’re going to have to work. You’ll have to take them on, you understand?
Pause.
Does she realize that?
Pause.
Lenny, do you think she understands....
He begins to stammer.
What....what....what...we’re getting at? What...we’ve got in mind? Do you think she’s got it clear?

Pause.
I don’t think she’s got it clear.

Pause.
You understand what I mean? Listen I’ve got a funny idea she’ll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She’ll use us, she’ll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

Pause
She won’t be...adaptable!

He begins to groan, clutches his stick, falls on his knees by the side of her chair. (H.C.97)

Max’s collapsing to the ground, his doubt whether Ruth will comply with the already agreed terms and his apprehensions that she’ll turn tables upon them have been interpreted by some critics as a final statement of Ruth’s dominance over Teddy’s family. It seems more plausible, however, to say that the ending installs a kind of ambiguity regarding Ruth’s resistant stance towards the family. Austin Quigley aptly points out that “for Ruth,...the ending
is of uncertain value," and Elin Diamond declares that, “to say Ruth has won is to ignore the ambiguities that resonate in the last moments of the play.” Quigley and Diamond provide a basis for arguing that the play actually ends on a postmodern ambivalence. Ruth can be seen as an agency by which patriarchy has both inscribed and subverted itself.

Like Stella’s silence at the end of *The Collection*, Ruth is given no final voice to permit a thoroughly feminist interpretation to the ending of the play. Instead, it illustrates what Linda Hutcheon describes as the typical postmodern stance of exposing and demystifying the representational categories of culture without, however, substituting one kind of representational apparatus with the other ones capable of escaping ‘constructedness’ and existing outside ideological framework. Any substitution of such kind, on the postmodernist view, would be to replace one ideology with another. The ambiguous ending of *The Homecoming* where patriarchy has been exposed but not replaced by any other

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ideological framework is typically postmodern in interrogating and
demystifying systems that unify with an aim to power.

With *A Slight Ache* (1961) and *The Dwarfs* (1963), Pinter
shows the signs of writing plays that reach their culmination in the
memory plays. Whereas *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The
collection* and *The Homecoming* offered a dramatic parallel to the
idea of the subject's ideological construction, *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",

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“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.\footnote{Harold Pinter \textit{A Slight Ache and Other Plays}. London: Methuen, 1961, p.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? \(^{16}\)

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.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pinter wrote some powerful plays that have been termed as memory plays. Whereas the 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 such as individual’s past and decentred subjectivity. 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

\(^{16}\) Harold Pinter \textit{A Slight Ache and Other Plays}. London: Methuen, 1961, p.112.
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 *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man’s Land* (1975), *Moonlight* (1993) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) 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.

*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.\footnote{Harold Pinter, \textit{Landscape and Silence}. London: Methuen, 1969, p.7. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. \textit{L} indicates the title of the play.}

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.

\footnote{Harold Pinter, \textit{Landscape and Silence}. London: Methuen, 1969, p.7. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. \textit{L} indicates the title of the play.}
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.

(L. 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. (L.15)

The play thus offers no clue, in realistic terms, about the origin, motivation and action of characters. Its bare plot and decentred 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. 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.”\(^{18}\) 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”\(^{19}\), 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

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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 to show 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.” 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. (O.T. 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.... (O.T. 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.  

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

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21 Harold Pinter. *No Man’s Land*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1975, p.20. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. *NML* refers to the title of the play.
malevolence. I was fortunate to escape with my life. 
(NML. 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. (NML .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.

(NML 46)

The decentred 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.  (NML 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?  (NML 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. (NML. 95)

*Moonlight* (1993) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), although chronologically belonging to the later period, share with the memory plays the basic structural pattern as well as the thematic concerns like the fallibility of memory, dramatization of absence and untraceable past. By means of theatrical innovations, *Moonlight* presents a situation where the very question of representation becomes central to it. The stage is divided into three parts. Andy, a bed-ridden, dying man in his fifties, and his wife, Bel, who sits beside his bed, occupy one portion of the stage. The second portion is occupied by Jake and Fred, the two sons of Andy and Bel, who never cross over to see their dying father and the third portion is occupied by Bridget, the daughter of Andy and Bel, who is arrested in the past at age sixteen, and being alone on the stage, addresses the audience from her hazy memory. This theatrical device of
dividing the stage into portions, two of which belong to the present while the third seems arrested in the past, itself creates a distancing affect that cuts at the roots of theatrical illusionism. Furthermore, the identity of Bridget remains in balance between life and death as she seems to be speaking from a death-like past, with her ethereal self residing in half-light. Bridget is cast in a shadow both through stage lighting and through her cryptic monologues. Although, throughout the play she is represented as sixteen years old, in one scene, by means of a flash back, she is shown to be twelve years old. Bridget herself says, “I am hidden....hidden but free. No one in the world can find me.”

It may be assumed that Bridget is dead and speaking virtually from across the borderline, but Andy’s remarks to Bel that he should “tell Bridget not to be frightened” questions this assumption. Bridget herself remarks in a monologue that her:

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\text{task is to see that my parents sleep in peace and wake up rested...Because I know that when they look at me they see that I am all they have left of their life.} \quad (Ml. 1)
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22 Harold Pinter. *Moonlight*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993, p.22. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. *Mt.* refers to the title of the play.
Fred and Jake remain entirely oblivious of their dying father. Andy’s question to Bel about their whereabouts further complicates the search for conventional solutions:

Andy: Where are the boys? Have you found them yet?
Bell: I’m trying.
Andy: You’ve been trying for weeks. And failing. It’s enough to make the cat laugh. \(\text{Mt.2}\)

Fred and Jake talk of their father in the past tense, as a modest man who “adhered strictly to the rule of law” (12). He is even remembered by means of contradictory labels as, “mountebank-a child-a shyster-a fool-or a villain” (17).

Maria, Bel’s friend enters to address Fred and Jake and delivers a long monologue. What stands out prominently from this speech is that although the stage directions suggest that she is speaking directly to the two brothers, she receives no response from them. Her reminiscences about the past revolve around her relationships with Bel, Andy and her husband Ralph. Her admiration for both Andy and Ralph suggests that she had affairs with both of them. Fred and Jake show no signs that they’re aware
of her presence ignoring her as they are ignoring Andy’s dying. The same kind of response is invited by Ralph when he enters and addresses them without invoking any reaction or interruption. This dramatic device raises serious questions on the reality status of Maria and Ralph. This is further hinted by their sudden and joint appearance before Andy and Bel. Although this time their presence does invoke response from the couple, Andy’s account that he, “bumped into Maria the other day, that day before I was stricken”, contradicts what Maria says; “It’s been ages. We don’t live up here anymore, of course” (18). Andy, for his part, denies having any past in a blatantly self-contradictory way: “I was a civil servant, I had no past. I remember no past. Nothing ever happened to me” (70). He concludes by asserting that “the past is a mist” (71).

It could be contented that Maria and Ralph are conjured up by Andy as the stage directions are very vague about when they enter and where they are standing. The dying man is standing at the horizon of death and has the awful spectacle of an infinite nothingness staring at him. He tries to grapple with the idea of death
by affirming some kind of meaning to the event of crossing the borders:

Personally I don’t believe it’s going to be pitch black for ever because if it’s pitch black for ever what would have been the point of going through all these enervating charades in the first place. (Mt. 46)

At the end of the play, Bridget in her last interlude, provides a commentary in poetic terms on the transition from life to death. She describes a house:

bathed in moonlight. The house, the glade, the lane, were all bathed in moonlight. But the inside of the house was dark and all the windows were dark...I stood there in the moonlight and waited for moon to go down. (Mt. 71)

*Moonlight* underlines Pinter’s concerns of problematizing the audiences’ assumptions about meaning, closure, certainty and stable reference. The play has no fixed point, no linear narrative and no resolution. By disrupting the spatial and temporal logic of realism, it signals a clear departure from its conventions. The play provides no answers to questions like who are Fred and Jake? Why do they not come to their father’s deathbed? Why is Bridget on an uncertain
territory between life and death, only in the past, and at age sixteen? But more importantly by focusing on the dying Andy and probably already dead Bridget, the play highlights the problem of death as a narrative closure to human existence itself. There is a wish entertained by humans in general to see death as a natural culmination, a rounding-off and a closure to life. This wish itself rises from the desire for finding meaning to the phenomenon of existence. But death, despite this desire, holds neither fulfillment nor any kind of closure. Death does not, to use the dramatic jargon, resolve the plot of life. It leaves it open-ended.

To be assured of some meaning, the dying Andy tries to invoke his past but is confronted with mere traces of memory, making him say 'I have no past,' and 'Past is a mist.' Death is a point where even these traces are blotted out, it is the final absence, the final silence and the obliteration of the human subject.

Like Moonlight, Ashes to Ashes deals with the psychological anguish brought about by an unidentifiable past. The dialogue between Rebecca and Devlin centers on the past of Rebecca which hints at a deep impact of some psychological trauma. The very
situatedness of Rebecca against an ominous but hazy and ambiguous backdrop allows the play to bring together personal and collective aspects of a historical catastrophe. Rebecca tries to negotiate with a past whose traces continue to shape her although she does not recollect it in a firm and even identifiable manner. The play offers to view the issues of memory, existential horror, brutality and ultimate breakdown of unifying bonds such as love, worked out together into a dramatic construction.

Rebecca begins her account of the past by telling Devlin about her former lover's threatening advances that combined physical dominance with erotic desire. Rebecca's narrative is too vague and obscure to warrant any finality. What she recalls however is that her lover:

Did work for a travel agency. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.²³

²³ Harold Pinter. *Ashes to Ashes*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p.27. All subsequent references to the play are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. *AA* refers to the title of the play.
The allusion to railway station and tearing babies from their mothers' arms is suggestive of the holocaust memories. It seems Rebecca could've been a victim of such atrocities. But when Devlin asks her:

I inferred from this that you were talking about some kind of atrocity. Now let me ask you this. What authority do you think you yourself possess which would give you the right to discuss such an atrocity. (A A. 41)

She coldly replies, “I have no such authority. Nothing has ever happened to me” (41).

There follows an account of how she protected her baby when “they were taking babies away”, hiding her baby in her shawl. This account is contradicted by the statement that at another train station when she met a woman who asked “what happened to your baby? ” she replied, “I don’t know of any baby” (81). For Rebecca, all that is left is a hazy remembrance of a haunting yet elusive past. As Keith Peacock has summed up:

Rebecca’s reminiscence conveys a sense of desolation and, although she occupies the same physical space as Devlin and occasionally communicates with him, she appears to be isolated in her own guilt and grief. Her reference to the stolen child may
mean that...she is plagued by barrenness. With Devlin unable to comprehend what she is saying, she is left only with the echo of her own voice.\textsuperscript{24}

Rebecca’s resonant voice that echoes with a kind of monologic strain is suggestive of the characteristic features of the memory plays of Pinter. These plays 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.

The third phase of Pinter’s dramatic career, beginning from the late 1970s is characterized by a turn towards depicting situations emerging from political oppression and power abuse. These ‘overtly’ political plays make a strong statement against the violation of human rights and dignity. To this category belong \textit{One for the Road} (1984), \textit{Mountain Language} (1988), \textit{Party Time} (1991)

and *The New World Order* (1993). It is obvious that Pinter is expressing his deep concern as well as a sense of horror over the mechanisms employed to subject human beings to persecution and torture.

The plays offer themselves as potent vehicles for Pinter’s position on these matters and understandably lose a lot of ambiguity central to the earlier plays. This might seem to suggest that Pinter has moved away from what we characterized as postmodern in his plays, as these plays are neither concerned with epistemological skepticism nor do they depict characters with unreliable memories and fragmented perceptions. Moreover these plays, unlike the plays belonging to the earlier phases, do not contest the assumptions of realism in drama. In fact, both plot and characters serve as mere tools for exploring the theme of the abuse of power.

Postmodernism, as discussed earlier, takes the issue of power and its role in society as one of its primary objects of attention. However, instead of the traditional view, according to which power works in institutions and systems alone, postmodernism, drawing from Foucault, points power to be ubiquitous and operating in all
human discourses. In Umberto Eco’s words, postmodernism is, “the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e. that power is not something unitary that exists outside us.”

Apparently, Pinter seems to have reverted to the traditional notion that power operates in and through institutional structures as his focus is on the ways the politically subjugated become the victims of power abuse. Furthermore, as against the Foucauldian concept, Pinter views power as a thoroughly negative thing wielded by the dominant to oppress the subservient. The view that in these political plays Pinter has moved beyond the concerns of postmodernism is put forth by Mireia Aragay. While acknowledging that “they do not dismiss the postmodernist encompassing of the whole range of ‘micropolitical’ power relations existing across the social network,” she nevertheless argues that


these plays represent "a full-blown rejection of the postmodernist understanding of language, subjectivity and history."\textsuperscript{27}

The relevance of postmodernism for these plays, however, becomes evident by noting that Pinter’s focus is neither on the depiction of torture and other forms of oppression, nor on enlisting the audiences/readers' sympathies for the oppressed, but on exposing how the dominant political groups always appeal to the notions such as morality, religion, consensus and democracy to legitimize themselves. A dramatic exposition of the self-justifying and self-legitimating character of the totalizing narratives corresponds remarkably with Lyotard’s analysis that all grand narratives have traditionally thrived on the principle of exclusion, leaving out or suppressing the notions of difference, plurality and provisionality. Quigley endorses this view by explaining what precisely Pinter aimed at these plays:

To try to persuade a theatre audience that it should in general be against physical torture, murder and rape seems somewhat gratuitous in spite of the prevalence of all three in the modern

world. What interests Pinter, however, is exploring the modes of presupposition and self-justification that enable such things to be done in the name of or on behalf of citizens and governments who might publicly and even sincerely condemn them. What is dramatized is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in critical discussion, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness.28

Appealing to Lyotard’s disagreement with Habermas’s idea that the Enlightenment pursuit of social and political consensus is the goal of a democratic society, Quigley remarks:

For Lyotard the great danger of the pursuit of consensus is that if too many people agree on too many things, disagreement becomes a sign of social abnormality, dissent becomes unpatriotic and difference becomes intolerable—precisely the scenario implied by Nicolas’s attempt to invoke social consensus in One for the Road.29

In One for the Road, Nicholas seeks justification for Victor’s torture by appealing to the notion of consensus:


I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when...the man who runs this country announced to the country: We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage...(Pause)

I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a common wealth of interest. I am not alone...I am not alone.30

Victor’s dissent from the majority’s views merits him imprisonment and torture, while as Nicholas invokes all notions available to him to justify his act, “I run the place. God speaks through me”(36). A similar kind of spectacle is witnessed in The New World Order where it is democracy that is invoked to snuff out dissent. Lionel and Des, the two men torturing a blind-folded political dissent exchange their views:

Lionel: I feel so pure.

Des: Well, you’re right. You’ve a right to feel pure. You know why? Because you’re keeping the world clean for democracy.31

In Party Time, Pinter again underlines how self-justification and self-legitimization provide those in power a reassurance of their

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propriety. The spokesperson at the party is Dame Melissa, a woman of seventy, who extols the virtues of Terry’s club. She proclaims the superiority of the club to the tennis and swimming clubs of the past which had no moral grounds. As against other clubs, Terry’s maintains a firm faith in morality for it is:

inspired and activated by a moral sense, a moral awareness, asset of moral values, which is –I have to say-unshakeable, rigorous, fundamental, constant.\(^{32}\)

Dame Melissa’s invocation of morality, a grand-narrative which merely serves the interest of power is a striking example of how discourses are always appealed to by the dominant groups. Douglas, one of the power-brokers of war machinery declares:

We want peace and we’re going to get it. But we want that peace to be Cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Tight as a drum. That’s the kind of peace we want and that’s the kind of peace we’re going to get. A cast iron peace.\(^{33}\)

The kind of peace Douglas talks of here is achievable only when no form of dissent is tolerated. The exclusionary enterprise, the play suggests, is inextricably bound up with the exercise of power.


\(^{33}\) Ibid, p.15.
In *Mountain Language*, Pinter dramatizes the theme of repression in terms of a totalitarian sanction against the use of a language. The language of the capital which is officially sanctioned is forced upon a people and they’re prohibited to use their own language. The play is set in a prison on the day when women from the mountains have been permitted to meet their imprisoned husbands and sons. They are, however, forewarned categorically against using their own language, not because the officers don’t understand it, but because it doesn’t deserve to exist. The officer announces:

Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand?....it is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your *mountain language* in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead.34

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The officer trying to sound rather sympathetic but actually betraying the sense of absolute control over the mountain people, tells his sergeant, “These women, Sergeant, have as yet committed no crime” (23). The Sergeant however invokes the authority of religious discourse to suggest that ‘crime’ and sin are not mutually exclusive: “Sir! But you’re not saying they’re without sin?”(23). The officer agrees with his Sergeant ascribing sin to a woman particularly: “This one’s full of it. She bounces with it”(23). The spokesmen of the capital language force the mountain people into marginality by ‘representing’ their language as already dead. The play ends at an ironic note when the state decree reversing its earlier ruling allows the mountain people to speak their language, but only after the mother of a prisoner has lost her power of speech:

Prisoner: Mother, you can speak. (Pause) Mother, I’m speaking to You. You see? We can speak. You can speak to me in our own language. (she is still).....I am speaking to you in your own language...It’s our language...(she does not respond), Mother?....Mother? (She does not respond. She sits still. The prisoner’s trembling grows. He falls from the chair on to his knees, begins to gasp and shake violently). (M.L. 45-46)
Mountain Language is a dramatization of the conflict between the centre and the margin where the margin, perceived as a threat to the hegemony of the centre, is suppressed.

A prominent feature of the political plays is that they illustrate an absolute ascendancy of the dominant power groups which successfully liquidate the potential resistance of the subservient groups or individuals. Moreover, the plays show no signs that the subservient groups or individuals can effectively mobilize themselves into any kind of oppositional stance. Perceiving this, critics such as Silverstein argue that Pinter’s refusal to explore oppositional politics in these plays offers a statement on his work as a whole. He remarks:

Pinter’s plays offer a dystopian vision of the invincibility of regnant forms of cultural and political power.....Pinter offers a dramatized “theory” of cultural power that conceptualizes that power as unalterable, not susceptible to fundamental change.35

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Silverstein, hence, views these political plays as a final confirmation of his thesis that Pinter demonstrates a monolithic unassailability of dominant ideologies.

Notwithstanding the formidable character of Silverstein’s argument, it could be contented that in a certain sense the question whether or not Pinter’s final vision is dystopian, is beside the point. This is because rather than focussing on the possibility or otherwise of oppositional politics, Pinter’s overriding preoccupation is to show how ideological positions claiming the status of truth can provide legitimacy to the repressive apparatus. Pinter is, therefore, clearly demystifying these totalizing narratives and offering a dramatized parallel to the insights of Lyotard and Laclau, both of whom posit a postmodern idea of politics. Laclau’s argument that “postmodernity does not imply a change in the values of Enlightenment modernity rather a particular weakening of their absolutist character” is also echoed by Lyotard:

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Justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.\(^{37}\)

Justice and other such values, postmodernism contends, are still important but have to be salvaged from the subversion of the totalizing narratives. Pinter’s concerns in these plays can finally be understood in the light of the following remarks of Simon Malpas:

The grand narratives are still invoked in order to impose their injunctions upon us. Most recently, the world has been given a choice: with no sense of irony, George W. Bush announced that, in the war on terrorism, ‘you’re either for us or against us’- accept everything that is done by us in your name or join the terrorists. For the postmodernist, this is a false opposition, a totalizing opposition that should be resisted.\(^{38}\)

The above analysis amply demonstrates that Pinter’s whole dramatic career, covering a period of almost four decades, can be seen in terms of a persisting concern with the themes central to the poetics of postmodernism. The plays belonging to all three phases

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offer certain significant thematic and structural illustrations of how postmodernism lies at the centre of Pinter’s dramatic expression. Marking a significant departure from the mimetic tradition of the realist theatre on the one hand, but refusing to write plays with no referential value on the other, Pinter offers instances of a doubly-coded drama inscribing the dramatic conventions but challenging them from within. By dramatizing the permeation of power in the linguistic and cultural codes, Pinter demonstrates the ideological construction of both objective knowledge and human subject. At the same time, revealing these processes which attend the formation of human subject and other discursive practices suggests a strategy of demystifying their supposed neutrality. These ideas are worked out more rigorously in the plays belonging to the earlier and the later period, although a strain runs through the memory plays of the middle period as well.

The memory plays, however, primarily dramatize the idea of the decentered human subject by illustrating the fragile and ruptured nature of private memory. Structurally, these plays inscribe the devices of repetition, conflation, overlap, disconnected stimuli and
simultaneity. Presenting characters in a static mode, however, does not amount to the negation of the past. Instead, it is the inescapability of the past that is suggested through the inability of characters to break themselves free from its clutches. The problem, nevertheless, lies in their incapacity to negotiate meaningfully with a past that haunts them and yet remains unavailable except through attempts of overt construction.