Chapter - III

And Then Came Pinter
The title of the present chapter may remind the readers of that famous adage associated with Julius Caesar: Veni Vidi Vici — I came, I saw, I conquered. And this suggestion is not altogether unwitting. Although there is a huge gulf, gaping between Julius Caesar and Harold Pinter in respect of time, status, and demeanour, the gesture of self-possessed confidence exhibited in the utterance of Caesar has a lot of resemblance with that basic trait in Pinter’s character that paved the way to the indelible obstinacy of deportment he maintained against heavy odds throughout his life.

The first and the foremost intrinsic feature that has contributed substantially in shaping the die-hard stubborn tenacity in Harold Pinter’s character is the innate repugnance he felt towards Europeans in general and Britishers in particular for their attitude towards Jews in which they were one with the Fascists and the Nazis. Pinter himself has described that he had to pass through the threat of anti-Semitic violence in London during the immediate post-war years. In order to understand the full impact of the anti-Semitic posture of
the Britishers one needs to go down the years of history several thousands of years.

Harold Pinter was born on 10th October 1930 in Hackney, East London. His father Hyman (Jack) Pinter was a ladies tailor who worked twelve-hour days making clothes in his shop. He belonged to the fold of Ashkenazi Jews who settled in the middle and northern Europe before settling down in England in the early years of the twentieth century. History of Ashkenazi Jews goes back to the hoary past, to the days of Noah and the deluge told in Chapter X of Genesis of Old Testament. Noah, the blessed son of the Lord, lived for 950 years of which 350 years were after the deluge that wiped out the entire creation by the wrath of the Lord. Noah's son Japheth had seven sons of whom Gomer was the eldest. To Gomer was born three sons — Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. Like the oriental practice in the occident racial inheritance was traced back also to some legendary figures. Pinter's family descended down from Ashkenaz and was designated as Ashkenazi Jews. By the time of Harold Pinter's birth the Jewish population of North London has grown to nearly 40,000 strong. Though not quite affluent, they enjoyed middle-class respectability and were particularly noted for their
religious conformity in an age when even the ritual of routine Sunday churchgoing was hardly adhered to.

First nine years of Harold Pinter’s life were spent in a brick house on the Clapton side of Hackney Downs on Thistlewaite Road near Clapton pond having a few ducks frolicking all day long. Excepting the pond with ducks the rest of the neighborhood was dingy and presented a shoddy poverty-stricken working class atmosphere with rundown Victorian houses, shops, and factories. Some distance down the road there was a river Lee, a tributary of Thames – running for about a couple of miles ending in a marsh beside which was a filthy canal into which a terrible factory emptied all its foul smelling filth polluting the atmosphere of a vast area in the neighborhood. This is how Pinter himself has described the stuffy complexion of the area in which he had to spend his childhood days. (Batty: 2005)

Apart from this offensive nasty environment there was also the economic insecurity from which the Pinter family suffered. Even after working for twelve hours per day Pinter’s father could not save enough money to update his tailoring establishment to cope up with changing fashions and rapidly increasing competitions in his own field of business. As a result he lost his business and had to work as hired craftsman for
somebody else. Being an exceptionally precocious child Harold felt the bitterness of the penury though his parents attempted hard to keep their only son sheltered from poverty. Soon after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Harold along with most of the youngsters in London was evacuated to a castle in Cornwall. His parents occasionally visited him there. In his own words Harold Pinter has described: My parents came down occasionally from London. It was over four hundred miles there and back, and I don’t know how they made it. It was terribly expensive, and they had no money. (95-98)

This clearly shows that even as a child Harold Pinter was quite conscious of the strained circumstances through which their family had to pass during the war years.

To add to all these apparently painful circumstances of Pinter’s early and adolescent years were the socio-political disturbances that convulsed the life of the Londoners during and after the war years. Mixed up with the ethnic apathy of Europeans in general and of Londoners in particular the threat of impending bombardments created an appalling aura terrifying enough to make the existence of youngsters tremulously menacing. In fact, on several occasions Pinter witnessed
the spectacle of the neighborhood or even their own backyard in flames consequent upon enemy bombardments.

Moreover, Pinter remembers to have met groups of youths standing by the railway yards just beyond the turning of the approach road to their home with broken beer bottles in their hands. May be that they might not have waited for Harold Pinter, the Jew! Yet the precocious sensitive mind of Pinter made him apprehensive of irritating skirmishes grown out of apathy towards the Jews. (20-21)

The strained zeitgeist that overlaid the general mien of life obtaining in Britain during Harold Pinter’s formative years was highly charged with tensions and arduous circumstances consequent upon the damages caused by World War I. The whole situation has been succinctly described by Michael Howard:

Exports declined; prices rose; the inflation resulting from the growing flood of paper money hit the salaried classes; imported raw materials for industry dwindled or disappeared. The combined pressures of the blockade and the demands of the armed forces resulted in growing shortages of food, fuel,
and transport; and during 1916 the civilian population began seriously to suffer. (Howard: 56-57)

Though the situation has considerably improved in Britain by the time Pinter was born, Britishers had to pay a high price by changing over from a totalitarian system of administration to one approaching democracy.

When in 1919 'the war to end wars' ended and the Armistice was signed the destiny of the warring nations laughed a sardonic guffaw shaking the very roots of humanity at large. Tensions over the precarious balance so dearly bought kept on rising; and hardly the second decade after the armistice have ended the monster of World War II engulfed the belligerent nations again. The artists one and all — both English and American — vehemently opposed the shrewd conjectures of the warmongers. London based American poet Ezra Pound wrote in his Hugh Selwyn Mauberly bitterly of a human sacrifice in the name of 'an old bitch gone in the teeth/ for a botched civilization' (Sanders: 512). Pinter's apathy and his obstinate tirade against the warmongers have already been recorded in the earlier chapters.

As has already been hinted Harold Pinter enjoyed a comfortable upbringing as his parents tried their best to
guard their only son from all the worries and hardships they had to face. As a child and a young man Harold developed a taste for modern literature and started trying his hand in writing poetry quite early in life when he was only about thirteen years old. When he was only about twenty years of age, two of his poems were published in Poetry London. He was also quite precocious even in his reading; he read James Joyce's *Ulysses* when he was only about fifteen, and this book remained a favourite classic for him throughout his life. Other authors he read include Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, Eliot, Dylan Thomas, W.B. Yeats and Franz Kafka. (Batty: 4-5)

The last name in the list — Franz Kafka — was indeed that of an artist that fascinated the imagination of young Harold. Like Harold Pinter Kafka was born in a middleclass Jewish family in Prague, the capital of Austria – Hungary (now Czech Republic). Though Kafka showed great interest in Jewish culture and spirituality, he himself was not very much involved in Jewish religious life. Kafka's fascination for Jewish culture and religion was the outcome of the interest he took in Yiddish theatre. From the performances of the Yiddish plays his curiosity in Judaism grew; and he even distinguished between the Jews of Eastern Europe and
those living in Western Europe in the intensity of their religious fervour and spirituality of the former, which the latter lacked. The monotheistic religion based firmly on the laws and teachings of the Holy Scripture – Pentateuch, The Prophets, and Hagiographa – was meticulously followed by the Jews and was known as Judaism. Kafka’s association with Hugo Bergmann and Max Brod clearly indicates his leanings towards Judaism as both of them were Zionists. One can very well interpret these gestures of Kafka as basically humanitarian because he felt that worship of one God would reduce the hostile attitude obtaining among people belonging to various beliefs and nations. The need to have basically tolerant as well as different ways of thinking became almost an obsession with Kafka in his later years when he was suffering from his own physical ailments. His writings show clearly that it is possible to write differently. The Metamorphosis is a unique example of this telling the story of its hero Gregor Samsa transformed into a horrible vermin one night in his bed. The rest of the short novel deals with the reactions of the people around Gregor in a perfectly realistic manner.

The very fact that Harold Pinter was fascinated by the writings of Franz Kafka shows that Pinter was
capable of appreciating these out of the way writings. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which remained a favourite with Harold Pinter throughout, was another similar example.

To pick up the strand of the climate obtaining in London during Pinter's formative years there appears to be a pressure of strain and stress hanging like an ominous cloud under the stars. On May 8, 1956 London's Royal Court Theatre staged John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Andrew Sanders records:

The play certainly shocked its first audiences, as well as some of its more perceptive critics, into responsive attention. It is also sometimes claimed that the play single-handedly provoked theatre managers and theatre companies out of their complacent faith in the middleclass virtues of 'the well-made play' and into a response to a new kind of drama which grappled with 'the issues of the day'. Osborne's play was revolutionary neither in its form nor in its politics; it was, however, by the standards of its time, alarming in its rancour, its language, and its setting.

(Sanders: 594-595)
Before scrutinizing the psychosomatic nuances of the British psyche during and after the war years, it appeared preferable to bring in the reference to John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* as this play had paved the way for a new kind of drama that shocked the public into a deeper kind of recognition of the trauma crouching behind their happy-go-lucky carefree postures. To say that Harold Pinter was impressed by Osborne's play is to put it rather glibly. Under the pseudonym of David Baron he played the part of Jimmy Porter's mate Cliff Lewis very successfully in the Royal Court Theatre. This obviously proves that he was immersed in the spirit of the play. And this spirit was almost a Paroxysm:

Osborne's play was to prove as significant an event on the London stage as *Waiting for Godot* had become the year before and was subsequently considered 'arguably the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since the advent of Shaw (Taylor:37) The basic realism of its setting challenged the demureness of traditional theatrical decor and the play gave voice to a frustrated, disenfranchised constituency of lower middle-class, first-generation graduates of Post-war British
education policies. Jimmy Porter, the bitter, articulate focus of the drama, rails against a class-ridden Establishment that this education has provided no means to either breach or influence and bemoans the lack of idealistic purpose. In this way, the play was deemed to represent a prevailing state of mind among the disenchanted youth of the times. (Batty: 17-18)

The 'state of mind among the disenchanted youth of the times' is exactly what we are to deal with in our search for the trauma of post-war sensibility.