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Strategic Use of Memory in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*

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Harold Pinter has been the most influential, provocative and poetic dramatist of latter half of last century. He is known for creating dramatic poetry out of everyday speech. *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Homecoming* (1965), and *No Man's Land* (1975) are some of his well known plays. In more than thirty plays, which he wrote between 1957 and 2000, he captured the anxiety and ambiguity of life through his enigmatic characters that use terse, hypnotic dialogue filled with gaping pauses and silences. In these dialogues Pinter explores varied tactics and stratagems which people try to gain self-confidence, or to make the opponents feel a sense of inferiority, or to establish one's upper hand over others. The present paper attempts to study one of such stratagems – memory, in two of Pinter's most important plays *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* and unfolds the intents of the characters.

Two or three people in a room - this seems to be the recurrent motif in Pinter's early plays including *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. The room that the characters occupy becomes a refuge from the menacing world outside. The conflict in Pinter's plays arises when "one of the outside forces penetrates into the room and disrupts the security of its occupants" (Wellworth 225). In the minds of these occupants of the room prevails an undefined fear from the menacing outside forces. Hence these occupants of the room seem to hide themselves from the outside people, and this creates an impression that these occupants are some escaped convicts or offenders of the law of the land. It seems that these occupants of the room are wary of facing the outsiders because they may have some knowledge of the past life of these insiders which they do not want to reveal at any cost. Thus the insiders of the room try their best to escape the memory of their past as it torments them and gives them nervous anxiety while the ominous outsiders bring the memory of their past with them and charge them with vague accusations.

The strategy that the occupants of the room adopt to escape from the memory of their horrible past is either by hiding it or by engineering and inventing it in such a way that it favours them against the powerful forces they come to confront in their struggle for survival. Thus the invention and engineering of the memory of past demands a language which can conceal rather than reveal the information sought. This way language becomes striking as it works like a shield to a soldier in the battlefield. Hence if ever a Pinter character recalls his past he muses over it so strategically that its impact establishes his strength rather than exposing the Achilles' heel of that character. Those who are not careful enough to guard their secrets have to bear the consequences. Thus most of Pinter's characters struggle hard to guard their past like anything and do not let their secrets get divulged.

Memory of past seems to hold a significant place in Pinter's first full length play *The Birthday Party*. The whole of the action of this play emanates from the dichotomy between the incidents of past that the intruders try to remind Stanley of and his attempt at forgetting those bygone days. Stanley has been hiding in the seedy seaside boarding house of Meg since a year or so. His shabby existence in the boarding house and the way he confines

himself to the house only, indicates that he is trying to escape from the outside world which may have some knowledge of his past that is frightening to him. When Meg tells Stanley that two visitors are expected to come and stay in her boarding house for a couple of nights, he does not believe her and tries to belie her because the very idea of entry of an outsider is alarming to him. He tries to take refuge in the memories of his golden past that seems to be fabricated purposely:

STANLEY. Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country. (*Pause.*) 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 [. . .] (*to himself*) I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot [. . .]. (BP 32-33)

Stanley earlier told Meg that he has been offered a job as a pianist and that he is considering it. The job, he says, will take him to the various big cities of the world. Then suddenly he narrates the story of a concert that he gave at Lower Edmonton. In Stanley's recollections of his days as a concert pianist, rather than anything appearing true, there seems to be a characteristic Pinter note - a yearning for some lost Eden as a refuge from the uncertain present. Since it becomes difficult to verify this kind of memory, it appears to have been assembled to impress the landlady Meg and also to soothe his troubled mind of the fear of possible arrival of the two men about whom his landlady has informed him. But the more he tries to hide the fear lurking under these recollections of past, the more intense his dread becomes. A thought terrifies him that "They're coming [. . .] They're looking for someone [. . .] They're looking for someone. A certain person" (BP 34). The past that he seems to have been guarding till now appears to go out of his control as two men who are expected may reveal his past. Therefore he tries to escape these messengers of his past, when they come, by saying that he has nothing to do with them and that for him they're no more than a dirty joke. The fear of the past getting revealed seems to make him behave like this in his very first meeting with Goldberg and McCann:

STANLEY. Let me—just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke [. . .] Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss? (BP 55)

This kind of aggression speaks volumes of the uneasiness inside Stanley. The question arises that if Stanley does not know and has nothing to do with the two men, Goldberg and McCann, why he gets so aroused at their arrival in the boarding house? The answer seems to be that the two outsiders have knowledge of secrets of his past that he tends to petrol so cautiously. Clearly Stanley has tried to escape from his self as well as his past by taking refuge in Meg's house. He does not recall his past until and unless it is useful in his present. What recollections he makes to Meg, regarding his career as a pianist, appear to be doctored to give a favourable impression in the present.

The kind of accusations that Goldberg and McCann shower on Stanley appears to have nothing to do with a pianist. The strange thing about the play is that neither of the two parties clearly reveals what fault Stanley has committed in past. Though the menacing pair comprising Goldberg and McCann flings aside the floodgates leading Stanley to reminisce his past with all his faults and crimes: "Why don't you pay the rent?" (BP 61). They charge him of being a sinner and a "mother defiler" (BP 61). They find him "a traitor to the cloth" who has verminated the "sheet of your [his] birth" and the one who contaminates "woman

kind” (BP 61). Apart from the above said accusations they put him through nonsensical interrogation:

GOLDBERG. Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY. Neither.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY. Both.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! It’s necessary but not possible.

STANLEY. Both.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?

... ..

GOLDBERG. Which came first?

MCCANN. Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

GOLDBERG and MCCANN. Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

Stanley *screams*. (BP 60, 62)

This kind of interrogation to which Stanley has been subjected to makes the play paradoxically famous as this leads the critics to say that it is an absurd drama as well as that it is a great play of universal significance. Stanley can be any defaulter who has been caught in the net of forces he has been trying to escape throughout. That Stanley must be at fault is established by two things: one that he tries to hide himself from the outside world by confining in Meg’s house and second that he tries to dominate Goldberg and McCann as soon as he meets them by bullying them before they ultimately peep through his false bravado and try to make him recall his past:

GOLDBERG. Webber, what were you doing yesterday?

STANLEY. Yesterday?

GOLDBERG. And the day before. What did you do the day before that? (BP 57)

It is not Stanley alone who is horrified with memory of past but Goldberg also dislikes to visualise his past. He has fond memories of his wife who used to call him ‘Simey’. But when McCann addresses him by this name, he flares up in rage:

MCCANN. . . . Simey.

GOLDBERG (*opening his eyes, regarding MCCANN*). What–did–you–call–me?

MCCANN. Who?

GOLDBERG (*murderously*). Don’t call me that! (*He seizes MCCANN by the throat.*) NEVER CALL ME THAT! (BP 86)

Here perhaps Goldberg gets angry because the word ‘Simey’ brings back the memories of his past and tortures him. Apart from this Goldberg recalls his uncle who used to take him to various places during the early years of his youth. That, he says, was the golden time for him. In Act III he recalls his father who, at his death-bed, had given him some very valuable advice. Goldberg’s tendency to reminisce and to speak about the past probably shows his desire to escape from present into the golden past. At the same time there are certain memories of his past that are painful and hence unwelcome to him. So also seems to be the case with Meg who recalls her past when she was a little girl her room used to be pink with pink carpets and curtains. At other occasions she escapes the memory of past because it seems to give her pain. Towards the end of the play she does not want to recall the incidents of the last night and keeps herself in an illusion that she was the belle of the ball.

With *The Caretaker* there comes a change in the attitude of Pinter's characters towards their recollection of past. Whereas Stanley of *The Birthday Party* was anxious to hide his past, Davies in *The Caretaker* falls back on the memory of his past to support him so that he can dominate others. He uses his memory quite craftily according to his need and for his benefit. Being a master manipulator of language, he twists and turns his memories of the life lived in such a way that he is able to draw profit out of it. On the one hand he recalls those memories of his past life which can establish him as a superior to his benefactor Aston, on the other he does not recall any incident of his past that may expose his weakness and prove fatal for him. Apart from this his memories are so vague that it becomes very difficult to make any meaning out of it. He can easily recall that part of his past life the revelation of which can prove beneficial to him:

DAVIES. [. . .] I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week, I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. A pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since. (TC 18)

By recollecting this past incident, Davies seems to try to hit two birds with one stone - one that he is a clean and respected person and never compromises with cleanliness and honesty, and second that he can be extremely offensive if a situation demands. Indeed the kind of circumstances Davies finds himself in derives him to create a false impression about his personality. His idealised self demands his efforts to memorise some invented or real past which can help him in generating some compensation for his obvious inferiority.

On other occasions when his past is probed into he refuses to remember anything. He appears to look forgetful when Aston asks him a question: "Where were you born then?" (TC 34) Davies cleverly refuses to recall his past: "I was . . . uh . . . oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back . . . see what I mean . . . going back . . . a good way . . . lose a bit of track, like . . . you know. . . ." (TC 34). Here he purposely conceals information because revelation of the facts can put him in trouble rather than come in his defence. In fact, Pinter's characters like Davies "reveal what they choose to reveal and confuse each other with language" (Randisi 64). To decide what to reveal and what to conceal is a part of their stratagem. That's why most of them prefer to ask more and more questions rather than answering the queries put by others.

Unlike Davies, Aston is a simpleton and he makes the mistake of narrating his past to Davies just as it happened:

ASTON. I used to go there quite a bit. Oh, years ago now. [. . .] I thought . . . they understood what I said. [. . .] I talked too much. [. . .] The trouble was, I used to have kind of hallucinations. . . . I used to get the feeling I could see things . . . but may be I was wrong. [. . .] Then one day they took me to a hospital, right outside London. . . . I tried to get out. [. . .] But . . . it wasn't very easy. Then one day . . . this man . . . doctor . . . he told me I had something . . . he said we're going to do something to your brain [. . .] I knew he couldn't do anything to me without getting permission. [. . .] my mother [. . .] signed their form, you see, giving them permission [. . .] a man had a . . . he had a fit, right next to me. . . doctor used to fit the pincers, something like earphones, he used to fit them on the either side of the man's skull. [. . .] the machine, you see . . . he'd turn it on [. . .] they

came [. . .] anyway, he did it . . . I got out of the place . . . my thoughts . . .
had become very slow (TC 63-66)

Being righteous, Aston does not know how to mould his memory in his favour as Davies does. Thus by recollecting the past incident of the brain hospital, Aston has invited trouble on himself because “to show an emotion in Pinter’s world is a weakness which is mercilessly punished by the other characters” (Hall 23). From Aston’s emotional recollections of his past Davies picks up weak points of his personality. Now he knows that Aston is a brain patient, that his mother did not support him, that he is fearful of the hospital and its paraphernalia like pincers and that his mind is slow. These disadvantages of Aston he now converts into his own advantages. Now onwards he becomes Aston’s dominant partner. He tries to instigate Mick, Aston’s brother, against him and wishes to take Aston’s work for himself from Mick. He complains to Mick of Aston’s letting the Blacks use the lavatory of the house. Here Pinter reveals in a subtle way that “to disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome possibility.” (“Introduction” *Plays: One* 15)

It is Aston’s brother Mick who “is a practiced exponent of the tongue in cheek, and he also has an unsettling knack of shifting between different levels of phatic and rhetorical discourse,” (Almansi 53) and who outshines the clever manipulator Davies in the smart game of memory that the later tries to use to his own benefits. In his very first meeting with Davies, Mick realises that the tramp is very clever and thus treats him fittingly. He baffles Davies through his memory of a bloke he once knew in Shoreditch and then again leaves him perfectly deflated through this self-contradictory memory of uncle’s brother:

MICK. You remind me of my uncle’s brother. He was always on the move, that man. Never without his passport. Had an eye for the girls. Very much your build. Bit of an athlete. Long-jump specialist. [. . .] Had a penchant for nuts. That’s what it was. Nothing else but a penchant. [. . .] Had a marvellous stop-watch. Picked it up in Hong Kong. The day after they chucked him out of the Salvation Army. [. . .] To be honest I’ve never made out how he came to be my uncle’s brother. I’ve often thought that may be it was the other way round. I mean that my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle. As a matter of fact I called him Sid. My mother called him Sid too. [. . .] Your spitting image he was [. . .]. (TC 40)

Here it becomes very difficult for Davies to decide whether Mick is praising him or insulting him by comparing him with his uncle’s brother. Mick describes his uncle’s brother Sid as a progressive man who was an athlete, who had a very good stop-watch and had penchant for nuts. Then Mick tells, Davies that Sid had mere penchant nothing else and that his stop-watch was stolen one and that he was expelled out of Salvation. Further he asserts: “Your spitting image he was”. Thus Mick mixes his thesis and antithesis so beautifully that Davies is left totally deflated and badly confused. Actually this kind of memory seems to be insignificant and a non-entity. The idea is supported by Mick’s words: “I’ve never made out how he came to be my uncle’s brother.” The memory seems to be invented one to defeat Davies who does not know anything about Mick to recall and counter attack him. Thus this kind of strategic communication used by Mick is to disarm his opponent “by saying the opposite of what the other one was hoping or expecting.”(Hall 23)

In *The Caretaker* the past of Aston, when revealed to the opponent Davies, proves fatal for him; the memorised glories of Davies’s past fail to secure him any room in Aston’s

room; and strategic recaps from the past by Mick undo Davies's attempt of dominance over him. The seesaw of Stanley's past, in *The Birthday Party*, comes in his favour when he himself recalls his past to Meg while its other side comes down when the two intruders interrogate him with a volley of relevant or irrelevant queries.

Indeed Harold Pinter's world is elusive, irrational, hostile and full of insecurity. His characters are the ones whose self has been hurt by others - the powerful ones or who fear lest they should get hurt any time by some external force. Therefore they do their every bit to keep themselves safe from the extrinsic forces around them. They struggle for their survival against all odds and adopt all possible stratagems to defend themselves. In order to survive against the attack of their enemies and to get away from the dominance of their opponents, they pose big and sometimes go the other way round and try to win the sympathy of their foes by presenting themselves as the ones who are in a pitiable condition. Some of such characters recall their past which is believable while the others invent it and the invented past is hardly believable. What they tell about their gone days hardly fits in with their present status. They come under the shed of past to escape from the attacking hailstones of dominance of others.

A common string that runs through the memories of different characters in Pinter is the unreliability of memory. We face immense difficulty in verifying the past of his characters as they either cannot remember their past or are uncertain of the accuracy of their memory or recognize that whatever they recall is true mainly for the present, however false it may be for the past. The past to which Pinter's characters lay claim may be true or may be created. On the mistiness of memory Pinter once remarked: "If you were asked to remember, you really cannot be sure of whom you met twenty years before, and in what circumstances" (Gussow 9). Nevertheless, the characters try to impose their own version of memory upon their opponents in order to gain control of the battles.

The pattern of memory in Pinter's plays does not remain the same throughout. With the advancement of his career as a playwright significant changes have been perceptible in his characters' attitude towards memory. Whereas Stanley of *The Birthday Party* launches himself into a frontal attack on his opponents Goldberg and McCann, the case of Davies of *The Caretaker* goes a step forward as he does not refuse to bring memory of his past in his mind though his recollections of the past are doctored so carefully that they only endeavour to put him in a superior place to his opponent and come to favour him. Thus the pattern that emerges out of the study of the two plays is that if Pinter's earlier plays present the characters who cannot reinvent their past in a desirable way, his "later plays show characters who present a past which is not only what they remember but also what they imagine to remember, convince others to remember and pretend to remember" (Kumar 188). Thus memory of past has been used differently as well as strategically by different characters of Pinter.

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