



Pursuit of Memories in Harold Pinter's Landscape

KEYWORDS

Memories, Past, Infidelity, Lyrical evocation, Landscape.

Dr. Ishan Gairola

Mansoorie, Dehradun

ABSTRACT *It is widely accepted that memories play a significant role in reconstructing the past. Every individual needs memories to be able to experience her/his autobiographical continuity. It would be impossible for an individual to relate her/his past with her/himself without these memories. The strong bond between memory and the past has been a dominant topic in contemporary British literature and, therefore, the significance of memory has been discussed in many literary works. This paper focuses on memories, and the way Pinter demonstrates these to operate on a variety of levels. The play, Landscape, demonstrates an individual's experiences of self-confrontation, as the character realizes, how unreliable memory is and how it can be shaped according to one's present desire. It can become a means of comfort and security on the one hand or can separate people by providing them the possibility to live in the past and avoid confrontation with the present on the other hand.*

Introduction:

There was a radical change in the writings of Harold Pinter during the late 1960s, as he had then swiftly shifted his focus from the absurdity of life to the recollection of memories of an individual. *Landscape* is one such example. The play is marked as a fine example of a distinct transition in the dramatist's writings from his earlier absurd plays. Writing on the lines of existential writers for almost a decade, Pinter experienced a period of anxiety and restlessness. He expressed his feelings by saying that it was hard work to start a totally "new course" or explore a new territory: "You're always stuck. You're stuck as a writer. I am stuck in my own tracks, whatever they are—for so long." (Gussow 24)

As the circumstances of his life changed, the social milieu of his plays and some of his subject matter changed. But the most significant part of Pinter's writing was his constant striving for greater economy and clarity. He discarded the traditional devices of theatre. The characters in Pinter's *Landscape* recite their own versions of the past events, in order to manipulate or overpower the other individuals. The audience and the readers have a cryptic feeling about whether the monologues or speeches, uttered by the characters have any authentic validity with their true self. The dramatist in these plays intensively pursues the unanswered questions concerned with the nature of memory, its unreliability and essentiality and its role in both life and art.

Pinter's One-Act Play, *Landscape* (1968), was first presented at the Aldwych theatre in 1969. The play reveals a new insight of Pinter's artistic vision. The play focuses on a middle-aged couple Beth and Duff. Both the characters appear to be sitting and speaking alongside a kitchen table. Duff addresses Beth, but does not appear to hear her. Similarly Beth too neither addresses Duff, nor does she appear to hear him. The technique of interweaving the stream of consciousness predominates in the play. Though there is lack of action in the play, yet quite a lot is explored through Beth's monologues.

The couple separates from each other as their memories create a gap between them, which they fail to overcome. At the very beginning of the play we watch Beth recol-

lecting her memory, specially of a day she spent with her lover on the beach and later in a hotel bar. She strongly wishes to hold that beautiful past (the experience) as she tries to bring that memory into the present and extend it into the future. For once, in her life, she had experienced complete fulfilment. She innocently craves to become a mother. The question arises whether she had been emotionally detached by her dull husband Duff? Beth, cares for nothing but her love on the beach, the memory (that particular moment) of which had become the only reality which existed for her. The kitchen where she seemed to sit does not appear to exist for her. She successfully recreates the archetypal reality of her past against the present reality of her husband, whom she neither sees nor hears.

As Beth's memories appear to lie in a further distant time, Duff is involved with more social and recent activities. He talks about an event during which he was forced to take shelter under a tree because of heavy rain, and then later, about how he was involved in a fight over a beer in a pub. Duff's dialogue confirms him to be a masculine stereotype. He focuses on masculine pursuits such as drinking and dog-racing, rather than making any effort to communicate with his wife. We can also observe the constant clash of the romantic female view with the coarse male view.

The tension increases when Duff tries to make a contact with Beth, but fails, while Beth ravishingly intensifies the situation as she relives her past experiences. Duff shrewdly holding the arms of memories tries to start a conversation with his wife. And it is this conversation which throws a light on their past lives. Through his speech, we realize that the couple is residing in a large country house of their former employer, Mr. Sykes. So, where did Mr. Sykes go? Why did he leave the house for the couple? Such questions are marked out by Duff. In a fit of a remembrance of a moment from the past, Duff appreciates the beauty of his wife, on that particular evening, when she appeared to be adorable: "The nice blue dress he chose for you, for the house, that was very nice of him. Of course Of course it was in his own interests for you to look good about the house, for guest." (CW III 188)

From Duff's statement we are assured that it was the same

blue dress that Beth was wearing on the day, she went to the beach, with her lover. As she herself acclaims: "I wore my blue dress." (CW III 194). Through Duff's revelation of the past one can come to a possible interpretation that Mr. Sykes had left the house for the couple, as he was emotionally and physically connected with Beth. At a certain stage in the play even Duff takes his expedition in the landscape of memories. Filled with guilt consciousness, he recalls the day he confessed his infidelity to young Beth. Whereas Beth is unwilling to live in the present and forget her lover, Duff has chosen to shatter all the windows of the past memories and has forgotten the girl for whom he had betrayed his wife. For Duff, the past does not hold any strong implications, as compared to the present moment. Duff's confessed infidelity, working in counterpoint with Beth's unconfessed, but re-created, infidelity, is the central irony of the play.

So, the question is whether infidelity is the reason for the couple's present state of non-communication? Out of the different possibilities one could state that Duff's confession of being unfaithful years back is what made Beth turn to an anonymous lover. But one of the strongest cause for the couple's non-communication emerges from Duff's self-acknowledgment of the most decisive and traumatic incident. The incident takes place after Mr. Sykes had gone or had probably died. In order to control his present, Duff finally attacks Beth's memories. He reveals the ugly past of raping his wife in a big hall in front of the dog. The image appears to be of a crude male stereotype mentality. From Duff's brutal description of the rape, one can figure out the reason for Beth's total surrender of her thoughts, in the landscape of memory.

Duff interrupts her with his abrupt images of past, but his constant use of colloquial phrases and harsh sounding consonants, does not affect Beth's memories. In fact, memories hold Beth in such a way that she is enthralled with the light touch of her lover in contrast to the heavy crudeness of Duff due to which he is unable to reach her. The final image of the play displays Beth's lyrical evocation of gentle lovemaking on the beach:

So sweetly the sand over me. Tiny the sand on my skin

Pause

So silent the sky in my eyes. Gently the sound of the tide.

Pause

Oh my true love, I said. (CW III 197-198)

Conclusion

In the play, it is the past that dwells on the present, and casts its shadow over the action of the characters. It is not important for the past, to be true, solid and fixed, for it can be shaped and reshaped, directly or indirectly without any cause. Memory under the influence of the conscious and subconscious mind could blend reality and fiction, present and past. Thus, the title of the play, *Landscape*, basically refers to the emotionally vast landscape separating Beth and Duff on each stand. The title also suggests the physical landscape (the beach, the pub, the hall and so on), where the memories of the couple keep on shuffling at constant intervals.

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