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## I REMEMBER; THEREFORE, I EXIST: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF HAROLD PINTER'S OLD TIMES

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### Abstract

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) employs the major themes of the twentieth century in his drama such as the loss of meaning and identity. His characters want to find a sanctuary where they can anchor and define their existence in a world which lacks unity and is beyond the explanation of reason. This shelter they take refuge in is their memories as they assume that the past can provide them with a fixed realm where they can feel meanings. Therefore, Pinter's pervading theme is memory. Moreover, Pinter's characters are depicted as they try to persuade others to verify their own memories to assert a stable identity and meaning to their existence. That is, remembrances of their past help them to overpower others, so they can feel confident. Considering these, this study aims to explore the use and functions of such themes as memory, existence, identity and gender-power relations in Harold Pinter's Old Times (1971).

**Keywords:** *Harold Pinter, Old Times, Past, Memory, Existence, Gender-Power Relations.*

## HATIRLIYORUM; ÖYLEYSE, VARIM: HAROLD PINTER'İN ESKİ ZAMANLAR OYUNUNUN VAROLUŞSAL BİR OKUMASI

### Özet

Harold Pinter (1930-2008), oyunlarında anlam ve kimlik kaybı gibi yirminci yüzyılın en temel temalarını işlemektedir. Aklın açıklayamadığı ve bütünlük kavramının yitirildiği bir dünyada, Pinter'in oyun karakterleri varoluşlarını hem sabitleyip hem de tanımlayabilecekleri bir sığınak bulmayı arzulamaktadır. Sığınak olarak seçtikleri yer bellekleri yahut hatıralarıdır çünkü karakterler geçmiş kavramının, onlara anlam bütünlüğünü tekrar hissedebilecekleri, değişmez ve sabit bir yeri sağlayacağını düşünürler. Bu yüzden, bellek (hem de hatıra) Pinter'in oyunlarında sıklıkla kullandığı temadır. Bunun yanı sıra, Pinter'in oyun karakterleri, varlıklarına anlam katmak ve sabit bir kimlik elde etmek amacıyla, hatıralarını doğrulamak için gerekli olan diğer karakterleri ikna etmeye uğraşırken tasvir edilir. Diğer bir deyişle, geçmişi hatırlamak onların diğer karakterleri alt etmesine yardımcı olmaktadır ve bu şekilde kendilerini güvende hissetmektedirler. Buradan hareketle, bu çalışma Harold Pinter'in Eski Zamanlar (1971) oyununda, bellek (hatıra), varoluş, kimlik ve cinsiyet-güç ilişkileri gibi temaların kullanım ve işlevlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Harold Pinter, Eski Zamanlar, Geçmiş, Bellek, Varoluş, Cinsiyet-Güç İlişkileri.*

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## 1. Introduction

*Old Times* is a memory play which deals with its characters' recollections of the past. As Esslin puts, "*Old Times contains drama in presenting a clash of personalities, a battle for the affections of a woman and best friend*" (1970: 183). Harold Pinter's concern is with the motives behind people's recollections as his characters voluntarily, not arbitrarily, go back to their past and invoke their memories. As Pinter's biographer, Billington asserts, "*the play is also a sustained mediation on time and memory in which Pinter suggests the past is no more fixed or certain than the present or the future*" (1996: 213). The past is very difficult, almost impossible, to verify; therefore, Pinter's characters either cannot remember the past or they are uncertain about its accuracy.

Pinter is obviously influenced by Wilde's ideas about the past. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily and Mrs. Prism elaborate on the function of memories. Mrs. Prism announces "*Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us*", to which Cecily replies "*Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened*" (Wilde, 1899: 57). Pinter takes this idea a stage further and theorizes that "*through the very act of remembering, the past acquires an imaginative truth*" (Billington, 1996: 213). Uncertainty of memories causes each character to have a different version of the original recollection. This notion also denotes the subjectivity of memory. To dominate others in order to assert one's existence and compensate for his own inadequacies or insecurities is the main motive of Pinter in *Old Times*. The characters construct, deconstruct or reconstruct their recollections of the past according to their own present need which is mainly the need to overpower others to assert their existence.

## 2. An Existential Reading of *Old Times*

As in many plays of Pinter, an outsider comes into a territory, and threatens the others' possessions, security, or identity in *Old Times* too. Thus, the characters are in continuous guard of their territory against the intruders who try to invade it both psychologically and physically. In *Old Times*, the married couple, Deeley and Kate is waiting for their guest, Anna. Deeley feels intimidated by Anna's visit since he regards Anna as an intruder or a threat who, he believes, is to take over his authority and territory which denote his house and marriage with Kate. For Deeley, their house in the country is a refuge, and Anna's arrival will bring menace into it.

Deeley is seemingly the centre of the play or the focus of the patriarchal power because he is the one who suffers most from the existential concerns and tries to overpower others. Deeley reflects his anxiety by asking Kate a lot of questions about Anna and her relationship with his wife before she arrives. Kate claims that Anna is the best and only friend she has got, which makes Anna's existence more intimidating for Deeley. As he enquires about Kate's past relationship with Anna, Kate states that she remembers vaguely because it was a long time ago. Deeley still feels intimidated and argues: "*But you remember her. She remembers you. Or why would she be coming here tonight?*" (Pinter, 1971: 246). That Anna and Kate remember each other makes Deeley feel threatened by the old times they had together. Deeley tries to learn more about his possible rival by inquiring about Anna's personal life:

DEELEY:

What do you think he'd be like? I mean, what sort of man would she [Anna] have married? After all, she was your best-your only-friend. You must have some idea. What kind of man would he be?

KATE:

I have no idea.

DEELEY:

Haven't you any curiosity?

KATE:

*You forget. I know her.* (Pinter, 1971: 252)

Kate knows how to offend Deeley. It is Deeley who feels to be challenged and overpowered by his wife when she mentions the old acquaintance between her and Anna. Deeley who is unable to find a space in their memories feels insecure and defeated so this is a stroke to his sense of existence. Deeley avoids presenting himself as a vulnerable person lest others would attack him. Therefore, he mainly speaks for the purpose of overpowering others in order not to be defeated. For example, Kate threatens Deeley's existence by implying that he could not interfere in the unique relationship she had with Anna:

DEELEY:

You haven't seen her for twenty years.

KATE:

*You've never seen her. There is a difference.* (Pinter, 1971: 252)

Deeley asks these questions to have knowledge about Anna because knowledge is power and he is eager to have power over both Kate and Anna. Deeley tries to cover his insecurity and uneasiness by pretending that he feels confident of himself: *"Anyway, none of this matters"* (Pinter, 1971: 255). For Deeley, they all matter but he tries not to reveal his vulnerability and weakness, which is being underestimated and taken for granted by others. He will not be able to define and assert his existence without others' approval and verifications of his remembrances. He bitterly feels that how little he knows about Kate's past and not knowing enough renders him weak, which he struggles to accept.

At that point, Anna, who is standing by the window throughout this conversation between Deeley and Kate, turns from the window, and starts her first speech about her recollection of the experiences that she shared with Kate when they lived together in London. *"The hallucinatory framework, the contradictory statements the characters make about each other and the oddly varying descriptions of the past"* (Billington, 1996: 212) lead to myriad of speculative speeches throughout the play. Anna's description of the past is based on a sophisticated and energetic life with operas, concerts and ballets.

With the emergence of Anna, Deeley's war of existence and power struggle officially starts. Milne asserts that *"Pinter's plays are typically concerned with the idea of male bonding, yet Old Times stands out because it depicts an exceptional situation among Pinter's plays because it pinpoints female bonding and highlights a male exclusion instead"* (2001: 202). Creating a female bonding with Kate, Anna exerts control over Deeley by describing their intimate relationship in which Deeley was neither present nor aware of; *"both giggling and chattering, both huddling to the heat, then bed and sleeping innocent girls, innocent secretaries"* (Pinter, 1971: 255-6). After her first speech, Anna becomes distinctively Deeley's antagonist because he feels defeated having heard all about the sophisticated life Kate and Anna led. This action develops into a duel of wits between Deeley and Anna; each uses his/her memories and reminiscences to put the other at a disadvantageous position. Moreover, Anna and Deeley alternately try to objectify Kate because she is regarded as a vehicle to test the validity of the identity that they have created for themselves. Kate becomes a criterion for them, so both Anna and Deeley try to take possession of Kate. According to Savran, Pinter's *Old Times* is about *"an erotic triangle of passion in which both Deeley and Anna desire for Kate who becomes a desired object in this triangle"* (1982: 44).

Anna makes the best use of every chance she has in order to make Deeley feel insecure about his "possession" of his wife. Therefore, Anna and Deeley start a power battle in which each one insists that he or she knows Kate better than the other one. *"Characters create the past according to the psychological and tactical needs of the moment and, as they do so, it acquires a tangible reality"* (Billington, 1996: 213). In other words, both Anna and Deeley resort to their recollections about Kate and deconstruct, or reconstruct them in order to be able to dominate the other and announce the sovereignty of his or her existence:

ANNA:

She was always a dreamer.

DEELEY:

She likes taking long walks. All that. You know. Raincoat on. Off down the lane, hands deep in pockets. All that kind of thing. (Pinter, 1971: 261-2)

Anna puts forward Kate's past preferences and personality qualities. Deeley, who does his best to prevent Kate and Anna from attaining personal integrity and dominance over him, delivers a counter attack by noting Kate's present preferences. The past which is transferred by Anna and the present which is represented by Deeley are intermingled, and they influence each other. The past is no longer something fixed because the boundary between the past and present is blurred. There is nothing to trust or take as real for both characters and the audience. Anna is unable to reply to Deeley's assertions about the present. Thus, Deeley tries to go on dominating her by talking about their romantic moments:

DEELEY:

Sometimes I take her face in my hands and look at it.

ANNA:

Really?

DEELEY:

Yes, I look at it, in my hands. Then I kind of let it go, take my hands away, leave it floating.

KATE:

My head is quite fixed then. I have it on. (Pinter, 1971: 262)

In Pinter's plays, relationships keep changing in the sense that the characters change sides in dominating the others. They use memories, by either fabricating or interpreting them, in order to subjugate and victimize each other. Kate takes Anna's side, and exercises power over Deeley by representing a more realistic point of view regarding Deeley's expression of the intimate moments they share. Anna takes advantage of that, and attacks with the recollection of Kate again. Anna gets herself involved in Kate's dreams by using a more poetic language as follows.

ANNA:

She was always a dreamer. Sometimes, walking, in the park, I'd say to her, you're dreaming, you're dreaming, wake up, what are you dreaming? and she'd look round at me, flicking her hair, and look at me as if I were part of her dream. (Pinter, 1971: 262-3)

Pinter uses a variety of techniques in the play both to depict the battle between Deeley and Anna; songs and movies enrich the texture of the play. Anna and Deeley go on their battle by using their words as weapons. They use the lyrics of a song which is cleverly chosen to reinforce the play's basic theme of remembrance: "DEELEY: (Singing to KATE.) *You're lovely to look at, delightful to know*" (Pinter, 1971: 265). Anna starts singing by picking up the lines carefully in order to control Deeley. The lyrics that are picked up praise Kate, but their intention is devious. They are carefully chosen to assert the power over Kate as follows:

DEELEY:

Blue moon, I see you standing alone

ANNA:

The way you comb your hair

DEELEY:

Oh no they can't take that away from me

...

ANNA:

You are the promised kiss of springtime

DEELEY:

And someday I'll know that moment divine,

When all the things you are, are mine! (Pinter, 1971: 265)

In the first line of the song, Deeley suggests that he is standing and admiring Kate from a distance. Anna takes the control with a more intimate observation of Kate which is the way she combs her hair. As a reaction, Deeley openly tells Anna that she will not have Kate as he insists that Kate is his to possess.

The film called *Odd Man Out* is also functional to underline the theme of the play. It is deliberately chosen as the occasion for Deeley's alleged first meeting with Kate. The title is an attribution to Deeley himself: he is the odd man out in this peculiar relationship. He makes use of the recollection of how Kate and himself first met. Deeley's account of his cinematic encounter with Kate is circumstantially detailed:

DEELEY:

I thought Jesus this is it, I've made a catch, this is a trueblue pickup, and when we had sat down in the cafe with tea she looked into her cup and then up at me and told me she thought Robert Newton [the actor in the film] was remarkable. So, it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart. (Pinter, 1971: 268)

Deeley refers to Kate as a picked-up girl which is not romantic at all. He bases the memory of their first acquaintance on a sexual and crude relationship. In that way, Deeley regards Kate as an object which he could pick up through his masculinity, but he merely demeans that special occasion. His statement "*It is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart*" (Pinter, 1971: 268) is significant since he challenges Anna through the implication that she will not be able to come between them. However, this account of him is undercut by Anna. Her description of rushing off with Kate to some obscure, unfamiliar district to see *Odd Man Out*, strikes another blow to Deeley and reinvents the past to suit her own purposes.

Deeley assumes that his only chance to overpower Anna is the sexual relationship he has with Kate. He supposes that Anna cannot be able to compensate for a heterosexual relationship that Deeley can offer to Kate. He asks what Robert Newton would think of this, but actually he challenges Anna by forcing her picture Deeley and Kate's physical act of love, and provokes her to attack if she can.

DEELEY:

And then at a slightly later stage our naked bodies met, hers cool, warm, highly agreeable, and I wondered what Robert Newton would think of this. What would he think of this I wondered as I touched her profoundly all over. (To ANNA.) What do you think he'd think? (Pinter, 1971: 269)

Anna's reply is highly significant in the sense that she refers to the manipulation of the recollections, and implies that Deeley does manipulate his recollection:

ANNA:

I never met Robert Newton but I do know I know what you mean. There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place. (Pinter, 1971: 269-270)

Anna, the mouthpiece of Pinter, suggests that the main characteristic of the memory is its uncertainty. The memories may not have taken place in the past but the characters recall them as they take place, and make them true for the present. Anna argues that what Deeley remembers may not have happened; so, she undercuts the meaning and reality of his recollection. Deeley cannot respond to that challenge. Anna immediately attacks with her recollection of a man in Kate and Anna's room:

ANNA:

This man crying in our room. One night late I returned and found him sobbing, his hand over his face sitting in the armchair, all crumpled in the armchair and Katey sitting on the bed with a mug of coffee and no one spoke to me there was nothing but sobbing, suddenly it stopped. The man came over to me, quickly, looked down at me, but I would have absolutely nothing to do with him, nothing. (Pinter, 1971: 270)

At that point, Kate, who remains silent till that moment, states: *"You talk of me as if I were dead"* (Pinter, 1971: 272). Kate is quite aware of the battle which is going on between Anna and Deeley. She implies that she is very much present and listens to everything they say. Therefore, she hints that they have to be careful of what they say. They ignore Kate's statement, go on with their competition. Anna tells how happy she felt when she first learnt that Kate was married. Her remarks are attempts to assert how well she knows Kate:

ANNA:

And later when I found out the kind of man you were I was doubly delighted because I knew Katey had always been interested in the arts.

KATE:

I was interested once in the arts, but I can't remember now which ones they were. (Pinter, 1971: 275)

Kate suggests that Deeley's ability in art was powerful once, but now it does not attract her to Deeley anymore. Kate exerts control over Deeley, and at the same time she diminishes his power on her. Anna sees this chance, and evokes the recollection of her and Kate when they *"explored London and all the old churches and all the old buildings"* (Pinter, 1971: 276). She also reminds Kate that she used to insist they visit various galleries and theatres. Anna implies that Kate was interested in art when she was only with her, not with Deeley.

Deeley, who is defeated once more, tries to assert his existence while Anna and Kate are talking about Anna's villa in Sicily. Kate is interested in Anna's daily habits in Sicily and the details about her villa. Deeley realizes this interest, and attempts to attract the attention on him. He presents himself as a globe-trotting film-maker: *"DEELEY: As a matter of fact I am at the top of my profession, as a matter of fact, and I have indeed been associated with substantial numbers of articulate and sensitive people, mainly prostitutes of all kinds"* (Pinter, 1971: 280). While trying to assert that he is a true artist or intellectual, Deeley simultaneously expresses his contempt of the snobs who claim to be artists or intellectuals like Anna. Deeley who sees his proprietary claim to Kate is under threat battles to re-establish his identity. *"I had a great crew in Sicily. A marvelous cameraman I wrote the film and directed in. My Name is Orson Welles"* (Pinter, 1971: 280). As a sign of his mounting panic, he exaggerates it and even calls himself Orson Welles. However, Kate ignores him, and inquires more about Sicily:

KATE: (To ANNA.)

And do you like Sicilian people?

DEELEY:

I've been there. There is nothing more to see, there's nothing more to investigate, nothing. There is nothing more in Sicily to investigate.

KATE: (To ANNA.)

Do you like Sicilian people? (Pinter, 1971: 281)

Deeley's statements indicate that he wants to diminish the importance of Sicily and accordingly Anna's importance and identity. He insists on changing the subject of the conversation. The interesting point is that Anna does not answer Kate's question but just stares at her. That action suggests that even language is not for communication but it is for exerting domination over others.

Anna suggests staying inside that night instead of going outside. She makes plans at home, but Deeley is not included in these plans: *"I'll cook something, you can wash your hair, you can relax, we'll put on some records"* (Pinter, 1971: 281). In that respect, she wishes to re-live their past. They talk about their old friends and their past daily routine, which suggests that Deeley is completely left out.

Kate decides to take bath and she leaves them. Deeley is alienated from these plans. Therefore, he reacts to assert his existence and masculinity. He talks about a precise reminiscence of meeting Anna twenty years ago although he claimed that he has never met Anna before at the beginning of the play. He claims that he and Anna met twenty years ago in a pub called the Wayfarer, and later at a party where he stared up her skirt at her white thighs. Thus, the contest between Anna and Deeley becomes even more blatant when he reduces her to a piece of skirt. However, Anna can remember neither the tavern nor their acquaintance. The audience can never be sure whether this story is true or false. Deeley insists on the truth of his recollection: *"It's the truth. I remember clearly"* (Pinter, 1971: 288). This memory may be true or false; it is unprovable. However, there are several hints suggesting that Deeley is inventing or reshaping their memories to suit his own needs. Deeley exercises control over Anna by emphasizing his masculine appeal which Anna has rejected previously:

DEELEY:

You sat on a very low sofa, I sat opposite and looked up your skirt. Your black stockings were very black because your thighs were so white I simply sat sipping my light ale and gazed gazed up your skirt. You didn't object, you found my gaze perfectly acceptable. (Pinter, 1971: 289)

Deeley belittles Anna by representing her as a woman whom he could abuse. He reflects his recollection in the way that his crude action which is looking up her skirt was accepted by Anna. Additionally, he overpowers Anna through his insult: *"You must be about forty, I should think, by now (Pause) If I walked into the Wayfarers Tavern now, and saw you sitting in the corner, I wouldn't recognize you"* (Pinter, 1971: 295). He implies that Anna has lost her charm and sexuality, and suggests that he has nothing to do with her now.

Kate has her bath and joins them. She is aware that she is the object of desire so she retains the control over them. During the play, Kate does not talk much; her silence makes her the most powerful one in the play. She lets Anna undermine Deeley's existence; once Deeley is defeated, Kate moves in to demolish Anna and her memories too as follows:

KATE:

The water is very soft here. Much softer than London. I always find the water very hard in London. That's one reason I like living in the country. The only thing nice about a big city is that when it rains it blurs everything. (Pinter, 1971: 297)

Anna protests against Kate's remarks, and reminds their intimate and caring relationship back in London. Anna interfuses the past into the present. Kate gradually distances herself more from both of them by ignoring their attention and possessive attitudes. Kate seizes her chance to dominate others at that point. She evokes the recollection of the man in their room that Anna has told before. She reconstructs the memory by abolishing Anna's existence, and states:

KATE:

I remember you dead. I remember you lying dead. You didn't know I was watching you. I leaned over you. Your face was dirty... Last rites I did not feel necessary. Or any celebration. I felt the time and season appropriate and that by dying alone and dirty you had acted with proper decorum. It was time for my bath. (Pinter, 1971: 310)

According to Kate's recollection, Kate was watching Anna and she leaned over her. That suggests that Kate was the one in power. Reference to dirt on Anna's face signifies that Anna brings malice into Kate's life, so Kate washes her body clean off Anna's effects. Kate then refers to man who is associated with Deeley:

KATE:

When I brought him into the room your body of course had gone. What a relief it was to have a different body in my room a male body behaving differently, doing all those things they do and which they think are good He liked your bed and thought he was different in it because he was a man. (Pinter, 1971: 310)

Kate concludes by dismissing both of them from her life so that she can possess the ultimate power: “*Neither mattered*” (Pinter, 1971: 311). Kate is the victorious one, and the battle is finished by the one who uses silence as the weapon for domination. Kate’s silence makes her the strongest of the three as she lives in her private world from which she observes the vulnerable sides of the others. In the end, she attacks and exercises power over both Deeley and Anna because her reinventions of the memories and words are more powerful than the others’. She manages to establish her subjectivity and power over her husband and friend because unlike them, Kate does not need others’ confirmation to assert her sense of subjectivity, identity and existence. Aware of the power struggle between Deeley and Anna over herself, Kate chooses to stay out of this conflict. Staying inaccessible and “*indecipherable*” (Savran, 1982: 46) to Deeley and Anne, Kate thus proves to be the powerful one among characters. At the end of the play, stage directions state the physical positions of the characters as “*Deeley is slumped in the armchair; Anna is lying on divan; Kate is sitting on divan*” (Pinter, 1971: 312-3). Every physical position defines each character’s inner world. Kate has triumphed and proved her own ultimate unpossibility. She has the confidence of her victory; Anna feels drained by her defeat and she lies as if she is dead and, likewise, Deeley feels insecure due to his defeat. The two characters who have been obsessed with past to prove their existence in the present, as it were, are the ones which end up with failure.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Pinter’s *Old Times* is mostly celebrated for its successful exploration of the existential conflicts and dynamics in human relations which are mainly based on power relations and remembrances of the past. Thus, *Old Times* represents itself as a battlefield in which every character is on guard to fight against the other to feel secure in an insecure world, as Cahn points out, “*This battle is, at its core, a struggle for power, power that in and of itself provides some verification*” (1994: 5). The memories go beyond their usual functions, and they become the instruments of exerting power and domination over others throughout the play. The play is an example for reflecting one’s yearning for dominating the others by means of remembrances of the past in order to feel secure against the possible and ongoing threats to his or her identity and personal space. *Old Times* clearly asserts the fact that characters remember their past or mention their reinvented memories as an attempt of attaining knowledge over one another because knowledge is power and helps them both prove their existence and control others.



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