

Authoritarianism and Insecurity: A Political Reading of Herald Pinter

Abstract

The sense of uncertainty, insecurity and meaninglessness in post war literature especially in drama is by product of the political upheaval and chaos during war. Indiscriminate killing during Second World War has caused massive devaluation of human life. Herald Pinter depicts the fear which has instilled in the unconscious mind of the people and resulted into illogicality of human behavior.

Keywords: Political Torture, Absolute Power, Political Dissidents, Cricket Metaphor, Persecution.

Introduction

When it comes to authoritarian discourse, the works of Harold Pinter vie for serious contemplation. What interests Pinter is exploring the modes of presupposition and self justification that enable things like physical torture, murder and rape 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. In this regard, this paper tries to study two plays of Pinter *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* to bring home the point that the process of dehumanization by totalitarian systems could not be more openly stated than in these two plays. In *One for the Road*, Nicholas, the interrogator, derives some of his sense of legitimacy from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus.

The source of appeal against the behaviour of brutal government agents in plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* is not one ideology or another, to one brand of political conviction or another, but to the local relationships that individuals contract with each other, particularly in small social and family contexts, and to the rights and responsibilities thereby invoked.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to define, mark and decode the signs and symbols which Pinter uses to communicate the authoritarianism in day to day life of working class people.

Main Text of the Study

In *One for the Road* (1984) we see two victims of torture in periods of respite when they are subjected to interrogation. They are a husband and wife; and their body language intimates the nature of what till now has been unremitting physical abuse. The play marks the transition as a result of his shock at meeting with the American Ambassador in Turkey who was more upset by Pinter's use of the word genitals than by the real use of electrodes on genitals in Turkish jails. From then on his tone radically changed. He moved away from dramatic displacements and British euphemisms. *One for the Road* is a horrific play on torture staged by Pinter himself when he played the role of the tormentor. Simon Gray sees in it a play about the absolute power of a man who stepped beyond bribery into absolute and thus irresponsible freedom.

Another interesting point that this paper tries to focus upon is that in both these political plays, those in power assume that family is a dangerous threat. Accordingly, the fact of family is viewed with alarm by agents of established state power. Indeed, a part of the torture to which victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them. Though the context in which we encounter them prevents the characters in these two plays from being developed in great detail, Pinter conveys



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enough of the personal in social and political contexts to make these scenes continuous with scenes in his other plays in which we feel we are encountering individual characters with, among other things, familiar social histories. As its last dimension, the paper tries to study the fact that while a post modern view of politics sees a world in which rulers are remote and dispersed; Pinter reacts against the supposed facelessness of power.

Authoritarian Discourse was never so worthy of discussion than in current political situation of the world. After Husni Mobarak's debacle, Col Muammar Gaddafi is proving out to be a character from Harold Pinter's political plays. Like many of the Pinter characters, Col Muammar Gaddafi is regarded as slightly odd, even a potentially dangerous madcap with intellectual pretensions in the smug world of international politics. So, when it comes to authoritarian discourse, the works of Pinter vie for serious contemplation. Varun Begley opines, "His drama is also formally and ideologically bounded by self conscious politics...and also by popular culture-both of which Adorno considered adversaries of autonomous modernism. Politics and popular culture are perhaps the liveliest areas of current Pinter research."(2005:18). Though the two plays which the research paper deals with seem to refer to authoritarian states but Pinter always took serious stance against the Elder Brother attitude of America towards other states. Dilek Inan (2005:2) has noted in his scholarly paper that eventually in his later stage and screen scripts Pinter criticized current widespread persecution in the institutions of the state: from hospitals(Hothouse-written but discarded before *The Caretaker*, produced in 1980) to prisons (*One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*). Pinter's plays reached beyond the world of theatre and became part of the starkly politicized 1980s social and cultural scene. Above all, his work established a 'theory of power' and articulated the use/abuse of the political power of language. What interests Pinter is exploring the modes of presupposition and self justification that enable things like physical torture, murder and rape to be done in the name of or on behalf of citizens and governments who might publicly and even seriously condemn them. What is dramatized is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in critical discussions, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness. In this regard, this paper tries to study two plays of Pinter: *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* to bring home the point that the process of dehumanization by totalitarian systems could not be more openly stated than in these two plays. In *One for the Road*, Nicholas, the interrogator, derives some of his sense of legitimacy from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus:

"I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when- only the other day, last Friday, I believe-the man who runs this country announced to the country: We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you,

apparently."(Pinter 1998:232). Here the social 'bond' of fellowship that strengthens Nicholas' convictions that what he is doing is justified is the same bond that excludes Victor not only from that society but also from the civil rights its members might otherwise enjoy. The voice of exclusion seeks to derive its legitimacy from the voice of inclusion.

One for the Road is one of Pinter's overtly-political plays and was published in 1984. Here the protagonist Victor is being tortured by puissant state officer Nicholas. His wife Gila is also confronted by Nicholas and he appears to be directing heinous sexual torture on her that has taken and will continue to take place off stage -"How many times have you been raped"(Pinter 1998:243). Their son, Nicky also is tortured by the swashbuckling bantering of Nicholas. In four short scenes we see Nicholas confronting the three imprisoned members of the family: the silent, ultimately mutilated Victor, his raped wife Gila and their vulnerable son. The play has an incremental horror and the final sentence of Nicholas breaks the chandelier on Victor when he speaks about Nicky in past tense-"Your son? Oh, don't worry about him. He was a little prick". (Pinter 1998:247). Throughout the play, Nicholas keeps the sham of being an urban and civilized man. This can also be the tactics of gaining the rightful authority to behave as he is behaving and not giving out the signals that he is undertaking the sinister act of 'torturing'.

There are some pertinent points that come out starkly from Nicholas's deportment. First, on the veneer, it seems that he is inflicting tortures upon the members of the Victor family but his fulmination is ample proof of the fact that he is tired of it. It has petered down to be a tedious job because of the monotonous rigmarole of the whole act. Not a word seems redundant in a series of tense, teasing dialogues between Nicholas and his three prisoners which fascinatingly suggest that the torturer is tortured himself, despite his smooth manner. He seems to be suffocating in a closed jar, living a sequestered life, which he can not extricate himself from. Only his prisoners seem to be his friends.. And the alacrity with which he shows his smooth manners and offers drink to Victor also suggests that he, at no point, underestimates the high esteem of Victor and Gila. He gives high plaudits to Gila's father while talking about him. Says Nicholas -"Your father was a wonderful man. His country is proud of him. He's dead. He was a man of honour. He's dead."(Pinter 1998:240) and he is equally impressed with the spiritual and intellectual strength of Victor that keeps penetrating Nicholas's self esteem through his (Victor's) eyes. His bizarre sham of being civilised is an attempt to match his status with the prisoners and that is why he does not want to categorise himself as a savage officer. And in spite of the vicious situation of the victims, there could be nothing worse than to be Nicholas. To quote Inan again, "For Pinter the system represents a source of power that resists change. It is strictly hierarchical, and is here portrayed through the voice of Nicholas- the 'mouthpiece' of 'the man who runs the country.'"(2005:5) When Victor, an intellectual/academic, is suspected of not fitting in with

the system, he is by definition guilty of rejecting the 'guiding light'. He is faced with the pain of death, imprisonment, and social degradation.

Charles Spencer rightly says that as well as offering a hideously persuasive account of state repression, *One for the Road* takes you right into the heart of one man's moral wasteland. What makes this play so much stronger than Pinter's subsequent political plays is that it retains the ambiguity of his greatest work. Pinter himself tells Nicolas Hern, "The facts that *One for the Road* refers to are facts that I wish the audience to know about, to recognize. Whereas I didn't have the same objective at all in the early days." (Hern 1985:11)

And after four years of *One for the Road*, when *Mountain Language* opened at the National Theatre in London on October 20, 1988, the audience was shocked by the play's stark look at the machinations and effects of totalitarianism. Pinter very categorically stated that he was deeply perturbed by the way Kurdish people were oppressed under the mayhem of the Turkish rule. The play tries to focus upon how a language is discredited and the cultural vehicle that binds a group in a social bonhomie is punctured. The play is short and crisp and ferrets out the destiny of political dissidents in just one scene. Ironically, the language of the victims is forbidden and in contrast, it becomes the tool of the oppressor, whose torrent of words infects the atmosphere.

As always, Pinter's incredibly short dialogues very deftly convey the total tumbling of the communication as well as asphyxia of the whole ambience. The play starts with a line of women standing up against a prison wall and then a young woman and an elderly woman are interrogated by the ruling authority's skunk sergeant and an officer. Here also, the psychological torture of the tools of the authority is perceptible very much like Nicholas of *One for the Road*. The audacity of the women is similar to the stoic stance of Gila and Victor. Thrice does the Sergeant ask the name of the women and he is given the same answer again and again that they have already given their names. The political metaphor of dog is again a trenchant Pinter device to convey the irreverence with which the women look at the officers ("Who did this?"/ "A big dog".) The garbage verbosity of the Officer truly shows the nadir of his mental status. He babbles, "It must be the computer. The computer's got a double hernia. But I'll tell you what- if you want any information on any aspect of life in this place we've got a bloke..." (Pinter 1998:264) The whole edifice of a welfare state crumbles down and one is nonplussed at the whole sham of taking complaints and the rigmarole of jotting down the name of the complainants when they have no intentions of redressing their grievances. Look at the commands and the conditional reassurance of the Officer when he is told that the elderly woman is bitten by a Dobermann pinscher: "Every dog has a *name!* They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their *name!* Before they bite, they state their name....If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name I will have that dog shot!" (Pinter 1998: 253).

And when the whole sham of the redressal is done, the Officer announces to the minority that their language is prohibited. And when the Young Woman states that she does not speak the mountain language, she is not spared. She is met with the sexual flirtations of the Sergeant and the Officer. Pinter here shows the whole psychology of arbitrary torture with marvelous exactitude and sexual suggestiveness. Thus, the source of appeal against the behaviour of brutal government agents in plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* is not one ideology or another, to one brand of political conviction or another, but to the local relationships that individuals contract with each other, particularly in small social and family contexts, and to the rights and responsibilities thereby invoked. About this Young Woman Charles Grime says, "While her motivations for remaining silent remain ambiguous her corporeal reality emphasized through her silence...serves to demonstrate the disjunction between her suffering and our experience of it. This silence can be seen as moral indictment of the audience achieved metatheatrically" (2005:100) The inner strength of the people who are being oppressed or who stand up to claim their rights is something that makes the equilibrium of the dramatic tension of the play. In both the plays, the intellect and spiritual strength of the oppressed people is recognized by the oppressors. If Nicholas is full of praises for Gila and Victor, the Sergeant also knows the intellectual capacity of the Young Woman, though he abominates it by saying "Intellectual arses wobbled the best." (Pinter 1998:257). Even the physical strength of the women is also perceptible when the Young Woman tells that they have been standing in snow for eight hours! The second scene vividly deciphers the pensive sensibility in which nothing is finally evolved. The smarmy Guard keeps on reiterating that the language spoken by the elderly woman to her son is forbidden while she doesn't understand the single word that she is spoken to.

The two basic axis of life: bread and language are catapulted against each other. Pinter has scripted *Mountain Language* so that the simplest declarative statement ("I have bread") becomes deep connective tissue when a mother sees her son in prison and he looks back at her, understanding everything. The rules of this authoritarian regime are so random that once the language is forbidden and after the third scene, the rule is overridden. But by this time, the Elderly Woman seems to go in a trance; she is devoid of speaking any language. To her, being robbed of her language is to undergo a kind of psychic death. If the second scene captures the exquisiteness of the inside out relationship of a resilient mother and a tormented son, the third act shows the ephemeral intimacy between a husband and wife through the precise cadences of the language. Pinter has always been a master of using the different spaces of speech and silence. The third scene offers a kaleidoscopic focus light on the 'speeches' that occur in silence. Pinter employs an innovative technique in *Mountain Language* to indicate a kind of telepathic communication between

characters who cannot or will not speak aloud. What is arresting about these “voice overs” in the context of the brutal environment of the play, is their beauty, grace and sense of hope.

Another dimension of the authoritarian states which the paper deals with is the stance of torture taken by them. *One for the Road* is a horrific play on torture staged by Pinter himself when he played the role of the tormentor. Simon Gray sees in it a play about the absolute power of a man who stepped beyond bribery into absolute and thus irresponsible freedom. Both the plays, though written on specific grounds, can be seen as pertaining to any authoritarian society showing an increasing gruesome picture. “Were all to be said about Power is that it causes war and the attendant slaughter of the young and most capable of our species, this would be enough. But much worse is that even without the excuse of combat, Power also murders in cold blood even more of those helpless people it controls, near four times more of them.”(Rummel 1994:37)

Pinter was concerned about the violent tactics used by such governments to quell protesters, in spite of several witnesses confirming that forces loyal to the government had been shooting people from ambulances and using anti-aircraft guns against crowds. He opines, “One should also remember these prisoners are big business: they are profit-making enterprises which local communities think are wonderful since they provide steady employment. But it’s clear that torture does pretty well all over the place...” (Billington 2001). The precise snapshots of the tortures shown in both the plays are rightfully minimalist as it can go on again and again. Though scathing at times, Nicholas is made to look provokingly sophisticated to approximate his potential in order to berate the dignity of the prisoners. The quantity of hot air in Sargeant and Officer’s rhetoric is a measure of the desperation of the main contestants of power. Interestingly, the Young Woman and the Prisoner are tortured in spite of the fact that they do not speak the mountain language. Silence falls when she declares that she does not speak the mountain language and then the Officer and the sergeant resort to vile tactics. The Sergeant puts his hand on her bottom and blurts, “What language do you speak? What language do you speak with your arse?”(Pinter 1998:256) Rejali makes a point about tortures, “When officers seek false confessions, they are looking for a performance. They will take as long as it takes until they can secure that performance. The luxury of time allows for more subtle coercive techniques- such as hours of sleep deprivation, continuous interrogation, and forced standing.”(2007:61) As a matter of fact, Pinter was of the view that there are at least ninety countries that practice torture now quite commonly-as an accepted routine. With any imprisonment, with any arrest, torture goes with it. He further opines that it is on both sides of the fence, Communist and non-Communist.

Another nuance of the shard of black humour that Nicholas is adorned with is his use of cricket metaphors. He was very keen on using the most well known British Social games the way Brecht used

songs. “The very structure of those games clearly sets out what’s really at stake within these conventional social entertainments: power, winning or losing, and the reassessment of male bonding which announces political models which tend towards fascism. Even cricket, however elegant and visually satisfying it can be in a movie is not used as a mere decorative element.” (Gauthier 2009:56)

Look at the harangue of Nicholas after he takes a drink: “I open the batting, as it were, in a light-hearted, even carefree manner, while another waits in the wings, silent, introspective, coiled like a puma.”(Pinter 1998:225) And when there is no reaction from the daring-to-take-a-stand Victor, he maneuvers his chat and negates his previous statement. “No. no. It’s not quite like that. I run the place. God speaks through me.” Suddenly, the embarrassing barrenness of words falls flat on the atmosphere. (Pinter 1998:225).

Another interesting point that this paper tries to focus upon is that in both these political plays, those in power assume that family is a dangerous threat. Accordingly, the fact of family is viewed with alarm by agents of established state power. Indeed, a part of the torture to which victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them. Nicholas’s mercurial persona is bemused by the fact that Victor, Gila and Nicky are a family. In fact, when Nicholas is done with his filibustering on death and is still unable to break down Victor, he resorts to slander him by talking appalling trash about his wife, “Does she...fuck? Or does she... like...you know...what? What does she like? I’m talking about your wife. -Your *wife*.”(Pinter 1998:230) and then again “I think your wife is. Beginning. She is beginning to fall in love with me. On the brink...of doing so.”(Pinter 1998:230). In *Mountain Language* also, when the language of the minorities is discredited, the family of the husband, wife and the mother is able to communicate by the passionate language of love. But here also, the vulnerability of the Prisoner is brought forth through the fact that he has never seen his baby, there is his mother, deeply loved, who is bitten by dog and overall there is a wife who has no option but to sleep with the commandant Joseph Dokes for the sustenance of her husband. Similarly, the institution of family is something that is the privilege of the ruling authority while the oppressed are not supposed to have a family unless it is succumbed to atrocities. In scene two of *Mountain Language*, the Guard laughs at the Prisoner and tells him, “Not mine, I can tell you. And I’ll tell you another thing. I’ve got a wife and three kids. And you’re all a pile of shit.”(Pinter 1998:260) And when the Prisoner informs that he has also a wife and three kids, the guard gets incensed and retorts back angrily at him as if the Prisoner has no right to have a family. “I’m only concerned at the moment with accurate and precise images of what is the case. I can no longer write a play about a family and what happens to it, except that in *One for the Road*, I remind you, the man, woman and child are actually husband, wife and he’s

their child. Therefore, in a rather odd way, that play is about what happens to a family.”(Gussow 1994:92)

No meaningful literature is ever produced except as the result of an encounter between the writer and the society in which he lives. Pinter said, “To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to me facile, impertinent and dishonest” (Pinter 2001:92)

As a dramatist, Pinter relies heavily on the promptings of his subconscious; as a citizen, he is a man of much greater certainty who detests injustice wherever it occurs but who singles out the western democracies because of their hypocrisy. The secret of his power lies in the felicity with which he gets under the skin of his characters and fixes what is in their heart. There is nothing effusive in these two plays. Nothing spills over the edges. Everything is clear and in focus. The images speak and we listen with our eyes. They often say so much more than words. He never allows his tense scenes to disintegrate into melodrama or lets his lyricism slip into sentimentality. Every moment is visceral, specific and real. Nothing is stereotyped. And even where the scenes are composed with the utmost care there is no suggestion of an intellectual effort, of a striving after abstraction.

Austin Quigley proffers that though the context in which we encounter them prevents the characters in these two plays from being developed in great detail, Pinter conveys enough of the personal in social and political contexts to make these scenes continuous with scenes in his other plays in which we feel we are encountering individual characters with, among other things, familiar social histories (2001:11). There is no trace of seething rage nor any hint of protest here in the two plays. These men do not even need to speak to us. Their mere looks are enough to tell us all we want to know about them, all that has made them what they are. “His characters are found neither at the barricades nor behind the threatened panoplies of power. They are lovely, frightened individuals who have returned to the privacy of their rooms to have a think. They are kings and counselors without their regalia. They are all, under the skin, shivering creatures who fear the silences around them.”(Hollis 1970:122)

As its last dimension, the paper tries to study the fact that while post modern view of politics sees a world in which rulers are remote and dispersed; Pinter reacts against the supposed facelessness of power. “Power overshadows everything actively and commutes in an institution or society because it circulates and it is not localized.”(Bakhshizadeh and Gandhi 2010). Pinter was passionate about public affairs both at home and abroad. About the way civil liberties and foreign policy were kept off the election agenda. Nicholas is shown as a desperate man who seeks validation from his male victim, talks about his love of God, country and nature, and is always trying to find a philosophical basis for his actions. “And you only have to look around you to see world leaders doing exactly the same thing. George W Bush is always protesting that he has the fate of the world in mind and bangs on about the ‘freedom-loving peoples’ he is seeking to protect.” (Billington 2001).

His uniqueness as a political artist is that he is pessimistic about changing his audience or making it see its complicity in the horrors of the modern world. These horrors are dramatized through images of torture and oppression culminating in moments of silence that index the full extent of the destruction unleashed by power against dissidence. “Right Wing critics regularly point to Pinter’s ability to criticize the British government openly as ‘the most powerful rebuttal’ of his politics, in Tory MP Michael Gove’s words”(Bond 2009:2). Speaking about the author’s responsibility, Pinter confesses about the vulnerability of the author’s life. He has to make a choice and remain stick to it. We would like to conclude our paper with the concluding lines of Pinter’s Nobel Prize speech, “I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory. If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us - the dignity of man.”

Conclusion

Pinter has drawn the influence of political devastation to the unconscious level of collective mind. The insecurity in working class of post war Europe results illogicality of their behavior. The authoritarianism and lawlessness at international level manifests itself in lives of people. The symbols used by Pinter are decoded and evaluated in the study.

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56/SR-12/P-2/2018/11051

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