Political Suppression and Cruelty : A Study in Harold Pinter's *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*

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August, 2009
Abstract

Harold Pinter(1930-2008) is a distinguished British dramatist whose plays win him great fame in the world. His political views and anti-war attitudes are quite evident in his art. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005. In his political plays he attempts to uncover the precipice behind the evasive exchanges of everyday life. His pen penetrates the oppressors' closed rooms to reveal the ugly truth concerning the use and abuse of power and the violation of human rights. Pinter has written twenty-nine plays, two of which – One for the Road, and Mountain Language – are rich with political issues such as oppression, cruelty, murder and violence.

This study is an attempt to explore and examine Pinter's political views concerning the modern Western life in which man might become a victim of cruelty of an institution of some sort. The study constitutes two parts. Part I deals with the political analysis of One for the Road in which the playwright attacks forcefully the abuse of state power in the world. Part II tackles the political connotations of the Mountain Language. The study ends with a conclusion which summarizes the whole paper and sums up its findings.
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Part 1: *One for the Road*

It is a short four-scene play written in 1984. The play is a violent political drama, not through actions presented on the stage, but through allusions to violence and cruelty that occur off stage. *One for the Road* demonstrates Pinter's view that the modern world is a cruel police state. The play tells a message that if those in power do not like one's face, his politics, his style and values, he is better off dead.

Harold Pinter has been motivated to write the play during a visit to Turkey. He has been filled up with anger and fury as he has been attending a party there. "I wrote it in absolute fury," he asserts. In the party Pinter asks some women about the widespread notion of torture in the Turkish prisons. A woman tells him "Well, they're probably Communists," referring to the tortured persons. He gets very angry and leaves the party. He sits at his table and writes *One for the Road* in one night in an attempt to find an outlet to his anger.

*One for the Road* opens with Nicolas, a government official, sitting on a chair questioning Victor, an intellectual prisoner, who has been arrested with his wife and son. Nicolas tries to coerce him say some untrue things in order to prove him guilty. Victor has been subjected to violence and cruelty before his appearance on the stage. He is bruised and his clothes are torn. To terrify his victim deeply, Nicolas says: "I can do absolutely anything I like," (p.223).* This shows that he is obsessed with power.

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*Harold Pinter, *Plays Four: One for the Road*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1998). All subsequent references to the play are cited parenthetically in my text.*
Nicolas's main charge against Victor is that he is "a man of the highest intelligence ", and that "his soul shines through" his eyes, (p.224). Political villains fear intelligent people because they are not easy to submit to corruption. Hence, a considerable amount of physical and psychological torture should be exerted upon Victor's mind and soul to destroy them.5

Throughout the interrogation Nicolas keeps on referring to God to give the impression that he is a devout man: "God speaks through me", (p. 225) and "everyone else knows the voice of God speaks through me", (p. 227). He goes on to deepen the mental and the spiritual torture of Victor saying: "Death. Death. Death. Death. As has been noted by the most respected authorities, it is beautiful. The purest, most harmonious thing there is",(p. 229). The repetition of the word "death" sheds some light on the psychological motivation of the torturer and gives the play its political significance. Victor is, as an intellectual person, fully aware that Nicolas means what he says. He is really threatened with death in the whole sense of the word.

Harold Pinter has presented Nicolas as representative of those "most respected authorities" that inflect death upon others without any regard to human rights or justice. Pinter seems to attack oppression and cruelty all over the world. Michael Billington, a famous literary critic, asks Pinter about the political dimensions of One for the Road. Pinter affirms that it is futile to
that a brutal dictatorship is a bad thing, what are you going to do? Are you simply going to say 'A brutal dictatorship is a bad thing'? I think that what I was finally able to do in *One for the Road* is to examine the psychology of a man who was an interrogator, a torturer, the head of an organization, but was also a convinced passionate man of a considerable faith; in other words, who believed in a number of things and fought for them. He was able to subject his victims to any amount of horror and humiliation for a just cause as he saw it. I believe that reflects, as you know, situations all over the world, under one hat or another, now and then, at all times. The question of a just cause.

The interrogation of Victor by Nicolas shows what kind of man the latter is. He is a brute dictator who tortures his victims for no real cause or guilt. He chooses to see them guilty and that is a sufficient reason to victimize them. He alleges that he is a Jew who believes in the traditional Jewish principles of conduct; but in reality he disregards these values and proves his corruption. His appeal to God is no more than hypocrisy. His sadism is too much to be concealed. There is much truth in Michael Billington's statement:

What is extraordinary about the play is the attempt of the protagonist to justify himself and his constant appeal to God, to the family, to the state as a substitute family, to vindicate his actions and he's always looking for reassurance from his victims that what he is doing is sincerely and honestly motivated, that is not based on his personal sadism but upon moral convictions.
Trying to humiliate Victor more, Nicolas intentionally refers to Gila, Victor's wife, as being raped by several soldiers in the second floor. It is Nicolas who has raped her first, then the other soldiers repeat the act. Without any sense of prudence, Nicolas tells Victor: "The trouble is, I have rivals. Because everyone here has fallen in love with your wife. It's her eyes have beguiled them," (p.231). Through these words Nicolas's inner ugliness is fully portrayed. Furthermore, he asks Gila, in the presence of her husband: "How many times have you been raped?" Gila says "I don't know," (p.243). His question is, of course, intended to increase the psychological torture and humiliation of both Gila and her husband. Hence, an unredeemable psychological wound has been created between the wife and her husband that would violate their family relationship.

However, it is worth mentioning here that political dictators consider intellectual families as a dangerous threat against their brutality. These political villains always try to falsify and corrupt the intimate familial relationships of the intelligentsia. To achieve this vicious aim, those brutes are not content with Gila's rape; they commit another bloody murder. This time Nicky, the seven-year-old son, is the object. Nicolas addresses Gila mockingly saying:

Your son is … seven. He's a little prick. You made him so.
You have taught him to be so. You had a choice. You could have encouraged him to be a good person. Instead, you encouraged him to be a little prick. You encouraged him to spit, to strike at soldiers of honour, soldiers of God. (p. 244)
Nicky's murder, however, cannot be justified in any way. It is an obscene action to a degree. It actually stems from the dictators' desire to silence any voice of opposition. Nicky is murdered because he protests against the "soldiers of honour" when they arrest him with his parents. Political dictators believe that children should be brought up as obedient slaves to their rulers. It seems that those soldiers have no honour in the ordinary sense of the word. Nicky abuses the political institution; he respects his parents and refuses to deny them his love. This is why the bastards murder him in cold blood. Nicky's murder reflects Pinter's view that cruel political dictators have no respect even to the innocence of childhood. Nicolas destroys the moral ties of Victor's family by raping the mother and killing the son. Hence, Victor, already tortured in a cruel way, is brought to an absolute physical and psychological destruction.

In the final scene of One for the Road Victor mutters some words asking about his son. His words communicate a deep sense of despair. "Your son?", Nicolas assures him, "Oh, don't worry about him. He was a little prick", (p. 247). The syntax of Nicolas's last sentence reflects a horrible fact that Nicky does not exist any more. Commenting on the political role of Nicolas, Pinter states:

I won't be acting a monster, although he is certainly monstrous— but a man. Nicolas is a desperate man who seeks validation from his male victim, talks about his love of God, country, and nature, is always trying to find a philosophical basis for 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's seeking to protect. I'd love to meet a freedom-hating people. But in the rhetoric of global politics there is a total dichotomy between words and action; and that, in part, is what I'm writing about in this play.\textsuperscript{12}

In agreement with Nicolas's description of their business "to keep the world clean for God", (p.246), comes George W. Bush's alleged intention to protect the world from the cruel political leaders. Bush and Nicolas are politically bankrupt and morally scabrous. Their claim that criminals should be brought to justice is, however, no more than political hypocrisy. Pinter believes that bringing peace and stability to the world cannot be achieved through atrociously biased and illegitimate onslaughts against innocent people.

Victor's gaze at Nicolas near the very end of the play reminds us of Nicolas's fascination with the eyes. Victor's sharp look reflects his disgust that cannot be expressed in words. Little, if ever, does Nicolas pay attention to the deep meaning of Victor's gaze. For him, it is no more than an expression of collapse of a defeated man. He is an idiot who is blinded by power and he is unable to comprehend that Victor, though destroyed, cannot be defeated. Thus, Nicolas's aim to defeat him mentally and spiritually has failed.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{One for the Road} ends with silence which is an essential part of the climax. Silence is a technique used by Pinter to show that intense thought-processes are going on and that unspoken conflicts are mounting. The play expresses a refusal to communicate with a hostile world.\textsuperscript{14} It is a terrible political play that floods the mind with despair, the eyes with tears and the heart with disgust. It propagates the author's political message.
that human rights, innocence, and justice are violated by cruel political idiots in so many parts of the world. The play is a sincere warning to which the world refuses to listen.

**Part II. Mountain Language**

It is a four-scene political play written in 1988. The play opens with a very painful scene. A line of women have been waiting outside a prison for eight hours in snowy weather to see their men. Those women are not to use their own language spoken in their city (the mountain) because the political authorities consider it dead. The captors keep some dogs to bite any person who tries to speak the mountain language.

The intermediate setting of the play suggests that Harold Pinter is condemning any government that oppresses its citizens. The author does not mention any particular country to give the play universal political dimensions. In this respect it is similar to *One for the Road* because they could happen in any country. Both plays reflect the ugly mechanisms of political cruelty.

Pinter's visit to Turkey in 1985 inspired him to write the play. He saw the inhuman suppression of the Kurds there. However, the play is not only about the Kurds as a minority in Turkey; it has a wider scope as Harold Pinter explains:

> From my point of view, the play is about suppression of language and the loss of freedom of expression. I feel, therefore, it is as relevant in England as it is in Turkey. A number of Kurds have said that the play touches them and their lives. But I believe it also reflects what's happening in England today—the suppression of ideas, speech and thought.
In *Mountain Language* Pinter attacks the systematic oppressions of the governments against people. Commenting on the wide range of the political oppression depicted in the play, Mark Batty concludes:

Pinter in *Mountain Language* suggests that repressive zeal was not the discourse solely of military and fascist dictatorships, but is in operation in the corridors of power of all Western democracies, those self-proclaimed pioneers of a just New World Order.¹⁸

What is true in Batty's view with regard to the political suppression in the Western World could be true all over the world.¹⁹

At the beginning of the *Mountain Language*, a sergeant is presented asking a young woman about her name. She refuses to give her name as she has already given it to the prison officials. The Sergeant, however, insists on taking her name. He repeats the word 'Name' three times, a matter which reveals the absurdity of the prison authorities. This futile argument ends with the coming of the Officer who orders to "Stop this shit",(p.251).* The Young Woman has come to see her husband who is considered, as they claim, as one of the "enemies of the State", (p.255). The crimes, if there are any, of the prisoners are not identified. The totalitarian regimes have ready-made charges against their enemies.²⁰

The Young Woman complains that one of the dogs has bitten the hand of an elderly woman and that her thumb is almost detached. The


Subsequent references to the play are cited parenthetically in my text.
Officer shows no concern for the woman's hand; he insists on knowing the name of the dog which bites the woman. He becomes incensed, not by the seriousness of the wound, but by the fact that the dog does not give his name before it attacks the woman. "Before they bite", the Officer asserts, "they state their name. It's a formal procedure", (p. 254). Through this irrational situation Pinter reveals the corruption and the absurdity of the despotic authorities.

In a threatening tone, typical of the political tyrants, the Officer addresses the women boastfully:

Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists. Any questions? (pp. 255-6)

The Officer's feeling of having an absolute power is fully revealed in his speech. His language expresses prohibition, warning, and cruel punishment which indicate the political bankruptcy of the State to which he belongs. The Young Woman complains "I do not speak the mountain language", (p. 256). Putting his hand on her bottom, the Sergeant asks her mokingly: "What language do you speak? What language do you speak with your arse?" (ibid.,)
The Officer tries to reduce the Young Woman's anger as she hears the morally scabrous language of the Sergeant. He tells him that this woman has no crime, but the Sergeant insists that she "bounces" with her sins. (ibid.,)

The sexually-charged language of the Sergeant is meant to humiliate the Young Woman. It also portrays the moral degradation of the Sergeant. The Young Woman defies him as she stresses her right to see her husband: "My name is Sara Johnson. I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?" (p. 257) Accidentally, the prison authorities discover that her husband has been put in the wrong batch. This situation reveals the stupidity and the carelessness of those in charge of the prison.²¹ Sara and her husband are not mountain people; yet the Sergeant insults her many times: "She looks like a fucking intellectual to me" and that "Intellectual arses wobble the best" (ibid.). Though Sara is a woman of social rank, as her name and language indicate, sexual abuse is used against her to distort her identity.

Section Two of the play opens in a visitors' room. The Elderly Woman meets her son. Her compassion to him is contrasted with the cruel behaviour of the captors. The Guard orders her not to use the mountain language in talking with her son: "Forbidden! Forbidden forbidden forbidden! Jesus Christ!" (p. 259). He jabs her with his stick as she could not speak but the mountain language. The spectators sympathize with her suffering. With a broken heart, she tries to comfort her son: "When you come home there will be such a welcome for you. Everyone is waiting for you. They're all waiting for you. They're all waiting to see you " (p. 261).

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There is no definite charge against the son and hence the idea that he will never be set free is implied here. The dramatist suggests that there is no possibility of a reunion between the son and his family in future. The sense of alienation and terror is dominant to intensify the presentation of the great suffering of the victims in totalitarian regimes. The major concern of the playwright is to dramatize how the ruling ideology suppresses the ethnic identities that do not conform with its political views.

Pinter's sharp attack against the totalitarian regimes reaches its peak in the Third Scene of the play. It is entitled "Voice in the Darkness". The scene reflects the voice of the artist in a world ruled by dictatorships. Sara stumbles upon a hooded man accidently. She could not recognize him because of the darkness. Realizing his shameful dilemma, the Sergeant explodes: "Who's that fucking woman? What's that fucking woman doing here? Who let that fucking woman through that fucking door?", (p.262). The Sergeant, flustered, ejects an absurd attempt to distract Sara's attention from the fact that the hooded man is actually her husband. He tells her that she has been sent in through the wrong door, due to the computer's mistake. Sara is shocked to see that her husband has been tortured with cruelty to an extent that he cannot stand still but for the support of the Sergeant and the Guard. Pinter is, of course, revealing the ugliness and the cruelty of the prison authorities. Sara's husband is about to collapse when the Sergeant, in an attempt to reduce Sara's terrible shock, says:

Yes, you've come in the wrong door. 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 comes into the office every Tuesday week,
except when it rains. He's right on top of his chosen subject. Give him a tinkle on one of these days and he'll see you all right. His name is Dokes. Joseph Dokes. (p.264)

Sara is, of course, aware of the moral weakness of those sexually-corrupt officials. She asks the Sergeant: "Can I fuck him? If I fuck him, will everything be all right?" The Sergeant assures her saying: "Sure. No problem", (ibid.,).

Harold Pinter actually demonstrates the following facts for the audience:
1. the stupidity of the prison authorities.
2. the moral corruption of the despotic systems.
3. the absence of justice.
4. violation of human rights.
5. Sara's realization that the only possible way to save her husband is through prostitution.

The intimate romantic conversation between Sara and her husband in this section of the play offers some relief for the spectators. He tells her "We are out on a lake", and she replies, "It is spring", to which he says, "I hold you. I warm you", (p. 263). This situation is to be contrasted with the cruel situation in the prison. A reunion between Sara and her husband is but a dream that will never come true, unless she prostitutes herself, since he is charged with nothing which means that he will be kept in prison for ever. This idea is suggested implicitly.

Harold Pinter's political attack against the cruelty of the utilitarian systems is intensified in the final scene of the Mountain Language. The son of the Elderly Woman is brought on the stage with
blood on his face. It is clear that he has been subjected to violent physical torture. His mother is terribly shocked and she is unable to speak. Charles Grimes actually misses the point when he says that the silence of the woman shows the victory that the power state achieves by prohibiting people from expressing themselves. However, it is actually not a real victory of the power state in the ordinary sense of the word. This is a false victory because it has been achieved through oppression and violence against powerless people.

The Guard, however, informs them that the rules have been changed and the censure imposed on the mountain language has been cancelled. The Elderly Woman freezes and could not say anything. The situation is too much for her to bear. Carey Perloff, a reviewer, argues, quite objectively, that the woman's silence is her means of communication. Her son, trembling on a chair, tries to communicate with her: "Mother. Can you hear me? I am speaking to you in our own language", (p.266). Her silence speaks louder than words about her protest against the cruel nature of the utilitarian system. The spectators sympathize with the condition of the mother. Her silence is actually her weapon of protest that cannot be defeated by political tyrants. Like Victor, who has lost his ability to speak, the Elderly Woman remains silent as she sees her son bleeding.

Martin Esslin concludes, quite convincingly, that the message of Mountain Language is that "torture is obscene, the domination of human beings by other human beings is obscene, cruelty is obscene". Seeing his mother in this condition, the prisoner collapses on the floor gasping and shaking violently. The Sergeant reveals his true
cruel nature when he tells the Guard abruptly: "Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up ", ( p. 267 ).

*Mountain Language* portrays the political bankruptcy and the moral degeneration of the cruel utilitarian systems. It is an elegy for the passing 20th century violence. Pinter's adroit construction of the play illustrates the meaninglessness and the futility of the utilitarian systems which victimize people and make them suffer.
Notes


2 ibid., p. 87.

3 ibid.,


6 Quoted in Billington, p. 294.


10 ibid., pp. 67-8.


17 Quoted in Gussow, p. 6.

18 Batty, p. 114.


20 Batty, p. 101.

21 ibid., p. 109.
22 ibid., p. 107.

23 Grimes, p. 97.


Conclusion

The foregoing critical investigation of Harold Pinter's political views reflected in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* reveals that he is quite aware of the political issues of his time. As a sensitive artist, he is deeply troubled to see that the world is dominated by cruelty, oppression and violence. He demonstrates his awareness of the violation of human rights through his art successfully. Political crimes have been committed under one guise or another. Human dignity has been invaded and man has to be turned to an obedient slave of the corrupt political systems. Perverted political strategies lead, inevitably, to moral and social disintegrations, and hence great values such as love, truth and family relationships are falsified.

*One for the Road* propagates a sincere political message of Harold Pinter. The modern world is depicted as a violent police state. Intellectual people, represented by Victor's family, should be brought to conformity with the political views of the state; otherwise, they are to face cruel consequences. Political hypocrisy is a typical characteristic of so many of the world rulers in the 20th century. Those unscrupulous political idiots have no hesitation in committing vicious crimes against their people. Victor is deeply tortured, Nicky is murdered, and Gila is raped. The play is, however, not wholly pessimistic and tragic because there is a glimpse of hope in some change in future. This hope has been reflected through the overwhelming gaze of protest of Victor in the very end of the play.

*Mountain Language* is a terse political drama that reveals a considerable amount of Pinter's political awareness. He satirizes the utilitarian political systems all over the world. Tyrannical rulers, who try
to suppress the voice of the ethnic minorities, are criticized and their moral corruption is revealed to the audience with precision. The political blunder of those utilitarian systems is dramatized through the abrupt cancel of the censure imposed upon the use of the mountain language. Even in their victimization of the people, those bankrupt political rulers reveal, unwittingly, their sterility and moral corruption. Though there is no definite charge against Sara's husband, he is to be kept in prison for ever, but he will be set free right away if his wife responds to Joseph Dokes sexually.

Politically, *Mountain Language* is again similar to *One for the Road* in having some hope in future. The Elderly Woman's gaze, similar to that of Victor, shows that people can defy the oppression and the violation of human rights by silence which reflects a deep sense of protest. The two plays reflect Harold Pinter's sincere political message that people have to protest against the cruel and corrupt dictators in the world.
Bibliography


