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## Enactment of Power and Violence in Harold Pinter's Political Plays

Basanti Karmakar

### Abstract:

Harold Pinter, the British dramatist, famous for his 'comedies of menace' did not give any conscious political message in the early phase of his career. Still later global affairs and growing political discontent provoked him to write political plays. Born in a world ridden with second world war and consequent evacuation, Pinter in his boyhood refused to join in war as a 'conscientious objector'. But in the 1980s, social injustice and world-wide repression of minorities prompted this dramatist to create consciously political plays. This article presents Pinter's political involvement, his moral commitment which compelled him to write this political plays. His plays entitled 'One for the Road', 'Precisely' and 'Mountain Language' depict the reality of contemporary world. 'One for the Road' shows not only the inhuman torture unleashed on a family, side by side it depicts the psychological state of the torturer craving for love and stability. 'Precisely' deals with heartless calculation of two officials dealing about possible number of death-victims in nuclear war. 'Mountain Language' is about oppression of language of a section of society and to conform them to the rules prescribed by society and state, by snatching their freedom of speech and freedom of imagination. In a word, conscious political plays of Pinter shows his disgust, anxiety about what is happening in the world as well as his moral responsibility towards the tortured people worldwide.

### Keywords: politics, torture, psychological complexity, power and violence

Harold Pinter, one of the most famous post-fifties dramatists in Britain, has presented through his dramas menace, fear of the unknown and predicament of human beings in this claustrophobic modern world. Pinter's early work has much in common with Samuel Beckett's plays, though Pinter's dramas have a definite beginning, middle and end and they do not point to a metaphysical end. His plays deny us the comfort of knowing what his plays 'mean'. The products of a post-war culture in which so much of his life has lost any larger meaning, his plays refuse to offer us the consolation of an escapist world in which right always prevails and where, with the helpful guidance of the writer, we always know where we stand. Main themes of Pinter's plays are menace, fear of an outsider, sexual politics and politics in very personal level of consciousness. But Pinter was nowhere consciously political in his early plays. As early as 1961, Noel Coward singled Pinter from the 'New Movement' dramatists. His early plays, such as 'The Room' in 1957 and 'The Birthday Party' in 1958 were rejected as obscure. This misinterpretation of Pinter's work is partly due to his rejection of all didactic or moralistic theatre as 'sentimental and unconvincing'.

According to Pinter, the avoidance of specific political references in his early plays was the result of looking on 'politicians and political structures and political acts with ...detached contempt. To engage in politics seemed to me futile,' Yet the standpoint in his

later 'politically engaged' dramas remain the same. His political involvement represents a moral commitment, rather than a belief that the stage can change the world. Like many people who grew up during the Second World War, Pinter also had a very grim experience about reality. A sense of disruption was among his prime war time experience. 'Ironically, having been evacuated from London during the phoney War in 1940, he was back for the most savage period of the Blitz. But in 1941, he was again evacuated. Like many children grown-up in war-time, Pinter had a strong sense of life's drama and impermanence. In his teens, Pinter refused to take part in direct political involvement just because his developing sense of instinctual hatred of any form of injustice. For the same reason he refused to join in the National Service in October 1948, when it was quite common to every young male at the age of eighteen to join the Army. Pinter registered himself as a 'conscientious objector' and he was even prepared to go to jail. 'Conscientious objection was a landmark in Pinter's life for several reasons. It led to his first serious rupture with his parents. It gave him his first decisive experience of the conflict between individual determination and social conformity. It also bred a lifelong suspicion of the Kafkaesque workings of bureaucracy. Put simply, it was his first conscious political act.'

Harold Pinter's early plays like 'The Room', 'The Birthday Party', 'The Caretaker', 'The Homecoming' all deal with the themes of menace, violence, role of an outsider and the politics hidden in our very innocent day-to-day existence. Characters of his plays with Pinter's superb use of pauses and silences create an atmosphere of enigma. In 1980s Harold Pinter wrote three consciously political dramas like 'Precisely', 'One for the Road' and 'Mountain Language'. 'Precisely' deals with heartless calculation of two bureaucrats about the possible annihilation of human beings in coming nuclear war. 'One for the Road' shows the reward of nonconformity with authority of the state. 'Mountain Language' deals with the inhuman torture unleashed upon some innocent people by snatching their right of speech in their own language.

These overtly political plays in Pinter's later phase of career were not something unexpected from a writer dealing with violence, menace and underhand politics going on in our day-to-day existence. Among Pinter's early plays 'The Hothouse' bears the germ of Pinter's growing acceptance about violence not just in a microcosmic world, rather violence and role of politics in this war-ridden world where the authority uses its power to control the independence of its subordinates in a savage way. 'The Hothouse' is one of Pinter's best plays: one that deals with the man-eaten corruption of bureaucracy, the secrecy of the government, the disjunction between language and experience. It also reveals the acuteness of Pinter's political antennae.' Written in the winter of 1958, it shows the Soviet use of mental hospitals as social dissidents. It also prefigured the American abuse of political prisoners in Central America, the stern methods of interrogation and detention used by the British authorities in the H-Block of Belfast's Maze prison and the increasing number of deaths of prisoners held in official custody in Britain. Starting from a moment of private disquiet, Pinter sees its universal implications. The result is not political paranoia. It is a fable about what can happen when the rights of the individual are subordinated to the unaccountable power of the state.'

This tendency to present global politics and violence in a larger scale becomes accumulated in the decades of the 1980s. Harold Pinter who discarded Jewish orthodox religion at the age of twelve only, who was a 'conscientious objector at eighteen' was actually undergoing through a growing and ungovernable concern with injustice and worldwide denial of human rights. Pinter's political awareness was also the result of his personal relationships and public experiences during the decades of 1960s and 1970s. Among his intimate friends, there were Peggy Ashcroft, a great actress and lifelong political campaigner, Joe Losey, a director who was forced to leave the United States because of his leftwing political connections and also of David Mercer, a prolific playwright as well as an Yorkshire Marxist. Deep association with them made Pinter's political views strong. David Mercer's untimely death, immediate pressure of public events happening worldwide---all were behind Pinter's decision of creating overtly political plays. His political plays actually do the work of arousing the conscience of people regarding what is happening in this world.

Among Pinter's political plays 'Precisely' which was written as an anti-nuclear show by Harold Pinter, was first performed at the Apollo Victoria Theatre in December 1983. The title indicates how precisely two officials calculate the possible death-tolls going to be happened by terrible nuclear explosion. The conversation between Roger and Stephen who are engaged in calculation of nuclear victims becomes ultimately an eye-opener. The notion of violence and inhumanity on the part of these two officials envisage the path of human degradation. Killing of innocent lives, the cruel act of killing operation does not infuriate them; rather they are infuriated by any other possible calculation of death casualties by other people. Stephen says, 'I'll not tell you, I nor those above me are going to put up with it much longer. These people, Roger, these people are actively and willfully deceiving the public. Do you take my point? To which Roger retorts, 'I'd put the bastards up against a wall and shoot them.'

In Pinter's drama, these two men who possibly belong to the department of the ministry of the defense officials or members of a government think-tank meet for an out-of-office hours drink. They never mention the subject of nuclear-war, but the implication is clear. The conscienceless ease manifests the inhumanity and sheer nakedness of human civilization. Here it is a point to remember that at that time, Britain was not only investing heavily in Trident, but was also allowing US Cruise missiles to be sited on British soil...'

For many years, Pinter paralleled in his personal life the enigmatic quality of his plays. In the 1980s, however his political passion became widely known. He was tormented visibly by internal repression in Turkey and American intervention in Nicaragua, as well as a host of other foreign-policy issues. He and people like him were deeply concerned about the policies of Thatcher Government in contemporary England. Margaret Thatcher abandoned one-nation Toryism, introduced anti-union legislation, and started the privatization of national utilities. But what alarmed Pinter was Margaret's undermining of fundamental liberties among which freedom of speech, conviction and information, tightening of the official Secrets Act of 1911, the attempt to suppress or censure BBC Programmes touching on matters of national security, the restrictions on the right to



silence when citizens were arrested and questioned by the police, and Clause 28 of a proposed government bill which would forbid local authorities 'to promote homosexuality' were all vestiges of Britain's threatened democracy and liberty. In 1988, according to John Mortimer's suggestion, Pinter included himself in a colloquy titled as the 20<sup>th</sup> June Group to protest against the policies of Margaret Thatcher.

'One for the Road' was written in response to a very particular situation, Pinter's growing awareness of the systematic use of torture by the Turkish state and its oppression of writers, intellectuals, peace campaigners and racial minorities. 'One for the Road' was first performed at the lyric theatre studio, Hammersmith, in March 1984. There are four characters in this drama, among the tortured ones there are Victor, his wife Gila and their only son Nicky. The fourth character is Nicholas who is supported by the authority and the state power. This dramatic masterpiece is Pinter's first extended dramatic confrontation with violence as a global, political issue. But at the same time, it examines the psychology of a man who was an interrogator, a torturer, the head of an organization but who also craves for love, security and integration in his life. The claustrophobic interrogation-room where the three victims are examined and questioned becomes a symbol of our world as it is going on.

From the very beginning of this drama, Nicholas seeks to assault every aspect of Victor's masculinity: power, possession of women and property. Nicholas says 'what do you think this is? It's my finger. And this is my little finger...I wave my big finger in front of your eyes...I can do absolutely anything.' But this torturer also craves for stability. Once he claims that God speaks through him. He is the absolute master and he can do whatever he likes. At the same time, he craves reassurance, 'you do respect me, I take it?' On the surface level, 'One for the Road' enacts the relationship between the state-appointed torturer and the helpless victims of the state-power. During the play, Victor is tortured; his wife Gila is raped by several people and their only son Nicky is killed. But from this bare structure of a one-sided drama of unlimited torture and violence; the play ultimately emerges as a psychological drama, an enactment of psychological complexity of the torturer. Nicholas becomes a flawed, uncertain man who has to destroy Victor's potentiality to reclaim his own, an unloved son who cannot understand the natural bond between parents and child, a man who looks to the state to provide strong, patriarchal father-figures. For this he cries out, "we are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently." Despair grips his mind and to get rid of it, he unleashes torture among his victims. He ruthlessly abuses Gila for leaving her father and his father's ideology. For Nicholas, Gila's father is the perfect embodiment of authority and idealism, 'He believed in God, he didn't think, like you shitbags ...he would die, he would die, he would die, for his country, for his God...I loved him, as if he was my own father. A destructive envy of the things which Victor possesses drives Nicholas to destroy everything in the name of the state, and of the god. The cutting out of Victor's tongue, Gila's subsequent rape by the soldiers, and Nick's death revealed through Pinter's most devastating change of tense. All these point at the inhuman torture as well as the grimmest manifestation of tremendous vindictive jealousy.

Thus 'One for the Road' is resonant with multiple connotations. Nicholas's mental disturbance, his despair and his disgust is revealed through his announcement, 'I think I deserve one for the road.' At the end of the play, there is no road for Victor and Gila, the helpless victims of cruel inhuman power. But at the same moment, 'given the claustrophobically sealed interrogation room, only a one way road opens for Nicholas. But he has no way of knowing that.' The very sources which supply his total power set him upon a fixed course which admits no change in direction or self.

Harold's another play 'Mountain Language' deals with a kind of strangulation, according to Pinter himself. One section of the community in the-then England was being singled out, that was homosexual section. Not only that, books was being banned from libraries and those plays which touched on the gay scenes were also rejected. Pinter protested against this torture and the resultant play is 'Mountain Language'. There are four scenes all taking place in and around a gruesomely functional camp. The first scene is in a prison wall where we meet an elderly woman accompanied with a younger woman. They have come to meet a male prisoner there. The very first scene shows a line of women who are harassed continually. The sergeant repeatedly asks there names. The young woman once defiantly says to the sergeant, "we have given our names." Her refusal to answer his senseless demands prompts the officer to give his attention to this young woman. When the officer notices the mark of bite on the elderly woman's hand, he asks, "who did this?" the young woman answers, "A big dog." the officer asks the name of the dog. Surprisingly, in contrast to the dogs who have names, the men and the women who are being tortured have no names.

All these are preludes to the officer's injunction to the mountain language of this people. "Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hate me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your man. It is not permitted ... it is outlawed...your language no longer exists." When the young woman declares herself as Sarah Johnson and says, 'I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?' the officer wants to show her papers and declares that "he is in the wrong batch." This callous declaration nullifies her claim to meet her husband. Moreover, her attempt to particularize herself by stating her christened name also gets reduced to a big zero. Their repeated stress on her physical aspects reduces her further into a commodity.

The second scene takes place in the visitor's room. The elderly woman has brought provisions for her son. Repeatedly she is forbidden by the guard to talk in mountain language which is supposedly dead. Her son is also repeatedly insulted by the guard for his insolence. Language which is our medium of expressing our feelings is nullified by state-authority here. These people have been separated in the name of language. Though the prisoner and the guard are united with a common thread of humanity (as they both have three kids) still the guard blatantly denies any solidarity between himself and the prisoner by his declaration, "...I think I've got a joker here. Pinter in this scene also departs from customary realism, transmitting to the audience the thoughts of the prisoners and visitors, which they have forbidden to speak.

The third scene is called 'Voices in the Darkness'. It contains exchanges between the prisoner and his wife about their past romance which acts as sustenance. Apart from that, this scene also contains exchanges between the sergeant and the woman. The sergeant addressing love as 'fucking' terminates the visit of young woman, "yes, you've come in the wrong door. It must be the computer. The computer's got a double hernia." This scene is microcosmic representation of what is happening worldwide: 'the imprisonment and torture of people who have committed no crime.' Furthermore, as soon as Sarah understands what is necessary to get her due, she promptly questions, 'can I fuck him? If I fuck him, will everything be alright? Sarah has been categorized as a whore and so she adopts the language of a whore. In short, we are forced to assume the role society assigns us.

The final scene of 'Mountain Language' is the most harrowing. We are back to the visitor's room. The prisoner is present there with a blood-stained face, his mother sits opposite to him. The dramatist shows here the callous attitude of the men who are in power. Most callously they change their decision arbitrarily. Previously the prisoner and his family were forbidden to speak their language because their language was 'dead'. Without any reason, this once dead language became alive getting mercy of the power of the authority. But the prisoner's mother failed to speak in spite of his son's repeated attempts. 'Prisoner: Mother, you can speak.

Pause.

Mother, I'm speaking to you. you see? we can speak. you can speak to me in our own language.' The prisoner then falls from his chains to his knees and begins to gasp and shake violently. The sergeant interprets this behaviour of the prisoner to the guard, "Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up."

'The Mountain Language' is the extension of the world we already inhabit. Pinter is not offering us the consolation that we are witnessing something hopelessly alien and remote. His message is that it can happen anywhere in this world. But even more importantly he implies that we cannot give the moral responsibility for such actions onto others. The terror is within us, not without.

Pinter's fascination with politics and political themes extended in the decades in the 1980s to his work for film and television. In an interview at late 1988 when Pinter visited New York,, he spoke about the turns in his career and how they reflected his growing dismay about world affairs. He says, "I've written three scripts in the last two years, movies which all have to do, one way or another, with political state of affairs.' The Handmaid's Tale'-that Margaret Atwood's projection into a possible United States 25 to 30 years from now. The other one is an adaptation of 'The Heat of the Day' by Elizabeth Bowen. It deals with a British officer who is working for the Germans; he believes that the Germans are right. In this way, Harold Pinter's political plays point towards his consciousness about contemporary world and world affairs. His plays symbolize that accumulation of power and the dirty game of power politics which are working in microcosmic as well as macrocosmic level.

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