THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE: THE SYNTAX OF POWER AND POLITICS IN PINTER'S LATER PLAYS

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Abstract - The atmosphere of a Pinter play hangs heavy with words- the oblique, the noncommittal, the dismissive, and, intriguingly, the unspoken. And as a dramatist engaged in exploring the possibilities of language, it is what is left unsaid that most impacts him. Pinter questions the ability of language to speak of 'reality' and explores its limitations. His early plays confounded audiences and critics alike as these 'comedies of menace' brought on the stage characters who are lonely, frightened and despairing men and women, struggling to express themselves, utterly broken down and annihilated in the end by ruthless, articulate, powerful men. Implicitly political, this is as yet a theatre of images; but the social setting is significant as we see immigrants, drifters, the mentally disabled and the marginalized that exist on the fringes of society and are consequently helpless in the face of authority. This paper will deal with two of Pinter's later plays: One for the Road and Mountain Language - plays that, in contrast to his earlier ones, are overtly political and yet carry forward his artistic commitment. For here, again, Pinter is concerned with the arbitrary boundaries man makes for himself- of concrete, of language and of philosophy. One for the Road (1984) transports us into the dark world of a moral wasteland with its theme of torture and totalitarian suppression. Though not politically identifiable, the cruel interrogation seeks neither information nor confession but the destruction of the family. Pinter takes the metaphor further in Mountain Language (1988), which depicts abuse of power against socio-political prisoners by denying them the right to speak their own language .The short sentences, the phrases left unfinished, the awkward pauses, all become outward manifestations of the inner anxiety and deeper uncertainties of the characters, living as they are at the extreme edge. Significantly, Pinter gives skilful use of language to characters who wield power over others. Thus, Pinter's political theatre presents the marginalized, silent (silenced?) dissenters and their highly articulate oppressors, as he explores the power, as it were, of language in its use and the abjection that accompanies its denial; and the dangers of tyranny and absolutism: and the individual in the midst of all.

Keywords - Language, Political, Power, Annihilation, Silenced

The plays of Harold Pinter are mysterious, enigmatic and compelling. Pinter transports us, through seemingly realistic settings, to a world that is bleak, baffling, and often surrealistic. Brutality and menace have always been present in Pinter's plays as he expresses again and again the despair and helplessness of men and women caught in the quagmire of a search for self and identity. His early plays were all about the darkness and despair underneath a shallow exterior: the chill of a menace lurking outside a safe haven of a room, the struggle for power and dominance, and the dynamics of oppression. Inherently political, though not obviously so, Pinter's early plays raised uncomfortable questions (without providing the answers, of course) about the purposelessness of existence in a society that is, on the surface, rational but which possesses the potential to turn nasty and alarming.A room, two or three people inside engaging in inconsequential talk with oblique references to a menace outside, and, ultimately, the utter collapse of one of them as the menace takes over: this is the motif that runs through most of his plays. "Pinter's plays portray a world of closed doors and shattered windows, of people hiding in boarding houses and basements, often too absorbed in their mental survival to broach the outside world" [1].

From the blinded and silenced Rose in The Room, to the stuttering and inarticulate Stanley in The Birthday Party, and the rebuffed Davies in The Caretaker and Len in The Dwarfs, Pinter's characters are lonely, frightened individuals, struggling to make sense of a world that is as frightening as it is absurd. Baffling and mystifying as these plays were to their audiences and critics, one can retrospectively trace the concerns that Pinter brings up in his later plays as he becomes overtly political, denouncing the failure of democracy and the system in protecting its minorities while, on the contrary, taking away their voice from them, thus reducing them to mere silent spectators of their own doom. Since the 1980s, Pinter became increasingly vocal regarding freedom of expression and the need to safeguard human dignity by recognizing the basic human rights. He openly supported organizations such as PEN and Amnesty International and spared no words when it came to criticizing denials of basic human rights.

In his Nobel lecture, Pinter redefined the earlier statement he'd made in 1958 about there being no hard distinctions between the real and the not real, saying that while he still believed it in and that,".. as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot"; and he ended his speech with the words, "…unflinching, 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." [2]

It is his concern with the dignity of man that is most evident in his later plays, beginning with One for the Road (1984).The play takes place, of course, in a room. Typically, we are not told where this room is but the bars on the window, the desk at which a man is sitting and a 'machine' used as an intercom, all indicate that it is an office, perhaps of a prison or secret headquarters of some kind. The play begins with the familiar image of a man seated at his desk, waiting for someone to enter. Only, this time the menace - the torturer, Nicolas- is in the room, while the victims -Victor, his wife and his son- are brought in from without. A short play about cruelty and totalitarian suppression, its four intense scenes bring out all the horrors of rape, abuse and murder, not through graphic violence on the stage but through the dialogues between the interrogator and the prisoners. Though the reason for their incarceration remains unstated, it nevertheless contributes to the aesthetic power of the play. The interrogation by Nicolas, a high ranking official in the government of an unnamed country, is brutal and violent and that he considers his mission sanctioned by divine powers makes this even more horrific. "God speaks through me" he claims.

During the course of the investigation, it becomes gradually clear that Victor and his family have been tortured and physically abused but, ironically, it is Nicolas who craves validation for his actions through his continual assertion of being in the right. Self-avowedly the 'chatty type', he repeatedly seeks reassurance from his prisoners. 'You do respect me, I take it?' he asks Victor. And, later, 'Tell me… truly…are you beginning to love me?' This is the insecurity of a man who wields power by virtue of his weakness and not strength- not himself of much consequence, he derives his pride from 'the man who runs this country' and his power from his 'link' with the state and the fact that he is 'not alone'. Charles Spenser writes: "Not a word seems redundant in a series of tense, teasing dialogues between Nicholas and his three prisoners, which fascinatingly suggests that the torture is tortured himself, despite his smooth manner"[3]. Pinter in an interview called Nicholas 'an absolute disaster' [4]. The silence of the ironically named Victor is exacerbated by the torrent of words from his oppressor until, not receiving any response, Nicolas changes tack and asks:

Is your son all right?

The ominous words fall heavy on Victor's silence and are an indicator of things to come as Nicolas turns to talk of death. 'I love death', he states. '….do you love the death of others as much as I do?'

He next interviews Nicky, Victor's son and tries to establish some sort of kinship with him by stating the similarity in their names. His own rejection by his mother prompts him to ask Nicky whether he loves his parents. As the questioning continues, a sense of doom is built up regarding the boy's fate. He admonishes the boy for not obeying the rules and for behaving badly with the soldiers, a threat lurking in his words.

His interrogation of Victor's wife, Gila, is more brutal and crass. Gila, who has clearly been raped and abused, is subjected to greater cruelty by Nicolas as he castigates her for rejecting the values of her dead father, who was a soldier of the state and whom he lauds as a patriot.

The final scene is again, as the first, between Nicolas and Victor. Victor now is attired neatly and about to be released but is unable to speak due to injury to his tongue. We are reminded of the rather sardonic remark made earlier by Nicholas: 'I understood you enjoyed the cut and thrust of debate'-the dissenter has paid the price by losing his voice and, we come to know, his son, as Pinter achieves a supremely dramatic moment by a simple change of tense: 'He was a prick'. Gila, he has earlier been told, would most likely be released later. We can guess what fate awaits her. The play ends with the prisoner, not cowed down but staring straight back at his torturer and the audience is left with a terrifying yet powerful image of a weak oppressor and a silent, silenced, yet potent, unbroken victim, whose soul shines through his eyes. One for the Road takes you right into the heart of one man's moral wasteland.

As Ruben Moi observes, 'The play condemns all totalitarian regimes and attacks all forms of abuse of human rights. One for the Road functions as a show case for Amnesty International' [5].

Mountain Language carries the metaphor further and defines and concretizes it better than One for the Road. Mountain Language was first published in 1988 and was inspired by Pinter's visit to Turkey in 1985 where he was appalled by the way the Kurds were treated. He was shocked that they were not allowed to speak at all and, in particular, not allowed to speak their own language. Pinter began writing the play in 1985 but developments in Britain in 1988 caused him to complete the play which, as he told Mel Gussow: '..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.'[6]

The play takes on the issue of what may be akin to linguistic genocide- the enforced silence of peoples whose language remains unrecognized and which does not officially exist. It also explores the complex relationship of language and identity and, conversely, the loss of identity that accompanies the loss of language. Their language having been taken away from them, the prisoners are mute spectators to their own annihilation.

The play is set in, predictably, an unnamed country at a gruesome, torture camp, outside which are women from the mountain waiting to meet their imprisoned male relatives. A young woman, Sara Johnson, as we are told later, has come to visit her husband and is singled out. An Elderly Woman is waiting to see her son and has been harassed by the guards and bitten by

one of their dogs. Again, we do not learn of what crime their men have been imprisoned for. The women are abused and insulted:
Sergeant: Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouse. They are enemies of the State.

The Officer then starts issuing a series of commands:
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.

The repetitive refrain-like words of the Officer-"You may not speak it", and later, "It is outlawed" serves to reinforce Pinter's assertion that language is more often than not used as a "smoke screen"[7] in the battle for dominance.

The language of the mountain people would henceforth be Silence.

In the next scene which takes place in the Visitors' Room, the mother finally does get to see her son, but cannot speak as her mountain language has been officially banned. In a dramatic moment, the lights go half down and the mother and son sit still as the audience listens to their recorded voices, unheard by the guards outside. 'Voice in the Darkness', the third scene of the play, shows the sergeant and the guard holding up a hooded man and the young woman is informed that she has been sent through the wrong door. Again, the lights are dimmed and the audience can hear voices of a man and a woman (perhaps the husband and wife?) reminiscing about their past and reliving its happy memories.
The final scene reverses the commands of the first and also takes place in the Visitors' Room. The stage directions at the beginning of the scene are ominous: "Guard. Elderly Woman. Prisoner. Silence" It may seem that Silence is itself an entity, so to speak, and has a potent function in the scheme of things henceforth. The prisoner, we are told, has blood on his face and sits trembling while the woman is still. The old woman is now allowed to speak her language, only, she cannot. Reduced to silence despite her son's pleadings, words fail her. The son tries in vain to reason with the guard and even appeals to a common ground of humanity, a plea that is reported by the guard to his superior, calling the prisoner 'joker' for daring to assume equality with him. There is a blackout after the Sergeant demands to know 'What joker?', and as the next scene dawns, we see the son reduced to mere stutters and gasps, blood trickling down his face- his destruction seems complete. The sergeant merely quips, 'Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up.' The message of Mountain Language says Esslin, is that 'Torture is obscene, the domination of human beings is obscene, cruelty is obscene."[8]
Both One for the Road and Mountain Language deal with brutality and oppression, torture and repression and may thus be seen as companion pieces. Significantly, Pinter had been looking into the Turkish situation a year or so before writing One for the Road. Mountain Language was written after his visit to Turkey in 1985 where he saw for himself the real plight of the Kurds. Yet, by not situating the plays in specific countries, Pinter makes an overt case against state abuse and torture of all who represent dissent and disagreement. We might extend Mark Batty's observation to One for the Road too as he points out, "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"[9].

Pinter has always been concerned with language and communication and though he has often been accused of deliberately obfuscating issues and mystifying his audiences, his plays consistently deal with man's struggle to make himself understood. Intrinsic to the expression of identity and culture, language shapes and defines the human experience. The loss of language is therefore a tragic, even dangerous, loss as it entails the simultaneous loss of thought, ideas and, ultimately, identity. To the oppressor, Pinter gives the silence of 'a torrent of language' [10] that is as meaningless as it is brutal. To the victims he gives the silence that signals the end of the spoken. The silence of the elderly woman is "just as compelling if not as confronting, that is to envision the old woman as defeated, beaten, therefore silent. She has been deprived of means to alter, even to describe her condition"[11]. Like Victor who cannot speak though he is released, the elderly woman too is mute though she has been allowed to finally speak her own mountain language.

To conclude in Pinter's own words: "The ruthless degradation of human beings, both in spirit and body…are justified by rhetorical gambit, sterile terminology and concepts of power which stink"[12]. Language, therefore, fails to redeem the tyrant and silence falls on words that could have been; a silence that lingers long after the curtain has fallen.

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