

The Political Controversies in Harold Pinter's Plays: A Study of Power, Silence and Resistance

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الجدل السياسي في مسرحيات هارولد بينتر: الدراسة عن السلطة والصمت والمقاومة

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Abstract

Harold Pinter, through his plays, takes up the gauntlet to reveal the shocking political truths that are otherwise incomprehensible to the general public. The decisions made by individuals and governments become controversial because they have the foundations of self-interest and greed. Also, the mix of power, silence and resistance gives birth to a dark and uneasy correlation among the parties involved. Pinter underlines and emphasizes the actions and reactions of political manoeuvres and by doing so, thoroughly exposes the underbelly of the cesspool of politics. Furthermore, he underscores the ubiquitous presence of lies, which have become an integral part of human life. Pinter weaves plots that are based on real situations, and also imaginary. Additionally, he brings to light the webs of lies, deceit, greed, corruption and domination.

Keywords: Pinter, politics, power, situations, resistance, plays, silence, governments, meaning.

الملخص

يحاول هارولد بينتر ان يقدم، من خلال مسرحياته، شجاعةً لكشف الحقائق السياسية الصادمة التي يصعب فهمها من قبل عامة الناس، لذلك تصبح القرارات التي يتخذها الأفراد والحكومات مثيرةً للجدل لأنها تقوم على المصالح الشخصية والجشع، كما أن مزيج السلطة والصمت والمقاومة يُؤدِّد علاقةً مظلمةً ومقلقةً بين الأطراف المعنية. لذلك يُبرز بينتر ويُسلط الضوء على أفعال وردود أفعال المناورات السياسية، كاشفًا بذلك الجانب المظلم من مستتق السياسة، علاوةً على ذلك، يُؤكِّد على الانتشار الواسع للأكاذيب، التي أصبحت جزءًا لا يتجزأ من الحياة البشرية، وينسج بينتر حِكَاياتٍ مستوحاةً من أحداثٍ واقعيةٍ وأخرى خيالية، كما يُكشف النقاب عن شبكات الأكاذيب والخداع والجشع والفساد والهيمنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بينتر، السياسة، السلطة، المواقف، المقاومة، المسرحيات، الصمت، الحكومات، المعنى.

Introduction

Nobel laureate Harold Pinter was an English playwright who achieved great distinction for the themes he touched upon in his dramas. His writing techniques called Pinteresque and Pinter Pause became hallmarks of his plays for their power to create

tension and enigma. Since his early youth, theatre had been Pinter's calling and he also acted in plays. His breakthrough came with the success of his play *The Birthday Party* (1957) which had multiple themes that underlined his expertise as a dramatist. His other works of note include *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), *The Homecoming* (1964), *Old Times* (1974) and *One for the Road* (1989) among others. His dramatic works are famously called "Comedies of Menace" for their ability to keep the audiences on tenterhooks with a range of emotions from amusement to fear and uncertainty. Furthermore, the secret of his success lied in his ability to fathom human nature and the skill to depict them in his plays. The manner in which he portrayed human weaknesses and the struggles of the powerless against the powerful, highlights Pinter's efforts as an activist for human rights. The battles of oppression and resistance in varied forms in his plays reveal the unending fights that mankind had to put up all their lives. His adherence to pacifism is reflected in his works through the subjects and themes he addresses. He won many accolades and honor's during his lifetime and in 2007, he was granted the Légion d'honneur, France's highest order of merit. A man of many talents, he also was an actor, a screenwriter, a poet, a director and a political activist. Pinter died in 2008.

The Aims of the Study

- To investigate and fathom the correlation of power, silence and resistance in relation to political and individual actions.
- To extract the essence of the themes under study with the perspectives of Harold Pinter.
- To analyses the influence of the themes on nations and individuals.
- To highlight the causes that create confrontations between the oppressor and the oppressed.

The Questions of the Study

- How does Harold Pinter create plots that lead to power struggles?
- What are the power dynamics of the parties involved?
- What messages does Pinter convey?
- Are Pinter's plays social commentaries on the manners in which the powerful subjugate the weak?

The Significance of the Study

The study gains importance because the themes explored by Pinter are relatable to each human in different ways. In addition, the plays have immensely contributed to the understanding of the clash of human ideologies through varied situations and characters. The encompassing of the themes under study point to a complex societal structure and Pinter becomes the voice of it by offering perspectives and truths that are discomforting.

The Problem Statement

A number of plays of Harold Pinter are viewed as anti-authority. Literature on that aspect is aplenty. However, there is a dearth of research that points to the

circumstances that lead to those situations. Both, at an individual and state level. A further study is needed to provide insights that encompasses political controversies. The themes of power, silence and resistance need a detailed exploration to understand the nitty-gritties of Pinter's stance.

The Research Method

The present study uses the following Qualitative Research Methods to make an investigatory analysis of the selected Plays:

- Textual Analysis: To fathom the complexity of the works so that the insinuated and the declared can be interpreted through the analytical framework.
- Literature Review: This method will be used to fathom and gain insights into the existing corpus on the themes under study.
- Library Method: This method will be utilized to gather information through books, scholarly articles, and journals.
- Analytical Method: This method will be implemented to analyses existing literature to present a critical analysis.

The Theme of Power

Power and politics, more often than not, go hand in hand. Through his plays, Pinter proves that the canvas for those themes needn't be large. He further asserts that the games that common people play with each other, with overt and covert motives, are also a part of political tug-of-war. Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* is often cited as an example of the theatre of the absurd, and rightly so. However, the facet that is highlighted in the play is that of power and the power struggles through words and actions of the characters. Additionally, the Pinteresque style aids in the transfer of power between characters. For Pinter, power was a fundamental ingredient that defines relationships. Consequently, it can be said that "in this play, need of power is filtered through the words of the characters, who always want to establish their domination over the others. From the beginning to the ending, all the characters in the play are always trying to control the others by means of language or discourse in order to acquire power over others." (Yu, 2013, p.73). The playwright does not reveal the cause of fear in Stanley, but it exists, and that makes Stanley into a controlling individual. Through the power that Stanley wields, he attempts to crush imaginary difficult situations that may arise, through his words and actions. The combination of fear, power and control are interrelated in his case and are exhibited through his dominant behavior which is driven by power.

Harold Pinter was not an ordinary playwright. He understood the human psyche and the way it functions. Stanley's strangling of Meg, and his rape attempt on Lulu, reveals the portrayal of "man's fear of external threats that intrude on his life and demolish his defenses. These threats may represent two conflicting inclinations in man's psyche, each attempting to assert authority." (Neamah, 2024, p.47). Also, Stanley only acts dominant towards weak individuals like Meg and Lulu, while conveniently avoiding a direct confrontation with Goldberg and McCann. Pinter

underlines the fact that individuals who use power to suppress and oppress the weak do it out of fear. Therefore, “in other words, the attempt to dominate and assert authority is paradoxically an expression of weakness.” (Gning, 2024, p.23).

If viewed from the perspective of the Pinteresque writing style, the Pinter pauses pose more questions than answers. And they are about what character has authority over whom and to what degree. In addition, the disjointed and fragmented dialogues explicitly reveal power dynamics between the characters. The manner in which he uses silence is a psychological warfare between the characters for power over one another. It can be said with certainty that Pinter sees the expression of wielding power and that of subjugation through multiple manners of interactions between characters, and that “Pinter’s use of silence often center on whether it contributes more to psychological realism or existential ambiguity.” (Othman, 2024, p.63).

In *The Caretaker*, Pinter explores the theme of power through complex human relationships that stem from the insecurities and fears of Davies, Aston and Mick. Of the three, Mick is hot-headed, violent and aggressive who asserts his dominance at every chance that he gets. Davies resorts to manipulation through arguments and arrogance. His endeavors to create a rift between Aston and Mick are tell-tale signs of gaining power over the two brothers. Pinter depicts the psychological games that Mick and Davies play. He wants the audience to know that the fight for power in relationships plays out in the mind first and is then manifests into words and actions. The ungratefulness that Davies shows towards the brothers is also a strategy to seek power. Furthermore, the utilization of silence as a weapon is what makes the play stand out from the others. The effective and forceful use of silence to intimidate and cause fear and anxiety is a classic Pinteresque method. As a result, “Pinter’s manipulation of silence invites the audience to engage with the subtext of the narrative, prompting deeper reflections on the nature of communication, power dynamics, and the human condition itself.” (Abbass, 2025, p.258). The allure of power even in the commonest of people is what *The Caretaker* is all about.

Also, the underlying tension between the characters is evident when Davies’ chatter is met with silence by Aston. The tension that is built through such a scenario creates a kind of a communication where power rests with the person who seeks validation. And in this case, it’s Davies. The aggression of Mick, the argumentative and selfish behavior of Davies and the kindness of Aston create a union of characteristics that have nothing in common except that to assert oneself over the other. The ordering of Aston to Davies to leave can be seen as a normal reaction to the ungrateful behavior of Davies. But it should be noted that though he is institutionalized, he understands the psychological games Davies engages in to pit him against his brother. The thought process underpinnings of the characters to dominate reveals the human mindset which has a tendency to control and influence people. Pinter brings before the audience the ongoings that take place behind a casual conversation, a discussion or an argument. Human interactions, according to Pinter, “Pinter’s play texts

often revolve around the conceptualization of language as an instrument of power and a means of coercion and assimilation, which can destroy, annihilate and eradicate individuality and identity.” (Čirić-Fazlija & Kalajdzisalihović, 2023, p.119).

In *One for the Road*, Pinter takes the degree of power that is sought to an extreme level. In this play he paints the picture of power in a big canvas. He brings in the government and its citizens who are tortured by the former, and the ghastly and inhumane suffering that takes place. He exposes what a totalitarian government does to its citizens for going against it. It is a telling play that showcases the might and brute power of the government. Furthermore, Pinter highlights the murders and crimes that a government can commit without being held responsible. The victims of the state sponsored brutality, torture and killings have nowhere to go. It's a fight that those who defy the government are sure to lose and in doing so will be murdered and executed. The playwright has made inroads to the highest echelons of power with this play. He does not write a play, but rather reveals the truth. He does not tell a story, but narrates what the might of the government can do – destroy the very people who it is supposed to protect. By doing so, Pinter unmask the perennial truth that a government is the biggest enemy of the people and it expects nothing but subjugation from its citizenry. It also demands their lives through jingoism. For example:

He would die, he would
Die, he would die for his country,
For his God. And he did die, he
Died, he died, he died for his God.
You turd. To spawn such a
Daughter. (Act I, p.12).

The play is about a family of three – Victor, his wife Gila and their seven year old son Nicky, who are at the receiving end of the brutality committed by a government officer named Nicolas. Gila has been raped by Nicolas' soldiers and her son is killed at the end of the play denoting the barbaric nature of power. The power of a totalitarian government is total when it comes to muffle any sort of dissent and “it does not matter whether they deal an animal or human being, it matters whether peoples threat totalitarian existence and authority or not. They strive to dominate people who surround them and their states. They can torture psychologically and physically. They even kill if they found out that there is a need to.” (Jawad, 2022, p.273). The foundations of *One for the Road* lie in the cold-blooded fact that when a government has absolute power, it can crush its citizenry at will, and murder them according to their whim and fancy. Through his play, Pinter has reiterated the quote – Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Pinter underlines the truth that the mightier the power, the more brutal and deadlier the torture it can exercise.

Silence as Talk

Does silence speak louder than words? It definitely does for Harold Pinter. The *Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* are plays where he succeeds in building tension,

mystery and secrecy through silence and fragmented dialogues. The fundamental idea that Pinter employs is that he leaves it to the audience to fathom the meanings of silence and interpret dialogues that are fragmented. However, silence takes precedence and creates an atmosphere that is tense and dark at the same time. Pinter creates an engrossing communication through the silence of his characters because “he does not believe in the honesty of words and often finds them discreditable in communicating the truth. He knows very well that we hide instead of revealing, through language. That is the main reason behind the abundance of silences and pauses in his plays. Pinter believes that the characters in his plays are able to communicate even the unspeakable and unspoken thoughts and feelings through silences and pauses. When words fall short and cannot express the required thing, silences and pauses do that instead.” (Pasa, 2023, p.412). The presence of silence is found in almost all of his plays but the ones that stand out are in *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*.

The reason is not difficult to fathom because both of those plays have characters that are intriguing. The plots are suspenseful because of the silence ensconced between dialogues. The presence of Davies in a house where he is a stranger and the unknown background of Stanley keeps the audience on tenterhooks. By giving the liberty of thought to analyses the situation of silence, Pinter displays his ingenious method and his skill as a dramatist. In both of those plays, the conversations that take place reveal little and silence insinuates plentiful. The permutations and combinations regarding power dynamics, authority, and dominance between and among the characters through muteness, is where Harold Pinter excels in his art. In Pinter's own words “I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid...” (Hincliffe, 2016, p. 43). Therefore, it is paramount to know and believe that Pinter believes that the unsaid has more authenticity and sincerity than what is said. For Pinter speech is silver and silence golden. Though a lot is said and written about Pinter's use of silence and it is decoded in multiple ways, it is rarely mentioned that Pinter was very well-versed with the psychology of humans, and most importantly, what character meant what with their silence because of the traits that he infuses in them.

Also, in *The Birthday Party*, the function “of silence in the text include concealment which serves as a tool of a character to be intentionally, or without purpose, silent about certain topics. For example, Stanley, in his first verbal exchange with McCann, avoids mentioning Goldberg's name which showcases his fear therefore influencing his turns to become evasive. This function can also share boundaries with topic shift, as the difference between the two is not that clear. However, a shift in topic can be preceded by a textual pause or silence that marks the end of a topic and the beginning of another.” (Chouli, 2024, p.159 – 160). That observation points to the manner in which Pinter uses the tool of silence for continuity. The following situation describes it perfectly.

Meg: Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Pete: What?

Meg: Is that you?

Pete: Yes, it's me. (Act 1, p.3).

The unexpressed becomes a vehicle which takes the audience to unknown and unpredictable territory, which is more often than not, beyond the imaginary powers of the audience. Importantly, it's not that Harold Pinter has been the only playwright who uses silence to create the atmosphere of suspense and secrecy and to evoke the pinnacle of interest in the novels. However, he also faced a lot of criticism from critics about his use of silence and pauses in his plays. Critics were of the opinion that he had the habit of overdoing the same style, which made his plays very predictable in the manner in which they were written and played out.

In addition, "Pinter was accused of an excessive use of silences and long pauses. But the silences and pauses in his work are simply a part of his creed as a craftsman. They are the highly personal way of experiencing, and reacting to the world around him. If somebody tries to listen attentively and closely to the real speech of people, they will find that there are more silences and longer pauses, than those generally allowed in the traditional dramas." (Mhayyal, 2018, p.9). A look at the different instances of 'silence' in *The Caretaker* provide the answers.

Davies: I was ... uh ... oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back ... see what I mean ... going back ... a good way ... lose a bit of track, like ... you know ..."
(Act I, p. 25)

Aston: They weren't hallucinations, they ... I used to get the feeling I could see things... very clearly ... everything ... was so clear ... everything used ... everything used to get very quiet ... everything got very quiet ... all this ... quiet ... and ... this clear sight ... it was ... but may be I was wrong. (Act II, p.55).

Aston comes in. He closes the door, moves into the room and faces Mick. They look at each other. Both are smiling faintly.

Mick: (beginning to speak to Aston). Look ... uh ...He stops, goes to the door and exits. Aston leaves the door open, crosses behind Davies, sees the broken Buddha, and looks at the pieces for a moment. He then goes to his bed, takes off his overcoat, sits, takes the screwdriver and plug and pokes the plug.

Davies: I just come back for my pipe.

Aston: Oh yes. (Act III, p. 75).

The above dialogues are peppered with silences and in each case no two examples of silence mean the same. Yes, the contexts vary, but that is exactly what Pinter wants to express. He wants the audiences to know that silence is a single entity with multiple functions in different circumstances, contexts and meanings. For Pinter, the presence

of silence is not the absence of clamor, but an amplification of the messages that are sent out through noiselessness. And at times, they are so loud that they are deafening.

The Form of Resistance

Harold Pinter was an intellectual who had a great understanding of politics and the power that comes with it. He was a pacifist but he also knew how an authoritarian government functions and what it can do to the minorities. His play *Mountain Language* is based on true accounts of the oppression of the Kurdish people in Turkey (now Türkiye). He witnessed it on his trip over there as a member of a human rights group to probe the oppression and suppression of the Kurds. This play and its theme of resistance gains significance and value because it brings to light the process of dehumanizing individuals through mental, emotional and physical torture. All because they speak a language that is different from that of the majority. Also, it is a brutal attempt to erase the identity of a people by forcefully bringing an end to their culture and subjugating them to the will of the majority – by suppressing their linguistic freedom. *Mountain Language* is a simple play. But it resonates with the audiences for its ability to compel them to think and act in a rightful manner. That manner is to oppose and resist any such attempts in the future by any totalitarian government that may exist in any part of the world.

Pinter writes this play with an onus on making the audience feel what the Kurdish people went through. Hence, its theme of resistance is a clarion call to act when they see suppression and oppression in any form. Also, no other play of Harold Pinter speaks so loud about political oppression and power dynamics. In each act of the four acts of the play, Pinter doesn't loosen his grip over the message of resistance that he wants to give out. The first act of the play titled 'Prison Wall', begins with visitors lining in the prison to meet their relatives. An elderly lady and a young woman named Sara Johnson who is not a mountain woman. The elderly lady has come to meet her son while Sara has come to meet her husband Charley. The women are harassed by the guards even as the elderly lady is going through immense pain after being bitten by a dog. Instead of giving her any medical attention, she is asked to name the dog who bit here. The mountain women are forbidden to speak their language. Also, the following dialogues reveal the ferocity with which the officer makes it clear that the mountain language should not be spoken.

Officer: 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?

Young Woman: I do not speak the mountain language.” (Act I, p.255–256).

In the second act called ‘The Visitors’ Room,’ the elderly woman attempts to talk with her prisoner son but is physically attacked by a guard for speaking her mountain language. In act three, titled ‘Voice in the Darkness’, a woman inadvertently walks into a section of the prison which is prohibited for visitors. She sees her husband who is hooded, in a tortured physical state. Before leaving the prison, she asks the sergeant if her offering of physical intimacy would result in ending her husband’s physical beatings and torture. The sergeant agrees. In the fourth and final act titled ‘Visitor’s Room’, the elderly lady and her son meet up, but there is no communication because the elderly lady does not talk the mountain language and keeps quiet. Even after being informed about the change in rules regarding the permission to speak the mountain language, the elderly lady keeps mum which is a sign of fear having taken over her completely. Ultimately, Pinter sends out a message that the authoritarian government succeeded in their aim to make the mountain people stop speaking their language.

Michael Billington, noted for writing the biography of Pinter, observes that “For all his protestations, I don’t think Pinter is literally equating England—or Britain—with Turkey. What he is trying to do in Mountain Language is shock us into a realization that there is no longer an automatic division between Them and Us; between morally bankrupt tyrannies and supposedly superior Western democracies. The play offers a bleak vision of the tendency towards the suppression of any views that contradict the prevailing orthodoxy. It also implies that there is an instinct inside all of us to banish, negate, or deny what we cannot comprehend.” (Billington, 2007, p. 309). This observation seems more politically correct than using a bold approach and calling a spade a spade. Pinter never compares the treatment given by western countries to that what was happening in Turkey. He penned a play after seeing what he saw and his depictions are accurate and based on facts. And by mentioning those facts, Pinter brings to the fore many harsh realities.

The primary reality is that a minority group, whenever comes under the governance of a radical majority faces an existential threat. That threat is clearly carried out with the help of the administration by politicians. The sergeant and the guards in the play symbolize the administration while the changing of the ‘rules’ that the guard talks about symbolizes the government policy. Furthermore, Pinter has pointed out to the utter brutality that authoritarian governments employ for subjugation. The attack on the elderly lady is a prime example of the policy of the government to spare none. The readiness of the sergeant to accept carnal pleasures on behalf of someone else depicts the moral depravity that comes along with power.

Ultimately, the resistance in Mountain Language is depicted through the torture that the men go through inside the prison. The tortured haven’t given in to the demands of the government to stop speaking their language and accept a culture that was alien to them. By depicting that, Pinter has made a very telling statement that language is the soul of culture and is the closest to the hearts of people in defining that culture. The

defiance of the men in prison is the resistance. At the end of the play the government bows down to that resistance and allows the usage of the mountain language. Pinter has sent out a clear message – resistance to totalitarianism and authoritarianism leads to victory.

Conclusion

The thorough examination and analysis of the plays of Harold Pinter that have the themes of power, silence and resistance reveal the immense insights that Pinter offers on them. He builds those themes on the foundations of politics. Furthermore, Pinter brings to the fore the fundamental human emotional and mental reactions to those themes. And in doing so, highlights that they are inextricably linked through power dynamics. The playwright views politics as an undercurrent to power, silence and resistance. And that creates controversy at times. Be it individual relations, or the collective consciousness of a country. The array of perspectives that he offers of those themes showcases his ingenuity, expertise. And more importantly, the ability to decode the psychological ongoings in the minds of humans, which in turn reveals their character. His plays invariably deal with the themes under study with an open interpretation method and that aids the audience to offer multiple perspectives. The presence of fear, uncertainty, secrecy, resistance and the art of saying more with the unsaid creates an amalgamation that is an outstanding way of expressing existence. And that is where his strengths lie because those viewpoints reflect life which does not follow any set rules. Whether Pinter deals with individual characters or governments, he depicts them lifelike and in a relatable way. That is so because Pinter is able to peel the layers of situations and expose their cores.

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