

CULTURE AND NATURE IN HAROLD PINTER'S *MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE*

C. VAIRAVAN

Anna Centenary Research Fellow, Department of English, College of Engineering Guindy, Anna University, India

ABSTRACT

By borrowing insights from Raymond Williams and Pramod K Nayar, theoretical constructs on the concept of culture and nature have been studied and explored in this paper with special reference to Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*. There is a perfect interplay of culture and nature in Pinter's *Mountain Language*. The Culture and Nature of the ethnic minority is forcefully suppressed by the Military. In this situation, Pinteresque language is used as a tool to communicate the inner realities and suppressions of the Mountain people. Military here stands for power and the mountain people represent the tone of the suppressed. This article sheds light on the technique of using language to picturize Power and Suppression. It also focuses on the articulation of culture and nature, and use of the political power of language employed in *Mountain Language* by Pinter. According to critics, language used in the play symbolizes 'Culture' and 'Nature'.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Identity, Language, Pinteresque Language, Power & Suppression

INTRODUCTION

Culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, works of art and other related components. The development of culture depends upon humans' capacity to learn and to transmit knowledge to succeeding generations. Every human society has its own particular culture, or socio-cultural set up, which overlaps to some extent with other system. In *Mountain Language*, Pinter gives a new dimension to culture and defines it as a study of non-urban culture. He classifies culture into modern urban culture and peasant or tribal culture. This is communicated through the language used by people of both cultures. The tribal people are suppressed by the urban society. The sentiments and emotions of the tribes are expressed through their language, but they are not welcomed and understood by the urban people. Pinter describes this problem in his play *Mountain Language*. The act of suppression is treated as a social issue throughout the play. According to Clark Wissler [1] cultural elements diffuse outward from an initial central point and the development of which is accidental throughout the play. Pinter brings out a critical conflict between British culture and tribal culture. Tribal culture is dominated by the British culture in terms of power.

The minority culture is forcefully suppressed by the Military which represents power. According to Pramod K. Nayar [2] culture is concerned with the dispossessed, those oppressed, marginalized and silenced in the power relations among people, classes, races, sexual preferences, ethnicities and genders. John Lyons [3] described culture is more or less synonymous with 'civilization' and, in an older extreme formulation in contrast to 'barbarism'. Raymond Williams' [4] point of view cultures is nothing more indeterminate than this word, and nothing is more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods. According to Lyons [3, p303] The word 'culture' is to be interpreted, not in its classical sense, but in what might be described loosely as in its anthropological sense. As far as language is concerned, it is quite possible that there is an innate language acquisition faculty. Whether or not knowledge of one's native language is culturally transmitted; it is acquired through not necessarily learned, by virtue of one's membership of a particular society. Pinter employ's language for two purposes in *Mountain Language*. The first, he uses language as a medium of communication among the characters of the play, and second as a tool to bring out the theme of the play.

PINTERESQUE LANGUAGE: AN OVERVIEW

Pinteresque language was coined in the early 1960's with the influence of the style of Harold Pinter. Pinteresque language refers to the language that is used by Pinter especially in dialogue. His dialogues are embedded with characteristics such as oblique, repetitive, interspersed with lengthy pauses, menacing, and loaded with varied hidden meanings. *Financial Times* defines it as full of dark hints and pregnant suggestions, with the audience left uncertain as to what to conclude [5]. Pinteresque, hence, is a unique combination of comedy and menace out of very ordinary situations, never resorting to the gothic or supernatural. Beneath the deceptive surface, joviality lurks and it conceals violence and threat to safety [6]. It is rare for a dramatist to have an adjective descriptive of his style used early in his career and also to see it spread rapidly into general usage [7]. This has been exemplified after the production of his first full length play *The Birthday Party*. The themes of his plays are characterized with undefined images oscillating between reality and assumption. Other interesting elements of his style are pause, silence and a mysterious subtext. For a long time, Pinter did not employ too much of political connection to his works, but the use of Pinteresque takes on a political edge. Including a political edge to the Pinteresque creates a common ground with later more overtly political Pinter. In the political plays, there is a great concern for the abuse of authority and the environment that cultivates the abuse. *Mountain Language* (1988) is a play where Pinter explores Pinteresque and he calls it Pinteresque-filled "Room Plays" [8].

USE OF PINTERESQUE IN *MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE*

Pinter, in his play *Mountain Language*, uses 'Pauses' and 'Silence' as comedy of menace, angry and power. He uses this word in all his plays especially in *The Homecoming*. After every five sentences spoken by the cast, there is a small pause and silence. Sometimes it is really good, whereas sometimes the audiences do not understand. He uses the silence in various ways (...) "I wrote dot, dot, dot, and you're giving me dot, dot." In the opening of the play *Mountain Language*, an elderly woman is cradling her hand along with small basket in her hand. The elderly woman and young woman are waiting in the corridor. The sergeant asks a question "Name?" The same question put repeatedly to her. The young woman answers "we've given our names."... "She's been bitten" [9]. Here, Pinter gives a small pause. The usual rhythm of pauses and silence evolves into an explicitly political discourse. Here, pauses can mark the register of a blow, bring attention to what goes unsaid, the elderly woman is mostly in silence. She does not open her mouth. This lack of communication communicates all intents and purposes. The Elderly woman speaks in her mother tongue, which the officer could not understand. The officer raises many questions but the elderly woman does not answer. The reason here is the elderly woman hails from a mountain and she is not exposed to global language. Elderly woman could understand what they speak, but she could not reply.

Officer: Who did this? Who bit you?

Young Woman: A Doberman pinscher

Officer: Which one?

Pause

Officer: Which one?

Pause (Pinter, [9, p-342])

For the questions put to the elderly woman, the young woman answers.

Officer: Who did this?

Young Woman: A big dog.

Officer: What was his name?

Pause

Officer: What was his name?

Pause [9, p-342]

Pinter uses Pauses and Silence here in this juncture. He focuses a laser on the complex process of human interaction with a careful choice of words for absolute precision. He himself once said, "I think that we communicate all too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid." In his plays, political power, intimidation, and violence stem not from verbal confrontation, but from the utter devastation of staring into silence.

Pinter employs fairly plausible characters, for their real interest in how individuals survive in an absurd world. The significance of his move from original working class milieu towards a world of intellectual and professional middle class make him cultural icon in the 20th century. A few years later Pinter's writing transforms into overtly political plays which were actually a dream comes from for his generation. He transits from one direction to another because he knows that "wanted to get out in the world" [10]. Pinter was the only person who broadcast an anti-war programme for BBC at that point of time. The British council accepted him as a political playwright, after the introduction of his play in the world theatre. The play *Mountain Language* reached beyond the fences of world theatre and became part of the starkly politicized 1980's social and cultural scene.

POWER AND SUPPRESSION

Pinter has attempted to visualize the abuse of power by those who hold it in order to suppress and overpower the mountain people. Even though most of Pinter's plays describe the shadows of power exerted over individuals, *Mountain Language* is unique in rendering the distinctive features of power as well as the way in which people are treated by those in power. The researchers think that themes such as state power, abuse of power, control; violence and suppression may be more dominant in *Mountain Language* than in any other play by Pinter. This study will provide the readers with more knowledge about the relationship between Pinter's work and the socio-historical events of the time. Also, the way Pinter unfolds the appalling shadow and nature of power being practiced in society will be elaborated upon. Therefore, this paper targets those readers who are interested in Pinter's work and his world. Pinter's *Mountain Language* is a play about linguistic suppression.

Though Pinter wrote this play keeping in mind the specific suppression of global language into mountain people, it is a more universal play than any other. The play is acted in an unspecified prison of a capital, where speaking the mountain language is forbidden (Forbidden, forbidden, forbidden). This play shows two kinds of resistance to a barbaric politicization of language through the two female protagonists. The Elderly woman, who comes to visit her convicted son and keeps getting abused for using mountain language inside, decides not to speak her own language when at a later date the guard says that there is a change in the rules whereby she is now allowed to speak her own language. Here, the silence of the mother becomes an ethic of resistance to the ironic notion of linguistic freedom, which can only come from within the political power structure. On the other side, Sara Johnson, the wife of a convict comes into the prison to visit her husband and what she faces in the house is nothing but horror and sexual exploitation. The collapse of the 'hooded man', the confusion over the right chamber, the behaviour of the dog and finally the sexual pleasure she is bound to provide to the prison people in order to do something for her husband all speak volumes of Pinter's vision.

The military forces not only the physical strength of *incarceration* but also the ability to communicate beyond ethnic people, so that there is some distance, thus extending their authority beyond the minority. What is central to the military decree's ability to maintain the status quo of being in power is the ability to legislate a dialogue of subservience with the spaces beyond. The mountain people speak their own mother tongue. This is a neutral language. They are settled down in the mountain area. But the military could not accept to speak their language. They are expected to speak the capital language. Pinter's use of dialogue in *Mountain Language* focuses on the role that the military decree have in perpetuating systemic injustice on a broad scale.

CULTURE AND NATURE AS SYMBOLS

Pinter deals with culture and nature in his play *Mountain Language*, where he represents an ethnic group which has lost its dignity. A minority culture in a rural area is colonized and ill-treated by the capital. The capital's language disables the minority dialect. The play is set in a prison and the location is not specified. The play starts with a scene in which the Elderly woman and the Young woman are waiting to see their husband, son and father in the prison. The Elderly woman was speaking the mountain language. It was god's gift, and it was natural. In this situation, the capital suppresses the ethnic group by using iron hand and also they are not allowed to communicate using their native language. Pinter is a powerful voice in the public sphere. His voice is not a protest but a form of legitimacy that comes with being a member of the British establishment. He was a political writer; this situation has changed his way of writing. Pinter describes the political power that seeks to render knowledge that which evades the usual epistemological criteria. He is close to the complex interplay between the social, economic, and political spheres, as these penetrate the everyday life experiences of the subject. Though the institutionalization of regularity practices that produce particular subject and inhabit or constrain particularly others. *Mountain Language*, the title suggests that the military manipulation of information evades the language and the dignity of the ethnic people. The Sergeant talks with the voice of the military establishment. The Elderly women and Young women, symbol of suppression, are terrified and given a feeling of insecurity by the Sergeant through a language they do not understand. Pinter's preoccupation with language as a tool of distortion has never decreased. In this play, the abuse of language is at the core of oppression. He formulates the distinction between powerful capital language which is constructed around ideology, and the minority's acrostic language, which is power. The language of the capital is empowered to produce state controlled information and to destroy alternatives.

Mountain Language contains a more explicit example of the anxiety arising when the victimizer senses the possibility that he will come to inhabit the place of the victim. When a prison guard hits one of the visiting women for speaking to her son in the mountain language, the prisoner attempts to intercede: "She's old. She doesn't understand" ([9], p-345) the guard responds, casting the prisoner in the role of the other, but the opposition between the two men collapses as soon as the guard sets it in place [11, p-148].

Guard: Whose fault is that (if the mother doesn't understand the language of the capital)? (He laughs.) Not mine, I can tell you. And I'll tell you another thing. I've got a wife and three kids. And you're all a pile of shit. (Silence)

Prisoner: I've got a wife and three kids.

Guard: You've what? (Silence.) You've got what? (Silence.) What did you say to me? You've got what? (Silence.) You've got what? (He picks up the telephone and dials one digit) Sergeant? I'm in the Blue Room... yes...I thought I should report, Sergeant... I think I've got a joker in here.... (The sergeant comes in.) Sergeant: What joker? [9]

Pinter uses the two groups of culture. He could not mention both people from particular country or state. He presents one part of the people from military decree and another in the mountain area. There are various situations in the play where the mountain people are not given proper attention. In the play, the Elderly woman complains about the dogs bite to an officer in-charge. The officer in response belies the fact that they will do nothing about such complaints levied at the consequence of their power. In this situation the military decree shows their authority and carelessness on the local or mountain people. The Officer then continues to find identity by declaring to woman. "Now here this: You are mountain people. You hear me?" [9], p-348). The military decree considers the mountain people "other". Who are born on mountain, their language is different. The Military shows their authority to ethnic people. The officer, standing as a symbol of power, informs the ladies that only capital language is allowed to be spoken here. The word "other" is the nature of the textual utterance, the officers and guard occupies the authorial position of the verbal work. Williams [12] stresses that the dominant culture is very alert to anything which can be seen as new and different. The effort is immediately made to incorporate it. Capitalist society is especially vigilant in this regard. The relationship of the dominant culture to the residual and emergent elements of a culture is, clearly, a "temporal relationship". Indra Sinha [13] describes the word 'other', variously threat, responsibility, alter ego, and enigma to and of the self, has been a major preoccupation of Western thought. In recent times the figure of the other, hitherto silent and effaced, has made claims to speak, indeed to speak *back*, disrupting the realm of politics in radical ways: thus women, 'natives', minorities, deviants, subalterns, now claim to speak *as* others. Pinter deals with the Elderly woman as an "other". It is central to the creation of new cultural meaning. The military officer shows the authority to enable them to imprison whom they perceive to be the enemies of the law, since at their disposal is the power to effectively legislate the function of the mountain people's native language and, in effect colonize their ethnic identity. Pinter proclaims the above through the Officer's speech:

"Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your 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 law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language no longer exists" [9, p 343].

With the force of the military decree, they are not allowed to speak the native language "in this place", and by extension of their culture, the word 'dead' used three times in this paragraph. Michael Billington [14] criticizes the Officer's speech:

"The mountain language exists; it is dead. It is banished by military decree; it is banished by military law. You may not speak it. Through these contradictions, Pinter points up the arbitrary nature of classification. Pinter's statement in this play is that the officer gives all beyond contradiction for the sake of absurdity in that he is forcing an equivalency with each point. The military decree is effect, takes with it all the forces of deified authority, as "to forbid" becomes synonymous with "to extinguish".

Although Pinter carefully undermines the political and natural reference, in spite of the fact that the play is set in an unspecified totalitarian state, the numerous allusions to Lady Duck Muck. In the view of the sergeant, the mountain people are useless. But Pinter portrays that the mountain people have a unity and control of national consciousness. The light goes off. The prisoner and the Elderly woman were communicating themselves as: "I watch you sleep. And then your eyes open. You look up at me above you and smile" [9, p347]. The young woman answered: "You smile. When my eyes open I see you above me and smile". She repeated the same dialogue. This is a model of a possible idyllic counter society

where all the characters feel threatened, the only protection is found in pastoral language. However, the idea of nature as protection exists only in darkness; the hooded man is destroyed offstage and dragged off by the Guard. According to Frank Rich [15] in the play *Mountain Language*, language is the oppressors' weapon of choice. The fascist captors speak lies, scatology and double talk; the enemies of the state find their language has been declared dead and outlawed altogether. Only the victims' thoughts conveyed on tape can escape the reach of the decree. The suppression expressed in those ideas applied internally by the military decree and globally by forces which are sometimes restrained and sometimes savage, and Pinter indicates a worldwide system of oppression.

CONCLUSIONS

This world is concerned with the question of authority, abuse of power, violence, and suppression. Pinter states in the play *Mountain Language*, the mountain people are suppressed and dominated by the military decree. From the beginning till the end of the play, there are many situations where there are symbols of domination such as domination of power, domination of majority over minority, domination of language over language, etc. The word 'culture' is defined in the Pinteresque language as a study of non-urban society. Pinter uses language as a device to portray power and to classify mastery and slavism.

REFERENCES

1. Clark W. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. New York, 1929.
2. Pramod K. *Reading culture, theory, Praxis, Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt., Ltd., 2006.
3. John L. *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp 301-303
4. Raymond W. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 198
5. Cusac A. *Harold Pinter Interview*. www.progressive.org
6. Sharma R. *Dialectic of 'Pinteresque' in Harold Pinter's The Room*. *Muse India*. August 2009. (Vol. 26).
7. Harrison M. *The Language of Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
8. Brewer F. (ed). *Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter*. New York: Editions Rodopi, 2009.
9. Harold P. *The Essential Pinter*. London: Grove Press, 2006, pp-342-347
10. Gussow M. *Conversations with Pinter*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1994. Pp, 42.
11. Silverstein M. *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*. Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993, pp 148
12. Raymond W. *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory. Problem in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso, 1980
13. Sinha I. *Animal's People*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2007.
14. Michael B. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
15. Frank R. *A Pinter Double Bill of Evil and Bleakness*, *Theatre Review*. *The New York Times*, 1989.