



# Horror and Terror in Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*: A Posthuman Approach

Amirhossein Nemati Ziarati  
Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan  
Isfahan, Iran  
ahnemati@fg.ui.ac.ir

Mahdi Javidshad  
Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Arak University  
Arak, Iran  
m.javidshad@gmail.com

**Abstract**— The aim of the present paper is to study Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* employing a posthuman lens of investigation. In line with his other play, *One for the Road*, this play is also celebrated as one of the most paradigmatic examples of Pinter's political phase. *Mountain Language* is primarily concerned with the ways in which power relations occur and operate between the dominant agents of the State and the oppressed victims. This paper takes into consideration the posthuman situation as a fulcrum of its theoretical background which is mostly achieved through the prohibition of the native language of the subjugated people. All through this study, we will discuss the ways in which the world of Pinter's play divulges the indomitable power of language and how this mechanism can be employed as a forceful ideological apparatus to terrorize the play's characters.

**Keywords**- *terror, posthumanism, anti-humanism, decay of language, ideological supremacy.*

---



## 1. Introduction

In his famous one-act play *Mountain Language*, Pinter employs the dramatic space so as to explore the dialogic interaction that begets regimented and totalitarian control. The play's single act is divided into four short scenes which present the simple dialogic interactions that take place between the authoritarian power and its subjugated subjects. In lieu of one spiteful interrogator of *One for the Road*, the play's focus of concentration is directed towards numerous guards enforcing and inflicting the collective will of the State. Furthermore, instead of a specific imprisoned and restricted family, the focus is concentrated upon a number of imprisoned characters, with the principal focus of the play oscillating between the prisoners inside and their family members outside the walls trying ceaselessly to meet their loved ones. All over the play, two accounts are presented, one about an elderly woman coming from the mountainous area and endeavoring to see her son, and the other with a young lady endeavoring to see her husband. Both the elderly and young women do not originally belong to the mountains in question. In line with the action that vacillates between the places outside and inside the prison walls, Pinter makes judicious use of the rhetoric of repression supported by the oppressive State on stage.

The legislatures of the State control not only the physical sites of detention and incarceration centers but also the means to establish a communication beyond the confines of those carceral sites. As a result, this denotes that they extend the domains of the exertions of their power beyond the mere physical confines of the prison. The main issue that grants the oppressor the power and capability to maintain the current circumstance of staying in power and exercising its authority is nothing but its capability to create and instill in its subjects a discourse of docility and subservience within the places they hold sway over as well as what exists beyond. Consequently, while *One for the Road* is exclusively concerned with the cruelty and viciousness of state-enforced torment, *Mountain Language* outspreads this dialogue by concentrating on the role those authoritarian directorial strategies play in conserving total totalitarian power on an extensive scale.

## 2. Discussion and Analysis

Pinter's *Mountain Language* is another instance of the manifestation of the playwright's continuing dissertation on the thorny issue of posthuman situation springing from political authoritarianism. As pointed out and expressed in *One for the Road*, the play reflects this wider sense of posthumanism and social inequality by way of observing coercive domination as an issue of political strategy as opposed to an issue of personal actions. In



this manner, Pinter further blends the indistinct discrepancy between the personal and the political. As Inan remarks, like *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* represents “the horrors and dangers of life in totalitarian—or seemingly democratic but essentially authoritarian—countries” (199).

In comparison with *One for the Road*, Pinter’s *Mountain Language* examines farther the conflict between victimized and subjugated subjects in their posthuman situation and their oppressive rulers in their mercilessly tyrannical stance. This play beautifully depicts a powerful picture of free wills shorn of agency and the agonizing distress inflicted by despotic structures. Similar to a remarkable portion of his plays, Pinter is immersed in the threat that the despotic apparatuses of power exert over the less powerful, subaltern subjects; this engagement is portrayed in this play in its most direct manner. *Mountain Language* epitomizes the posthuman situations of people through the obliteration of personality and the decadence of language. The incidence of the victimized characters reflects the powerlessness of some people to retain and air their own voices in time of the Holocaust (see Kremer 950).

In his seminal paper titled “Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language*,” the American theatre director and author, Carey Perloff analyzes the play. According to her discussions, within the linguistic fabric of the play, language acts an apparatus for enforcing subjugation and domination and thus, the narrations become the only means of effectuating communication. Within the anti-humanistic background of the work, communication is prohibited, and oppression ensues with the failure and decadence of language (15).

### 2.1. Ideological Role of Language

In this theatrical small-scale version, the “owners of language” employ language so as to exert supremacy over those who have been robbed of their agency with a kind of antagonism. The state agents harass and persecute those who are going to see their families and notify them that only the language of the Capitol is permitted to be used. The women do not have the ability to speak the language of the Capitol and when they persist in speaking their own language, they receive corporal punishment. The women are coercively silenced and gagged because of the terror and heinousness of what the merciless guards may do to them. When a guard informs an old woman that she is permitted to speak in her own language again, that old woman who has long been persecuted and silenced feels too distraught and traumatized to say anything at all, being conscious of the fact that when her



language is “granted to her,” it is unusable. Through this consciousness, the old woman has grown into a subjugated prey of the guards (Carey Perloff 2).

The approach of *One for the Road* is to effectuate a purely terrible effect, whereas *Mountain Language* is possibly, sadder, more miserable, and more pessimistic. This notion is best investigated by Charles Grimes in his work “A Silence Beyond Echo”:

The oppression *Mountain Language* dramatizes is a matter of governmental policy, not the cruel whims of one individual. The theme, atmosphere, and experience of *Mountain Language* intensify those of *One for the Road*. Pinter indicts abusive power more generally, depicting the bureaucratic machinery of torture. By featuring a wider vision of a repressive regime, Pinter illustrates a wider level of its function; in contrast to *One for the Road*, which centers on the villainy of one extraordinary person, *Mountain Language* illuminates an extensive apparatus of ethnic and political repression. (89)

One more remarkable difference between *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* is that posthuman situation is achieved *through* language in *One for the Road*, whereas this state is realized *through* and *with* language in *Mountain Language*. In other words, in *Mountain Language*, it is both the straightforward employment of a compulsory language and an intimidating way of the employment of language that bring about posthuman condition. As well as the issue of language, Pinter employs other innovative approaches to convey and publicize the anti-humanistic situation he has in mind:

*Mountain Language* is stylistically and formally distinct not only from Pinter’s full-length plays but even from its immediate predecessor *One for the Road*. Pinter pushes his drama structurally towards postmodernism, with surface characters and abbreviated, disrupted narratives. As personalities, none of the characters in *Mountain Language* are psychologically developed as characters such as Lenny, Goldberg, or Mick in *The Caretaker*. Pinter does not want the figures in *Mountain Language* to exert psychological fascination upon audience. He attempts to minimize the predominance of character in his political plays. In this sense, Pinter’s political theater moves in the direction of Brechtian techniques (Grimes 92).

The employment of “Brechtian techniques” denotes that Pinter is no longer keen on evoking the sympathetic feelings of his viewers. In effect, he is keen on a type of viewer who chills out and takes it easy and



yet censoriously looks at the posthuman condition that happens before a live audience. In order to attain it, in *Mountain Language* “depth of character is replaced by something like Brecht’s concept of *gestus*, in which ‘character’ is nothing more than the expression of historical location and power status through action. People behave the way they do because of their position in society and the purpose of this behavior being to preserve asymmetries of power and privilege” (Grimes 92).

Back to the issue of language, it should be stated that from the very inception of the play, the state exercises and vindicates the merciless and ideological exertion of its power through the apparatus of language. In the first scene of the play, it is nothing but the ideological discourse concocted and manipulated by the State that gives oppressively authoritarian authority the freedom to enjoy plenary dominance. The women who are outside the prison walls are querulous about the fact that throughout the long time they have been waiting to visit their incarcerated family members, one of the guard dogs has brutally attacked an Elderly Woman’s hand. Similar to most of Pinter’s plays, whereas the real ferocity and brutality of the dog bite happens behind the scenes, the abstract ferocity and violence of their situations happen by means of the verbal and linguistic communication between the Guards and the Elderly Woman. After demonstrating their discontentment, an officer asks the Elderly Woman to air her grievance. After narrating the account of what had happened, the officer asks for more material from them about the dog:

What was his name?

*Pause.*

What was his name?

*Pause*

Every dog has a name! They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their *name*. Before they bite, they *state* their name. It's formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite. What was his name? If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name, I will have that dog shot!

These lines palpably denote a posthuman condition springing from the critical issue of identity. As said by Penelope Prentice, in contrast to the dogs who are said to have names, “the men being tortured and women waiting in line to see them remain nameless. The point of the sergeant’s repeatedly requesting the women’s



names serve only to remind them that they have none” (286). Such a doubtful query has no lucid answer, and palpably the officer does not expect to receive one. Nonetheless, in the anti-humanistic discourse concocted and adopted by the system, “formal procedure” resolutely commands that this is a genuine and credible statement made by the agents of the state.

In effect, his answer ideologically conceals the fact that they will actually do nothing about such oppositions and protests aired and directed against the corollaries of their power. Furthermore, they are supported by the legalized rehearsal of “formal procedure.” They and the dog were not conceivably permitted commit anything erroneous. Correspondingly, by posing an insoluble question, the women realize that their chances are very low either for the ruthless attack or for their incarcerated families. Consequently, the discourse concocted by the oppressive system, having a signification just within the constitutional concern by the officer, is by now bound for robbing the residents outside the confines of the prison of their agency, autonomy and liberty, people who essentially have no right or lawfulness for the governmental agents.

## 2.2. The Mechanisms of Enforcing Terror: An Ideological State Apparatus

From the perspective of the system, irrespective of the actuality or fallaciousness of the attack, it is most possibly the women themselves who are at fault and responsible, because it would be seemingly inconceivable for one of their dogs (or even all their dogs) to intrude upon “formal procedure” and wound someone’s hand without giving its name. In reality, it is the system that renders a ridiculous rationality seem rational and justifiable. Here, the result is a posthuman condition which emerges as a consequence of the assurance that exists for the dogs and is absent for the citizens’ entitlements and prerogatives.

This procedure of commanding and restrictive control is further shown in the first scene, as the Officer designates ethnocentrism as central plan of the system. First, they proclaim that those who have been incarcerated “are enemies of the State. They are shithouses” (???). correct and appropriate choice of words is of prime importance because the lawful and the blasphemous come to be intertwined within the authoritative and discursive structure of the system, resourcefully making the terms identical to one another. Not only are their men conniving plotters in a purely legalized sense, they are also overtly objectionable in all matters. Then, in another injunction which brings about another posthuman condition, the Officer grants authoritatively another identity by telling the women: “Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me?” (???). Again, decreeing



and instilling intimidation (“You hear me?”) is another political tactic for the state. The name ‘mountain people’ defines the terrestrial battle between the guards of the prison building and the inhabitants of the countryside mountain society. By trying his best to hail them as “mountain people,” the officer brings about a posthuman condition by establishing the hostile antagonism between the State and anyone viewed as adversative to its communal identity. The women escorted by their families inside are momentarily branded as “Other” to the extraordinary totalitarian agency of the reigning system.

The Guards and Officers assume and occupy the ruling position whereby in horrifying the mountain people and branding them as a cohesive Other, their condition of totalitarian oppressive agency is also, in turn, specified. At the same time as the system exerts a coercive corporal power that makes it defensible to incarcerate those who they deem to be the treacherous foes of the State, it also exerts the domineering power to efficaciously implement the purpose of the mountain people’s native language and, in final examination, take possession of and colonize their disintegrated racial identity. This is most clearly understood in the way the Officer speak to the Women:

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.

These lines most clearly and palpably denote a posthuman situation imposed and instilled by means of dread. The horrifying consequence (“You will be badly punished”) in case of using the citizens’ native language, a language claimed to be no longer present, is the greatest point of the posthuman condition in the play. The issue of language in *Mountain Language* leaves us with crucial inquiries into and about the anti-humanistic comportment of reigning classes, specifically the procedures through which they try to legalize, decriminalize or rationalize their inhumane comportment. As Stephen Watt has remarked, the declarations of the system are reasonably contradictory and do not have cogent and coherent foundation: if the mountain language is gone and deceased, efforts to make it outlaw are then unproductive and look pointless (109).



If the system validates and rationalizes its colonizing and monopolizing behavior by means of the power of language which is clearly deceiving, how can it win the concurrence or backing from its people? The unreasonableness and ludicrousness of the system's outward explanations and validations for suppressing the mountain-people marginal groups exceeds this ludicrous absurdity of outlawing a decayed and decrepit language. As Grimes remarks, the foundations for bias and directorial action against this marginal group are "arbitrary, loose, fungible, shifting, and syncretically accepting of self-contradiction" (93). The principal prohibition against the employment of mountain language seems to be "schizophrenically both a military decree and a law, a condition the Officer highlights rather than minimizes. The distinction between dictate and legislation belongs to a world that cares about logical and intellectual niceties – not to this one" (ibid).

This previous aforesaid quoted passage from *Mountain Language* is also analyzed by Mark Taylor-Batty. In his seminal work *Harold Pinter*, he reflects upon and studies the reasons why mountain language is proscribed:

This list of accumulating tautologies reveals the ruthless absolutism of the regime in power, as well as the ironic lifelessness of the language of authority. Depriving a people of their mother tongue is the most effectively suppressive act of control over that people, and indicative of an intolerant, even genocidal logic. Here is the kernel of Pinter's concern: the state oppression of ethnic identities (or any minorities) that do not conform with the visions of the ruling ideology. The consequences of such brutal logic are played out in the following scenes in which we witness the separation of two couples: the old woman and her son, and the young woman and her husband (107).

### 2.3. Posthuman Condition and the Deterioration of Native Language

In his observation, Taylor-Batty touches upon the notion of the posthuman condition brutally inflicted upon characters, an infliction which mainly exerted through the employment of language. Dismayed and disturbed by the horrifying potency of military injunction, not only are the residents not allowed to speak in their native language "in this place", but also, by extension, their culture, too, is deemed to be decayed and decrepit. The terrorizing reigning system holds for itself a self-asserted prerogative and entitlement to dictate the proscription, to enforce the regulation and, if those were not adequate, to brand their identity obsolete and deceased. Numerous critics such as Michael Billington remark that the Officer's commentaries and injunctions are riddled





with inconsistencies: “The mountain language exists; it is dead. It is banished by military decree; it is banished by law. You may not speak it; you cannot speak it. Through these contradictions, Pinter points up the arbitrary nature of classification” (311).

This anti-humanistic condition represented by Pinter has an overtly ideological and political consequence behind it. In reality, the decreeing verdict, as referred to by the Officer, carries with it all the hegemonic supremacy and domination of sacred power, as “to forbid” turns out to be equal to “to extinguish”. The suppression of the language is an emblematic act bringing about and breeding other kinds of posthumans. Perceived in this manner, the regulations present in the prison become the laws of the space prevailing outside its confines. In other words, the rule about the language is the rule about space in which it is present and exercised.

By forbidding the citizens’ native language “in this place”, the Officer further highlights the mountain people’s segregation from the larger despotic reigning system, or he takes them further to posthuman condition and this is highlighted specifically by the terrorizing dread that the State tries to enforce. Dissimilar from their families inside, the women may not be branded as “enemies of the State.” Nevertheless, they are outside-the-wall incarcerated people whose destiny is combined and unified for the reason that their inborn identity has been seen antithetical to the despotic reigning system. If they want the chance of setting foot inside the prison, they have to suppress their own native language, and in the final breakdown their own identities as well, and blindly adopt their newly given identities as commanded by the reigning supreme system exercising hegemony and control. With this anti-humanistic condition, the women are left with no option but to give up and eventually have their native identities taken possession of and destroyed by the degrading acts off the inhumane State.

The imprint of this injunction and decree on language can also be perceived in the “visitor’s room” of the second scene. The Elderly Woman who was previously attacked by the dog without name comes to her son and proclaims, “I have bread—.” After that the woman makes use of her own native language, the Guard hits her with a stick and yells: “Forbidden. Language forbidden... ..It’s forbidden. Tell her to speak the language of the capital.” The incarcerated son makes every effort to apprise the Guard that “she can't speak it” (Pinter, *Plays 4* 258). For a second time, the woman tells her son: “I have apples—” (Pinter, *Plays 4* 259). Once more, the Guard reminds her with the stick of the prohibited language and yells: “Forbidden! Forbidden, forbidden,



forbidden! Jesus Christ! (*To Prisoner*) Does she understand what I'm saying?" (Pinter, *Plays 4* 259). The incarcerated son replies, "No" (Pinter, *Plays 4* 259).

Robbed of the ability and facility to speak their own native language, they have no other means of communication, except the silent observations that the viewers can listen to which may insinuate what they are thinking to one another (probably a reference to an inner language that the army cannot completely subvert). The use of the night-stick draws an equivalent with the savagery and ferocity inherent in such despotic, dictatorial and anti-humanistic State that denies its residents the fundamental and rudimentary exhibition of their identity. Here, the playwright specifies that in order for the mountain people to be a member of the society and the State, they must reject their own individual identity, culture, language and origin and either learn the language of the anti-humanistic, sovereign State, or simply remain silenced and subjugated subalterns. If they do not have the capability to speak the language of the reigning system, they have no other option but to remain silenced and subjugated—a silence which in fact implies compliance, acquiescence, discards rebellion and humiliates and debases the Other. In the previous instance, the principal character of anti-humanism is the old woman. As a matter of fact, since she is an illustrative example of the mountain people, by default, she is not able to enjoy any open autonomous power of speech within the mechanisms and layers of the reigning system. Then, the crux of this moment is not only in the violent suppression and decadence of the language itself, but also in the demonstration and exertion of the State's supremacy to regulate the import, denotation and background of language to contribute to its own anti-humanistic agendas.

Hypothetically, the decree to reject and subdue their language spreads out into the personal oratory and expression of the family. Following teasing the old woman's inability to speak in the language of the reigning system, there appears a discourse being exchanged between the Guard and the Inmate:

Guard. 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?

ششمین کنفرانس ملے  
علوم انسانے و آموزش و پرورش بامحوریت توسعه پایدار

6<sup>th</sup> National Conference on  
Humanities and Education With a focus on sustainable development  
www.mpconf.ir



*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.

Sergeant. What Joker?

*Blackout*

This final extract is the final knock of the posthuman condition on the mother and the son as executed by the State. As said by John Lutterbie, the mother's disposition to silence and quietude serves as an act of resistance, opposing Authority in "a space defining the interface of opposites" (qtd. in Inan 208). Conversely, her silence, the Inmate's breakdown, and the Sergeant's derision insinuated the final uselessness and pointlessness of resistance to Terry Eagleton, who said Pinter's distinguished silence had become "The muteness of a whole people" (qtd. in Inan 208). In *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*, D. Keith Peacock alludes to the son losing his voice as "like Stanley after his interrogation by Goldberg and McCann, he is deprived of speech. Both literally and metaphorically the deprivation of language represents the abandonment of individual resistance and conformity to the will of the state" (143).

The son's state of fear and revulsion also reminds the viewers of the response of Victor in *One for the Road* (whose voice is blemished because of having his tongue severed) to the news of his son's theoretical death at the end of the play. Depriving them from interacting with each other has the consequence of breaking the connections of family itself. The Son's posthuman state of horror is his unconscious reaction to understanding the high extent of his isolation and to being completely and utterly alone. As made known above, as an image of the Capital-state's complacent and self-righteous contempt for the ramifications of their despotically anti-humanistic policies, the Sergeant responds to the mother's silence and her son's appeals: "Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up. *Blackout*" (Pinter, *Plays 4 267*).



### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be taken into consideration that Pinter's *Mountain Language* portrays the anti-humanistic condition of the subjugated people when it comes through their apparently unfair detainment and proscription of their native language and cultural heritage. Enmeshed in an administrative carceral system, the characters are terrified, terrorized and mercilessly dragged into posthuman condition, only because they are speaking in their native language. In this play, Pinter liberates himself from the "room": "There' a room in *Mountain Language*, but there is also a corridor. What I was talking about was freeing myself" (Pinter and Gussow 78). And the characteristic consistency of hiatuses and silences of the early plays such as *Birthday Party* advances into an openly politically-informed discourse. When Pinter was charged with relying on the crude and to shock, both in *One for the Road* and in *Mountain Language*, he responded by repudiating, reaffirming that his only purpose in these plays was to explicate on the pictures that came into his mind. But by 1988, as stated by Sue Summers, he was finding some of these pictures horrendous: "So they shock me into life, and into the act of writing. He believed that *Mountain Language*, with its poetic economy, 'simply does something'" (qtd. in Inan 211).



## References

- [1] Austin E. Quigley, "The Language Problem" Critical Essays on Harold Pinter ed, . Steven H. Gale (Boston: K.G Hall & Co., 1990).
- [2] Billington, Michael. "The Evil that Men Do". The Guardian: June 2001.
- [3] Burkman, Katherine H. *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971.
- [4] Grimes, Charles. *Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence beyond Echo*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005.
- [5] Inan, Dilek. *The City and Landscapes Beyond Harold Pinter's Rooms*. PhD Dissertation. University of Warwick. 2000.
- [6] Peacock, D. Keith. *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*. Westport: Praeger, 1997.
- [7] Pinter, Harold, and Mel Gussow. *Conversations with Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- [8] Pinter, Harold, and Harold Pinter. *The Birthday Party: And the Room; Two Plays*. [Book Club ed. New York: Grove, 1960.
- [9] Pinter, Harold. *Mountain Language*. Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 1988.
- [10] Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic (Studies in Modern Drama)*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2000.
- [11] Taylor-Batty, Mark. *Harold Pinter*. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2010.
- [12] Watt, Stephen Myers. *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998.