

The Culmination of Authoritarianism and Individual Freedom in Harold Pinter's *One for the Road*

Dr. Ishan Gairola

Gairola Sadan, Charlvelley
Road Mussoorie,
Uttarakhand, India

Abstract

Traditionally related with absurdism, Harold Pinter's name, in the later phase of his life was a byword for anti-authoritarian and anti-American politics. He was an outspoken and passionate vocal critic of political and social hypocrisy. His political views even distorted the British Literary Establishment. Being a critique of an inward looking society, which prefers disengagement, he firmly believed that politics and literature are parts of a whole. The present paper focuses on Pinter's view about world politics and its consequences on global citizens. The play, *One for the Road*, symbolically demonstrates the view that the modern world is a cruel place to live in, as all our individuality and democratic freedom are bound by legal laws, societal-restrictions and political amendments, in it.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Individual Freedom, Humanity, Politics, Realism

Introduction:

The important aspect of Pinter's writing is, that with the passage of each decade there has been a confirmed shift in his work. A sharp move is obvious in his writings from his pre-1970 plays (East London) to his post-1970 plays (North London), viz. from menace to politics. The swift shift, from the original working class milieu, towards a world of intellectual and professional middle class culture made him a cultural icon in the 1980s. The unconquerable entities of the earlier plays stand brutally ruptured in that decade. Pinter's political plays written after the 1980s express his poetic consciousness as an objective analysis of the urban phenomena, illustrating the towns to be working as modulators. It was this decade (1980s) when the dramatist's 'metaphorical' political engagement reached its peak, as he explored the social and cultural locale of the time, in accordance with the working of the state authority and political regimes. While gaining a profound understanding of the politics of the decade, Pinter also explored the new tracks into realism. Pinter personally felt that his plays dealt

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

with the individual at the mercy of a certain authoritarian system. He said: “These plays, all of them, are to do, not with ambiguities of power, but actual power.” (Gussow152) As an eminent critic of the bourgeois civilization, Pinter took an initiative to present complex reflections of the dark side of the Western imagination. His plays, in their core reflect the way, the established norms of society, project images, on to individuals. Moreover, the political play fantasizes the world ‘abroad’ with regard to ‘no man’s land’, with an enormous and historically relevant objective reality. His plays explore a culture of conception of the ‘other’, the need, as well as the terror of it.

One for the Road, a brief play, of four scenes, was first performed at Lyric Studio, Hammersmith, in London on 13th March, 1984. The play paved the way for Pinter’s first major success as a political dramatist as it was critically acclaimed by the major critics all around the world. The piece of art resembles Pinter’s earlier theatrical works in terms of ambiguity in language and the inner struggle of the characters in the modern society. But the play in its essence is a brutal-sadistic drama, where action is not directly presented on stage, but through insinuation to violence and cruelty, that occur off stage.

Initially, Pinter was compelled to write the play during a visit to Turkey in 1984. In an interview with Gussow, Pinter discloses the incident that immediately led to the writing of this play. He recalls the casual meeting with the two Turkish girls in a party, where he asked them about the widespread notion of torture, in the Turkish prisons. On enquiry, one of the girls coldly replied, “Well, they’re probably communists” (87), referring to the tortured people. At this Pinter got so annoyed that he immediately left the party. He went back to the hotel and wrote *One for the Road*, the very same night order to provide an outlet to his anger.

The play opens with Nicolas, an authoritarian dictator, sitting on a chair confronting his intellectual inmate, Victor, who has been arrested with his wife and son, for an unknown reason. Victor’s absolutist state, the state which affirms his monopoly of power through the control of discursive and repressive apparatus, is beautifully depicted here. Nicolas savagely distorts and annihilates the emotional and moral ties of Victor’s family by raping the mother wife? and executing the son. Victor, being an intellectual/academic personage, is considered unfit for the authoritarian system. He is, therefore, doomed to face the pain of death, ignominy of imprisonment and mental and social abasement, in the eyes of the state.

In the final scene of the play, Victor poignantly mutters some words questioning about his son. His last words: “My Son” (Pinter Plays 247) convey a deep feeling of despair, anguish, and regret. Whereas, Nicolas being devoid of any humane compassion sarcastically remarks: “Oh, don't worry about him. He was a little prick.” (Pinter Plays 247) The syntax of Nicolas’ final affirmation reflects a deep, horrible, fact that Nicky does not exist anymore. Hence, Victor being enslaved by the cruel circumstances, is brought to ultimate physical and psychological destruction. The character of Nicolas symbolically portrays the agents of

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

totalitarian establishments who deny people their basic human rights. To establish their basic ideologies and principles they torture and imprison men to extreme limits.

However, Victor's gaze at Nicolas towards the end of the play reminds us of Nicolas' preoccupation with the eyes. Victor's sharp look reflects his nausea; which is too little to express in words. Whereas, for Nicolas the hideous look of Victor, is no more than an expression of a collapsed defeated man. He hardly pays any attention on the deep agonizing look of Victor's dolorous countenance. Nicolas being blind-folded of ever changing and ever elusive power is unable to fathom out the Victor, who though destroyed, cannot be defeated. Thus, Nicolas' malicious intention to defeat Victor mentally and spiritually, pathetically fails.

Conclusion

One for the Road marks its end with a typical, 'pinteresque', silence. The technique is often used by the dramatist to manifest, that the intensive thought-process is carried on while implicit conflicts mount. The play in its essence enunciates a refusal to communicate with an antagonistic world. On a realistic level, the play demonstrates the political ambiguities, their manipulation and cruelty, on the millions of people living on the planet, Earth, whereas, it literally, fills the mind of the audience with despair and its heart with disgust. *One for the Road* propagates the dramatist's message that human rights, innocence and justice are violated by the crude and barbarous political authorities, all across the world. Symbolically, the play is a threatening alarm, against the current political establishments in the world, which intellectuals and society adamantly refuse to perceive.

Works Cited

- Gussow, Mel. *Conversation with Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1996. Print.
- Pinter, Harold. *One for the Road*. London: Methuen, 1985. Print.
- Achebe, Chinua. *The African Writer and the English Language*. Morning Yet on Creation Day. London: Heinemann, 1975. 18. Print.
- Aragay, Mireia. 'Writing, Politics and Ashes to Ashes: an interview with Harold Pinter'. *Pinter Review*. The University of Tampa Press, 1995-96. 4-15. Print.
- Billington, Michael. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996. 294. Print.