

# Silence of the Subaltern as Civil Disobedience in Harold Pinter's Mountain Language

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the notion of silence as representing civil disobedience in Harold Pinter's Mountain Language (1988). It argues that the old woman character in the play, who visits her imprisoned son, represents the figure of the speaking subaltern. The play's portrayal of the subaltern's rejection of the state oppression lies in Paulo de Medeiros' argument that literature itself is a domain of resistance in the face of discrimination. The paper thus examines the act of the woman – mainly performed in an intentional manner – in Mountain Language in the light of David Thoreau's arguments, in his Civil Disobedience – over the ideas of disobedience in a civil manner. The elderly woman, therefore, protests the state's policy of commanding by means of silence, a performative act putting Spivak's argumentation on the subaltern's inability to speak in dialogue and at question. The elderly woman correspondingly encapsulates the notion of resistance move and rejection in the face of commanding authorities and suppressive governments. The subaltern's silence is explored as being a matter of choice to annul the state's systematic domination as exercised by the so-called superior groups. The paper therefore argues that the formula of silence is a reference to a new form of outspokenness; it is both a peaceful form of resilience and is an empowered space for the oppressed thereby expressing their rejection to the state's divine laws.

**KEY WORDS:** Civil Disobedience, Language, Resistance Silence, Subaltern

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Following his return from Turkey in 1985 and witnessing Kurdish language denial back then, Harold Pinter was inspired to write *Mountain Language*, indicating that the play was thus rooted from the real political background. The play depicts the political reality of oppression and repression targeting many social or ethnic groups worldwide. It is not only about the Kurds, while at the same time the work itself promotes the rise of an alternative reality to the state's autocratic policy. It proposes a peaceful method of resistance to the state repression and suppression through theatrical performances. Given this political reality, Pinter (1988) states:

*In 1985 I went to Turkey with Arthur Miller, on behalf of International PEN to investigate the situation of writers in Turkey, which was pretty deplorable in fact. It was a very vivid and highly illuminating trip in a number of ways. One of the things I learnt while I was there was about the real plight of the Kurds: quite simply that they're not really allowed to exist at all and certainly not allowed to speak their language. For example, there's a publisher who wrote a history of the Kurds and was sent to prison for 36 years for simply writing a history of the Kurds.*

Pinter, thus, demonstrates that suppression of Kurdish language and ethnic denial were inspirational in writing his *Mountain Language*. Even though Kurds act as 'the springboard', the play is not merely about the political relationship between Kurds and Turks, but, as Pinter (1988) further contends, about the historical policy practiced by many state governments to prohibit the languages of specific ethnic groups. He, therefore, states that the play was written for many banned languages such as Kurdish, Irish, Welsh, Estonian, Urdu and the Basques' language. Despite this, it does not deny the fact that Kurdish language denial and ethnic suffering were obvious practices by the state during the time Pinter wrote his play, whereby the Kurds can be considered as the best example about whom this play was produced. As in other occasions, Pinter notes that historically

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS), Volume 5, Issue 1, 2022.

Received 24 Apr 2022; Accepted 16 Aug 2022,

Regular research paper: Published 30 Jun 2022

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speaking, Kurdish language was subject to repression along with ill treatment of the Kurds in detention centers: "It is only recently that the Kurds were allowed to speak their own language in public [...]. Torture is, in fact, commonplace, particularly in police stations" (Pinter, 1999). The linkage between language denial and torture inside detention centers are conspicuously connected and inseparable in Pinter's words made in 1999, eleven years following his *Mountain Language* publication. The play's characters, meanwhile, are British who have English names. This showcases Pinter's attempt of universalizing the notion of repression, denial of existence and rejection of "the Other" by - nationalist and racialized - states. This makes the play a global theatrical performance, a space where every individual can have their say and opinion about the sufferings of others wherever and whenever the figure of the oppressed are.

This article, therefore, links the experience of the subaltern - against the state policies mentioned above - with the act of silence as a matter of choice and resilience. Meanwhile, such connectiveness between language denial, torture, and rejection to speak, as portrayed in the play, is a praxis to analyze the method of the state policy of language repression that creates a reflexively reverse atmosphere whereby the characters in the play use this denial as a means of peaceful disobedience. Hereby, the elderly woman character in the play attempts to reimagine the historical praxis of state's linguistic denial in a way that *not speaking* itself is a performance of speaking and silence is an act of resilience, and resistance. She therefore turns the dream of prison guards - who are the practitioners of the state policy's ban of the existential subjecthood of the other - stillbirth. Correspondingly, this article further maintains that the elderly woman's act of *objection through silence* resembles that of Rosa Parks, the American civil rights activist, who refused to leave her bus seat for a white person that led to a peaceful campaign against segregation and racial treatment in 1955-56 in the US.

## 2. MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

This research refers to *Mountain Language* as a pure act of resistance by means of playing the role of an active domain in embodying rejection in the face of the state denial. Previous studies have been conducted about this play as mainly arguing that Pinter's work could be interpreted as being written for employing the notion of resistance or they have examined the concept of subaltern as being reflected in the play. In her article, "'Your Language is Forbidden": Language Negation as Political Oppression in Pinter's *Mountain Language*", Andrew Goodspeed argues that there is *probability* in

interpreting Pinter's *Mountain Language* as an act of resistance. The interpretation of the play's depiction of the language denial, as being a plateau of resistance, can refer to the oppression. She clearly states:

*Pinter leaves her silence more ambiguous than that interpretation permits. [...] The silence is intended to be uninterpretable, perhaps implying the resistance of nonconformity (as advocated by Hollis-Merritt) or, with equal plausibility, a fearful compliance with linguistic prohibition, even when that prohibition has been lifted. It may be that, even when the restriction on the mountain language is lifted, she is simply too scared to speak a word. The point is one of importance, as upon it depends one's interpretation of the conclusion of the play: either her willful silence suggests a hopeful individuality and willingness to persevere against oppression, or it is the result of complete linguistic capitulation before language prohibition. (Goodspeed, 2019, p. 27)*

For Goodspeed, two possibilities exist in conceiving Pinter's aim in demonstrating the notion of resistance; one is that of ambiguity and that of being uninterpretable. This shows that for Goodspeed this silence may not definitely refer to resistance; there is uncertainty in considering this act of silence as such. Moreover, she further contends that the elderly woman's not speaking her mountain language even after lifting the ban shows her fear of using her language. In his short article, 'Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*: A Subaltern Approach' (2021), Ram Pal Yadav attempts to examine the subaltern in Pinter's *Mountain Language*. He refers to the concept of the subaltern from the point of view that the play depicts the reality of the oppressive and dictatorial governments against the powerless groups, who embody subalternity and how the tyrannical policy makers render the excluded groups the voiceless subalterns. Amany El-Sawy, in her paper, 'Eloquent Silence in Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*' (2019), examines the code of silence, as a technique in Pinter's *Mountain Language*. She explores that silence in Pinter's play acts as a means of communication between the state and the elderly woman character - the latter represents mountain people - and also between the oppressed characters in the play. Furthermore, she investigates that the silence of the woman represents the denial of the mountain people's language. For the researcher, there is probability that silence represents 'the death of the mountain language' (p. 370). Even though the researcher argues that speaking is a probability of 'follow[ing] the rules of, and thus to succumb to, the regime of the city' (Ibid., p.373), she later notes that it is more an option that this silence is 'the negative power of withdrawal' and is an indicator of the old woman's defeat (Ibid.).<sup>1</sup> In another article entitled 'Culture and Nature in Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*' (2013), C. Vairavan examines the notions of power and suppression in

Pinter's *Mountain Language* and the way silence represents repression. He refers to resistance in the old woman's silence that is 'an ethnic resistance to the ironic notion of linguistic freedom' (2013, p. 13). However, he does not elaborate on the political disobedience to the state policy through this silence but only refers to the suppression. Vairavan, in another short study titled 'Communicative Silence: A Cross-Cultural Study of Pinter's *Mountain Language*', refers to "the significance of silence in human communication", while not examining the significance of silence as a new means of civil disobedience in the face of state racism, rejection of "the Other" and oppression. The author only analyzes the play from linguistic perspectives. (2018, p. 160). In the meantime, an article review by Francis Gillen, 'From chapter ten of the dwarfs to *Mountain Language*: the continuity of Harold Pinter' (1988), refers to the legacy of Harold Pinter; Gillen provides a possibility whereby the elderly woman's final silence could be a method of disobedience (p.4). However, the writer does not fully provide an analytical certainty that her silence is an absolute act of the resistant spirit.

The current paper, therefore, attempts to cast out ambiguities about the resistance move proposed by *Mountain Language* thereby arguing that the elderly woman's silence is not out of fear and obedience to the state rule, but is an absolute courageous peaceful demonstration towards the state's randomly irrational decision in banning and allowing speaking subjects of specific languages as a means of spreading its hegemony over the excluded groups. The elderly woman thus gains her own identity by creating self-dependency; she - not the state - decides to keep silent thereby allowing her own self the green light to break the silence in case she wanted to speak.

*Mountain Language* is part of resistance literature. Pinter portrays the notional view of resistance to nation-statehood oppressions and exclusionary discourse(s). However, the resistance literature this article refers to with reference to Pinter's work takes on a different form, and a broader sense, compared to that outlined by Barbara Harlow's arguments as discussed in her book *Resistance Literature*. Resistance literature, Harlow (1987, p. xvii) contends, is 'a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.' She also defines this type of literary body as a parallel to armed struggles for liberation and considers national language as playing effective role in writing resistance literature (Ibid., p. xviii). However, this study treats the notion of resistance as enjoying more liberty and a broader agreement in a way that *Mountain Language* was written by a British writer who represents a global voice and a universal agent whose work still acts as a tool for

resistance in the face of the states' colonial policies. Pinter's attempt by portraying the plight of others turns him empathetic and represents every single repressed voice worldwide. He travels beyond the boundaries set by Harlow in defining resistance literature; Pinter, and his *Mountain Language's* oppressed characters, are citizens of the world, acting as members of all excluded social groups. Being written in English language, therefore, renders *Mountain Language* as stepping beyond the idea that nations and peoples should only use their native languages to resist the systems of domination through their creative writings. The approach adopted by Pinter is correspondingly humanistic, reiterating Paulo de Medeiros' remark that 'literary representation' and 'the poetic voice' stand in the face of sovereignty as a means of 'denounc[ing] the abuses of power that constantly threaten to engulf human societies' (Medeiros, 2003, p. 82). Confining Harlow's definition of resistance literature (Harlow, 1998) to works produced only during 'organized resistance movements and national liberation struggles' for being 'a very site and history specific literature' sounds harmful to the pervasive impact of *resistance* itself. As Medeiros puts it, 'resistance' cannot be treated as an isolated constituent; it loses its meaning when Harlow's explanation is applied: 'Clearly, all poetry, all literature, is site and history specific' (Ibid., p. 83). Given Medeiros' reflection on the notion of literature in general, Pinter's attempt is a site of resistance whenever and wherever it takes place.

This paper thus employs this interpretation of the notion of resistance literature on Pinter's *Mountain Language* in a way that puts the play as being an imaginative vehicle whereby the modern state is expressed, nationalist narratives interrogated, and nation-state's oppressive policy reimaged. The play therefore refutes and stands against the state nationalism's idealistic formation of the nation that only one language - as a cursor of hegemonic group's identity - represents the state. *Mountain Language* is consequently a representative of the *postnational*, it critiques the fixed ideals of nationhood that the nation is a home for the dominant ethnicity, race, group or elite. Pinter's play, however, does not merely fight one method of oppression and, meanwhile, is distinct from national projects of nation-making. For Grabner and Wood (2010 p. 8), the 'work of art' is an 'act of resistance' by the writer, this is a means of establishing a network of resistance through others' readings of his/her works; 'author and reader' can together give birth to a powerful tool of resistance. The play, thus, performs an act of resistance by means of witnessing and documenting the histories and methods of nation-state oppressions worldwide. These histories and methods of oppressions, as demonstrated in *Mountain Language*, inspire Pinter to



produce his work following his travel to Turkish prisons in 1985.

Meanwhile, the notion of silence – as a symbol of resistance – is not only confined to unintended, purposeless, disobedience to the state ideals of rejection and exclusion of “the other” that is represented by the elderly woman character – and other marginalized characters – in the play. Commenting on the nature of silence in Pinter’s political works – including *Mountain Language* – Charles Grimes (2005, p. 49) states that “virtually all of Pinter’s political works end in some variant of [...] painful, double-edged silence”, a silence that “is both absolute and complex, it also represents the necessity of a futile resistance to all analogous brutalities.” Accordingly, silence for Pinter does not only represent repression that is practiced by the oppressive rules but could stand for rejection of submissiveness. Paraphrasing Francis Gillen’s argument that elderly woman’s silence is a “final defiance” (1988, p.4), Grimes (Ibid., p. 96) notes that Gillen’s remark is that “[the elderly woman’s] final silence is ambiguous. The woman may be choosing not to speak since to speak in her own language would be to obey and succumb to government imprisoning her”. Despite this, Grimes maintains that such silence by the old woman is more about defeat by means of employing Emmanuel Levinas’ argument about “tyranny and freedom” that freedom in the face of tyrannical rule is a mere myth. For this reason, Grimes (Ibid., p. 98) brings in other negative argumentations by Elias Canetti and Joseph Roth about the notion of silence and comments that silence is a representative of powerlessness and weakness: “*Mountain Language* thus illustrates how reigning power prevents the marginalized from expressing themselves in words or action.” On the other hand, speaking on the silence of characters, twenty-six years before his *Mountain Language*, Pinter argues that silence takes on two forms or silence may appear in two different forms:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls, we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (Pinter, 1976, p. 15)

For Pinter, silence is not only about uttering no word but when the ears hear speechlessness through words. However, the silence – or not speaking – is a sort of embodiment of a group of words, meaning that silence does not necessarily stand against language. Silence is probably another form of speech.

Pinter’s *Mountain Language* proceeds to propose an alternative reality outside the one established by the state and its agents. As Per Wastberg (2005, p. 5) states during the presentation speech of award ceremony of Nobel Prize in literature to Harold Pinter that generally speaking, “Pinter redefines romantic love as a more resilient love that includes friendship and the exigency to promote *justice* [emphasis origin] through action’. With specific reference to *Mountain Language*, Wastberg maintains that this type of love is replaced by depictions of resistance for the sake of showcasing justice through elderly woman’s disobedience: “In *Mountain Language*, love takes the form of an unconditional generosity missing in his earlier works. To survive, we must do good deeds and stand up for the enslaved in this age of terror and spiraling violence” (Ibid., p. 6). The Elderly woman, who keeps silent throughout even after the prison guards’ order to speak her own language, still rejects to speak, delivering a message that speaking and *not speaking* is decided by her, not the state. Her silence is a group of words that create incidents and show her anger and rejection to the state. Her tool is an untold wrath to the imagination of “unwanted, unlikely, others” perceived by the state nationalist pillars. As Wastberg further puts it: “[Pinter’s characters’] identities, backgrounds and histories are vague ... They seldom listen to each other, but it is precisely their mental deafness that makes us listen ... Atmospheric pressure fluctuates as secrets unroll and shift the distribution of power” (Ibid., p. 5). Echoing Wastberg’s claim, the elderly woman stands against the state in order to form and bring about a promising future, an eternal domain whereby the (ethnic and identitarian) difference(s) should be accepted and the perceived “others, their identities and language(s) are to be recognized. Pinter, meanwhile, not only showcases the cruelty of the authoritarian power by means of performing painful experiences of repressed and marginalized groups but also proposes an imaginative reality in which such repression and authoritarian denial are erased. Consequently, the play puts the fact that the historical creation of an equal reality, through which everyone can enjoy their access to their rights and justice, proceeds to reorient realities in a number of occasions.

### 3. THE ELDERLY WOMAN AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Speaking the language of the capital represents the powerful domain for the ruler in the play, whereas silence – or *not speaking* – indicates the empowered space for the ruled. The elderly woman in *Mountain Language* redefines, and reimagines, the status of the Subaltern

whereby the subaltern woman can speak, while rejecting to speak when it comes against her will. In her famous critical essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (1988), Spivak Chakravarty Spivak criticizes the constructed status of the subaltern by the colonial policy. She contends that the figure of the subaltern is mainly constructed as having no space through which they can express out their views, feelings, and reflections. The subaltern is unable to create their own platform thereby affecting policymaking. Her argument further aims at establishing the *authority of speaking* through critiquing ways of deciding on behalf of the subaltern herself. Accordingly, the mode of speaking is at the crossroads; are the subalterns allowed to speak freely or a specific mode of speaking is imposed on them? This is the moment when Spivak questions the dominated status of the subaltern woman since she is obliged to keep silent and/or to start speaking. For Spivak, the subaltern is mainly those Indian women – Sati – who were thought to have been rescued from the hands of Indian men by the colonial west. The major problematic concern that the most marginalized group – by which she means the subalterns – faces is lacking a space for expression by which they can be vocal. Spivak therefore argues that the subalterns are deprived from their right of decision making, meaning that they have no agency (Riach, 2017). According to Gyanendra Pandey (2006, pp. 4735-4741), the subaltern's position as a 'citizen' is rather about 'historical agency' and 'belonging'. Therefore, the fight has been towards a greater end, which is an attempt for 'recognition of difference' and 'the existence of a variety of differences that explained the diversity, density and richness of human experience. Even though Spivak's argument is focused on the Indian subaltern women, it is argumentatively encompassed to embrace women in the colonized world(s). The subaltern embraces voiceless women those who have been exposed to colonial policy for which language suppression and identity denial are contained in its policy making.

In Pinter's *Mountain Language*, the elderly woman character – whose identity is under attack for she even has no name – represents the reality of the voiceless women as designed by the state policy according to which speaking one's own language is by no means allowed. For the state, as depicted in the play, the suppression of the other is allowed since the logic of the state is spreading its power and legitimate its dominance. Such authoritarian rationality makes Pinter obviously state – during his Nobel Prize ceremony – that the language used by politicians is a language laden with narcissistic motifs, self-interest, and exploitation: "the majority of politicians ... are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power" (Pinter, 2005, p. 9). In the play, the truth for the authorities is that the unity of statehood is protected by

means of disallowing the subaltern woman to speak. If she is allowed to speak her own language, the state hegemony is dismantled, and its fabrics destroyed. Moreover, "the other" is always conceived as enemy for the state and is therefore under attack and rejection. When the character of Young Woman complains about the long hours of waiting in prison where they intend to visit their imprisoned sons, husbands, fathers, etc., the sergeant harshly rejects her complaint, saying:

*Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses. They are enemies of the State. They are shithouses. (ML, 1988, p.255)*

For the sergeant, the visitors are enemies and are thus allowed to be tortured freely as they have no impunity before the law. Such status of "the other enemy" makes the officer side with the sergeant and angrily state:

*Now hear this. You are the 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? (Ibid., 1988, p.255-6)*

The policy of the state is thus reflected and mirrored in the officer's statement that he draws a divisionary line between the self and the other. He refers to the permitted language as being "the language of the capital", an indicator that it represents the center – the self – while the mountain language stands for the margin – the other. This is reminiscent of Jean-François Lyotard's argument (1984, 46) about the constitution of 'discourse of power'. According to Lyotard, the presence of 'force' aims at demolition of the other, leading to detachment or disconnection between the two sides:

*Whenever efficiency (that is, obtaining the desired effect) is derived from a "Say or do this, or else you'll never speak again," then we are in the realm of terror, and the social bond is destroyed. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46)*

Given such statement by Leotard, the sergeant's command that the women should speak the language of the capital through forceful treatment is the status of dissolution of the relationship between the sergeant Self and the women Other. Such nationalistic approach and mindset are stemmed from exclusionary discourses, resulting from discursive constructions designed by the statehood maneuvers. The paradigms of statehood are constructed on the remnants of rejections by the law; the law is enacted to exclude what is not considered as part of the system. The law becomes an oppressive tool that

has a legal form and a political content. By mean of such enactment of the state law, the women's language is "outlawed". The law decrees the obituary of the so-called "mountain language" that is outside the legality of the state's law and that has no position within its legal framework.

Characters acting as state agents in the play have no names but military ranks such as the sergeant, the officer and the guard. This is a literary invention showcasing the fact that the state is militarily constructed where no freedom of expression is allowed apart from those opinions, decisions and standpoints decreed by the state itself. This is an indicator that the modern state is but a constituent of belonging and unbelonging subjects. In the play, the prison represents the imaginary notion of the camp where rights are assigned and stipulated by the state policymakers. The prison and the camp are two sides of the same coin, a resemblance that puts the lives of the unbelonging "others" at stake. In his *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*, Farrier (2011, p. 13) maintains that "the camp represents a permanent space dedicated to the impermanence of its inhabitants; a place where the rule of law is defined by its suspension; where those who do not belong are accommodated." In the same way, the sergeant and the officer's rule of law paralyses the usage of "mountain language", a language which has no space for the state's divine regulations.

The state's treatment of the women in the play, as enacted and performed by the sergeant and the officer, is reminiscent of the man in Frantz Kafka's parable *Before the Law*, who cannot enter the law. The man repetitively asks for entrance into the gate (law), but he faces deferment by the doorkeeper and never enters it until he dies. According to Farrier (2011, p. 129), it is the state of exception that abandons the man who is outside the law and yet belongs to it. Similar to the man in Kafka's parable, the speakers of mountain language, who are the women visitors in the play, are under the legacy of the state's law by not entering it and through being excluded. The state's laws, as implemented by the sergeant and the officer, are sacred in a way that have religious aspects being established on the notion of divine punishment as if the laws were handed down from God. Such nationalist exclusionary mindset is conspicuously reflected by the state actors in the play as the sergeant, in response to the Young Woman's request for permission to see her imprisoned husband, angrily puts it:

*What language do you speak? What language do you speak with your arse? (ML, 1988, p.256)*

The officer then comments on the sergeant's furious rejection of the Young Woman's request, saying:

*These women, Sergeant, have as yet committed no crime. Remember that. (Ibid., p.256)*

While the sergeant replying and surprisingly asking the officer: 'Sir! But you're not saying they're without sin? (Ibid., p.256), the officer then hurriedly clarifies that these mountain people have certainly committed sins: 'Oh, no. Oh, no, I am not saying that (Ibid.)'. This conversation between the sergeant and the officer, which is an embodiment of the state's military form, stemmed from an established political reality that is conceived to have been created by God, meaning that nobody is allowed to disagree with divine laws. The sergeant and the officer are deeply obsessed with the mythic paradigms on which the nation's sacredness is engendered, for them the exclusion of "the other" is inevitable and within the "untouchable" laws. Given this constructed reality, Gellner (1983, pp.48-9) - the widely known critic of nationalism - argues that "[n]ations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth", a formula that represents mythmaking policy in a way that divisive lines between the self - those who are included into the nation - and the other - those who are excluded from the nation - are continuously drawn. He further demonstrates the fact that apart from the mythic formulation of the nation, "nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality, for better or worse, and in general an inescapable one. Therefore, for the state actors in the play, the nationalistic policy is underway and is meanwhile allowed to draw divisive lines between "wanted" and "unwanted" citizens. The unwanted citizens are trimmed in a way the gardener treats plants thereby weeding out unnecessary branches.

As the play begins, the reader can notice that there is lack of communication between the women visitors and the prison wardens, namely the sergeant and the officer. The young woman rejects to answer the question imposed by the sergeant about the women's names. She appears obstinate. The sergeant commands them to say their names while the young woman replies: "we've given our names" (ML, p. 251) a couple of times. Such avoidance to say their names is a method of rejecting the state's rule. Then after a condemnation by both the sergeant and the officer, the young woman says her name and stops the obstinacy. In addition to this, the young woman shows the sergeant and the officer the bleeding hand of the elderly woman that was bitten by a Dobermann pinscher, while they both neglect her complaint and ask for the dog's name. This communication break between the mountain people - the visitor women - and the state agents - the sergeant and the officer - represents the binaristic site where the disobedience - embodied in the pattern of silence - is



born later in the play. The more the young woman complains about the bleeding hand, the more the sergeant and the officer neglect and treat them aggressively. The officer talks to the sergeant and says: "Look at this woman's hand. I think the thumb is going to come off." (ML, p. 253), then tells the young woman: "Who did this?" (Ibid.), the young woman replies: "a big dog" (Ibid.). The officer sarcastically tells the young woman that every dog has a name: "They [dogs] are given names by their parents and that is their name, that is their *name!*" (Ibid., p. 254). Such claim by the officer means that the visitor women can be treated like dogs, for he asks both the visitor women's and the dog's names. His message is that: when dogs have names, you women should have your names as well. These conversations in the play are interrupted by several pauses and silences that are used as theatrical techniques to represent the gap between the state and the excluded civilians. This technique is afterwards fully practiced by the elderly woman and ruins the commanding tone as imposed by the state.

As a rejoinder to the state's violent policy and exclusionary discourse practiced against the margins – represented by the Young Woman, Elderly Woman, and the prisoners in the play – the elderly woman represents the notion of resistance through *silence* as an act of disobedience. In his *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti argues that keeping "silence" hinders changes to take place in oneself and, therefore, silence is broken down at some point (1962, p. 294). However, in *Mountain Language*, the elderly woman's silence is itself a step forward towards breaking down the bastion of systematic oppression. As Canetti himself further maintains: "The man who maintains a deliberate silence knows exactly what should be left unspoken. [...] The one who remains silent] is respected for not surrendering it, even though it grows in him and burns him more and more fiercely" (Ibid.) The woman's silence in the play is a matter of personal choice, showcasing that it is a woman character who disagrees and stands against the statehood paradigms. In the scene two of 'Visitor's Room' where the women are supposed to see the prisoner (the son of the elderly woman), the elderly woman starts to speak their own – so called mountain – language, then the guard jabs her with a stick warning about the usage of their own language: "Forbidden. Language forbidden (ML, 1988, p. 258)", and asks the prisoner to warn his mother to speak the language of the capital and the prisoner says that she does not know this language. The elderly woman continues speaking to her son, and the guard jabs her again, saying:

*Forbidden! Forbidden, forbidden forbidden forbidden! Jesus Christ! (To PRISONER) Does she understand what I'm saying? (Ibid., p. 259)*

Such enthusiastic emphasis about the language ban by the guard shows the intolerable policies by the sovereignty that acts like a divine power; it is the sovereignty who decrees laws, while "the governed" is obliged to act questionlessly and should submissively obey. However, the elderly woman does not abide by their law and serenely keeps speaking the same language with her imprisoned son. Following the harsh treatment by the prison keepers for disobeying the rules, the prisoner starts to tremble as it is depicted in the scene four 'Visitor's Room'. The guard, all of a sudden, enters and informs the prisoner:

*Oh, I forgot to tell you. They've changed the rules. She can speak. She can speak in her own language. Until further notice. (Ibid., p. 265)*

The prisoner – the elderly woman's son – turns super happy with the "new rules" that allow speaking in their own language and turns his face to his elderly mother, saying:

*Mother, I'm speaking to you. You see? We can speak. You can speak to me in our own language. She is still. You can speak. Pause. Mother. Can you hear me? I'm speaking to you in our own language. Pause. Do you hear me? Pause. [...] Can't you hear me? Do you hear me? She does not respond. Mother? [...] Mother? She does not respond. She sits still. (Ibid., p.265-6)*

The elderly woman correspondingly disobeys the "new rules" which is a response of peaceful disobedience, an act that degrades the legacy and the potent authoritarian hegemony of the sovereignty. Similar to the previous disregard of the state's rule of *not speaking* in her own language in the beginning, she once again avoids obeying the command of *speaking* by means of being silent. Such act for the sergeant stands for disrespecting the state as he angrily turns to the guard, saying:

*Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up. (Ibid., p.267)*

For the sergeant, it is a state favor offered to the social margins by turning green light for them to speak their language. However, the right to speak one's own language is a basic human right that all civilians should be entitled with. Meanwhile, the elderly woman, through rejecting the state's new rules, showcases the fact that it is she who chooses to speak or otherwise.

This energizes the fact that the woman, as a subaltern, can speak but she decides not to. This moves upstream that creates a reverse parallel to what is traditionally conceived: only “the center” decides. She puts Spivak’s argument at question that the subaltern woman cannot speak and if they speak, they cannot be heard. *Mountain Language* consequently creates an alternative de facto that literature stands against what is considered as political reality. In addition to this, the play brilliantly brings back real historical examples of civil resistance to both public memory and attention in order such notion of silent disobedience would gain popularity in the face of oppression, repression, totalitarianism and racialized acts of supremacist regimes.

Pinter’s approach in his political play *Mountain Language* reflects his overall topical issues that, as Grimes (2005, p. 91) puts it, “[Pinter’s political] plays deal with an essential historical truth that shows itself in different countries and various eras.” This further marks the fact that *Mountain Language* can embody experiences from different geographical spaces and by various figures or characters. The play correspondingly textualizes the arguments proposed by Henry David Thoreau in his 1849 long essay *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau (2014, p. 1) argues that for him the slogan “that government is best which governs least” is true and has been proven right and he further puts it “that government is best which governs not at all” (Ibid.). By means of such claims, he showcases the fact that authorities are always oppressive through their sovereign rules. Similar to the political depictions in *Mountain Language*, Thoreau contends that the laws are mediums through which the states establish “injustice” against specific civilians. For Thoreau, the state actors work as machines in operating the state laws. For this reason, he criticized the legacy of the law, maintaining: “Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.” (Ibid., p. 3). All in all, Thoreau wrote this piece based on of his hatred towards slavery in America, and he provoked the idea that people should not follow such government laws thereby leading to inauguration of injustice; therefore, they need to abandon following these state rules.

Such ideas inspired great figures in America such as Rosa Parks, the black American woman who on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1955 refused to leave her bus seat for a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama (Schraff, 2008). As an act of civil disobedience, Parks disobeyed the state law by refusing to follow the “legal” command that whites are prioritized for having rights to sit down in buses while blacks are to stand up in the presence of whites. Parks rejected such order – and did not leave her seat for a white man inside the bus – and her civil act of resistance led to the abolishment of the bus segregation

in the end of 1956 following her imprisonment for a while. Similar to this, Pinter assigns a women character in *Mountain Language* to stand against the state’s segregation law and disobey the prison officials. The elderly woman’s insistence obliges the authorities to allow her speaking in her own language. Her act is that of civil disobedience and rejecting state regulations. Her silence is not a mere act of speechlessness but a representative of a great move towards gaining a political achievement. This is a technique that was deeply used by Pinter as Martin Esslin argues that silence has probably a greater effect than dialogue in theatre:

[... ]In drama dialogue is, ultimately, a form of action; it is the element of action, the interaction between the characters, their reactions to each other, which constitute the truly dramatic element in stage dialogue [...]. But being essentially action, dramatic dialogue is not necessarily the dominant element in the playwright’s armoury: it may be equally or even less important than the non-verbal actions of the characters and, indeed, their silences. (Esslin, 1970, pp. 215 - 216)

It obviously shows the fact that the silence acts as a powerful tool thereby opposing the state rule. The old woman’s silence is loud outcry in the face of tyranny. Moreover, the ambition of *Mountain Language* – as being a literary platform – does not stop at making the state to change its law of language ban, but the elderly woman goes a step further by rejecting the state law that allows the usage of the mountain language. Therefore, the elderly woman fully embodies the idea that whatever the state decides is subject to refusal, as showcasing that governments should be disobeyed, for they are always seeking obedience from their citizens.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language* (1988) as being a domain of civil disobedience in the face of state oppressions. Being a literary vehicle, the play promotes the notion of peaceful resistance by means of avoiding violence. Although the previous research – as referred to above – has shown that silence of the characters in *Mountain Language* represents the repression and suppression of the marginalized groups, this paper has argued that the technique of silence is also used in the play to indicate a couple of approaches; silence representing the gap between the marginalized group and the state agents on the one hand and standing for disobedience in a peaceful manner on the other. Silence acts as a tool to the audience, readers, and civilians worldwide to adopt the idea of serene disobedience against the state laws and imposed



“legality” through rejecting its commands and exclusionary discourses. The elderly woman in the play brilliantly symbolizes the denial of obedience through silence. She puts Spivak’s argument of *subaltern cannot speak* at question by showing that subalterns – characterized as marginalized, voiceless, women – keep silence as a matter of choice. The woman, on the other hand, puts Thoreau’s proposal of the right of civil disobedience in praxis that civilians can disobey thereby leading to gain rights; not only governments decide on people’s acts, but people can themselves lead the process of decision-making as being part of civil life. Silence, as a code, acts as a means of this resistance, a non-violent attempt that could gain popularity worldwide in standing in the face of states’ denials, oppressions, and overruling.

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<sup>1</sup> El-Sawy’s argument is exactly Charles Grime’s remark. Without referring to or citing Grime, El-Sawy copy-pastes Grime’s argument that “[t]he political meaning of this choice is, however, uncertain, since it gives the old woman only the negative power of withdrawal. A simpler reading of the cause of her silence is also possible; that is to envision the old woman as defeated, beaten down and therefore silent.” Charles Grimes, *Harold Pinter’s Politics: A Silence Beyond Echo* (2005, p. 97).