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**BAKEA**

# **BATI EDEBİYATINDA İDEOLOJİ IDEOLOGY IN WESTERN LITERATURE**

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## **BAKEA 2011**

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# "FOLLOW THE LINE": TOTALITARIAN IDEOLOGY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

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*Language –the performance of a language system– is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech; it compels speech.*

(Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", 1977)

I.

'Ideology' can be defined as any set of beliefs which appear to be logical and natural to the people who hold them<sup>1</sup>. A certain ideology gains ground by the projection of related beliefs, values or practices as universal. The system defines what is 'normal' through discourse and sets values concerning how people should live or act such as being good citizens, being patriotic, serving the state, etc. These standards or values of the dominant order, in turn, begin to shape individuals' perception of the world with their awareness of language<sup>2</sup>. That is why Einstein has rightly stated that the "greater part of our knowledge and beliefs has been communicated to us by other people through the medium of a language which others have created"<sup>3</sup>. People, however, use language without often considering the kind of ideology it may support. In a lecture delivered in College de France, Ronald Barthes talks about the connection between power, ideology and language:

*In our innocence [...] we believed power was a political object; we learned that power is an ideological object, that creeps in where we do not recognize it [...] Power is plural, we discovered... Make a revolution to destroy it, power will spring up again. And the reason why power is invincible is that the object in which it is carried for all human eternity is language: the language that we speak and write<sup>4</sup>.*

Barthes further laments that it is language which is "fascist", because it compels speech and obliges those who use it to subject themselves to its order: "Language is legislation,

<sup>1</sup> L. Thomas and S. Wareign, *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1999, p.34. Publication details of all cited works will be provided in a footnote on first appearance; thereafter pages numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Anatomy of Power*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, p.9.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, New York: Crown Publications, 1986, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, Edited and Introduction by Susan Sontag, New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, p.459.



speech is its code. We do not see the power that is in speech because we forget that all speech is classification, and that all classifications are oppressive [...]” (461). And since “the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology and more particularly through the ideological workings of language” nobody “who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society, can afford to ignore language”<sup>5</sup>.

## II.

Although *The Birthday Party* was composed more than half a century ago in 1958, it still remains one of the most important dramatic works demonstrating how authority or ideology works through language to shape, control and destroy individuals<sup>6</sup>. In the play, language represents a totalitarian system, which sets out to transform individuals into a single model who speak, act, like language, well-formed and orderly. Briefly, a totalitarian system could be defined as one in which a ruling power has almost complete control over the government and all of its activities such as the economy, the military, the businesses, the industries, the press and the media, as well as all aspects of the lives of the individual citizen<sup>7</sup>. In “Doctrines of Fascism” (1932) Mussolini, the first person to use the term *totalitario* to describe his political goals<sup>8</sup>, elaborates on the life of the Fascist as follows: “Life, therefore, as the Fascist conceives it, is serious, austere, religious; entirely balanced in a world sustained by moral and responsible forces of the spirit<sup>9</sup>. In relation to the State, the position of the subject is “[a]nti-individualistic, the Fascist conception is for the State; it is for the individual only in so far as he coincides with the State, universal consciousness and will of man in his historic existence”(14).

Although a clear political system is not specified in *The Birthday Party*, it, more or less, resembles any of the totalitarian systems such as Mussolini’s fascism, Stalin’s communism or Hitler’s Nazism<sup>10</sup>. More specifically, the characters Goldberg and McCann represent the dominant ideology. They are both victims and victimizers of the system. As Foucault emphasizes in *Discipline and Punish*, power is always instituted by the subject on behalf of the source, instead of the source itself<sup>11</sup>. As such, these two men do not produce power and ideology, but instead, power works through them in the form of language. They appear from nowhere and use the language of the system to transform Stanley, ‘a pianist’ from a non-conformist to a ‘standard’ citizen. The thoughts reflected through their speech represent order, respect, integration and standardization. Also, their verbal style that might be characterized as ‘the language of authority’ resembles those employed by lawyers, politicians, academicians, etc. In this respect, it is filled with ‘bookish’ metaphors, figures of speech, more and longer words than necessary, cliché phrases and a combination of legal,

<sup>5</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001, pp.2-3.

<sup>6</sup> For the use of verbal violence in the play, See. Sila Şenlen. *Words as Swords: Verbal Violence as a Construction of Power in Renaissance and Contemporary English Drama*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Cernak, *Totalitarianism*, Minnesota: ABDO Publishing Company, 2011, p.144.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Cernak, *Totalitarianism*, Minnesota: ABDO Publishing Company, 2011, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> Benito Mussolini. “Doctrine of Fascism”. *Readings on Fascism and National Socialism*, Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2008, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce F. Pauley. *Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson. 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin Books, 1977. pp. 14-15.



medical, religious, political and popular jargon expressed in passive structures. Such a style is in opposition to everything George Orwell specifies for clear and honest communication in "Politics and the English Language" (1946), that is, abstaining from using figures of speech one is used to seeing in print, the use of long and unnecessary words, passive structures, foreign and scientific jargon, and anything that does not support equality and freedom<sup>12</sup>.

*The Birthday Party* begins at a typical breakfast table, with Meg and Petey, the owners of a boarding house, who are later joined by their only lodger, Stanley, who is unshaven and in pajamas. When Meg mentions that there will be two new coming lodgers, Stanley suddenly starts to panic: "It's a false alarm. A false alarm. [...] They're looking for someone. A certain person"<sup>13</sup>. Stanley's reaction creates a sense of alarm. On their arrival, Stanley slips out the back door in order to avoid them and we get a chance to observe the intruders. McCann, who is more of an apprentice, feels nervous and Goldberg (his 'superior') calms him down by making the following suggestion:

*The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It's a well known fact. Breath in, breath out, take a chance, let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me. When I was an apprentice yet, McCann, every second Friday of the month my Uncle Barney used to take me to the seaside, regular as clockwork. [...] Uncle Barney. Of course, he was an impeccable dresser. One of the old school. He had a house just outside Basingstoke at the time. Respected by the whole community [...]* (29)

All of the thoughts that Goldberg puts forth are either clichés or those relating to order, respect and monotony. Then McCann worries about whether they have come to the right house and whether this "job" will resemble the previous ones. To this, Goldberg answers in a "quiet, fluent, official tone" (30) using professional jargon resembling a lawyer or politician seeking to obscure instead of clarifying a subject:

*Goldberg: This main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements, however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activities. All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satisfied?*

*McCann: Sure. Thank you, Nat.* (30)

Their arrival echoes Pinter's statement in *Various Voices* that "the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has disregarded responsibility (that word again) towards himself and others"<sup>14</sup>. So, they seem to have come to remind Stanley of his responsibilities.

Their first actual encounter with Stanley takes place in Act II. Stanley goes to speak to McCann, who is tearing sheets of newspaper into five equal strips -an indication of order- and are later joined by Goldberg. At first, Stanley takes a firm stance against them:

*Stanley: Let me—just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. [...] Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss?* (45)

<sup>12</sup> George Orwell. *Politics and the English Language and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford City Press, 2009, p.21.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, London: Samuel French, 1959, pp.20-24.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Pinter, *Various Voices Harold Pinter: Prose, Poetry, Politics*, New York: Grove Press, 1998, p.11.



In response, Goldberg and McCann ask and then order him to sit down:

Goldberg: *Ask him to sit down.*

McCann: *Yes, Nat. (McCann moves to STANLEY) Do you mind sitting down?*

Stanley: *Yes, I do mind.*

[...]

McCann: *(to STANLEY) Sit down.*

Stanley: *Why?*

McCann: *You'd be more comfortable.*

[...]

McCann: *Get down in that seat!*

Goldberg: *(crossing to him). Webber. (Quietly.) SIT DOWN. (Silence. STANLEY begins to whistle "the Mountains of Morne". He strolls casually to the chair at the table. They watch him. He stops whistling. Silence. He sits ) (46-47)*

Even though Stanley initially resists, he later obeys him and an interrogation begins.

The first part of Stanley's cross-examination includes questions about his physical appearance, past occupation, family life, marital status, name, religious belief. Some of the questions are as follows: "Webber, what were you doing yesterday?", "What did you wear last week, Webber? Where do you keep your suits?", "Why did you leave the organization? [...] Why did you betray us?", "When did you last have a bath?", "When did you last wash a cup?", "Why did you kill your wife?", "Why did you never get married?", "Why did you change your name", "Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?", "When did you last pray?", concluding that they are "right and you're [Stanley] wrong, Webber, all along the line./All along the line!" (47-50). Such questions are linked to social or religious norms, which are defined through discourse and regulated, directly or indirectly, by the system. So Stanley, as a subject, is examined throughout with a range of questions about his political and religious views, loyalty, life style, personal hygiene, etc. These questions are then followed by a grotesque display of cliché verbal patterns such as the endless "Why did the chicken cross the road" jokes and the "chicken-egg" riddle:

Goldberg: *Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?*

Stanley: *He wanted to—he wanted to—he want to...*

McCann: *He doesn't know!*

Goldberg: *Why did the chicken cross the road?*

Stanley: *He wanted to—he wanted to...*

Goldberg: *Why did the chicken cross the road?*

Stanley: *He wanted...*

McCann: *He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!*

Goldberg: *Which came first?*

McCann: *Chicken? Egg? Which came first?*

G&M: *Which came first?*



Stanley, unable to stand the examination any longer, screams. In this private meeting, Goldberg and McCann employ “a totalitarian style which allows no space for response and no option for self-defense”<sup>16</sup>. Stanley does not speak after he screams.

This scene is followed with Stanley’s birthday party organized by Meg, and attended by Meg, Lulu (a neighbor), Goldberg and McCann, while Stanley does not come. This social event gives us a further insight into Goldberg’s linguistic skills. At one point, he indicates that he first gave a lecture at Ethical Hall about “The Necessary and the Possible”. When Lulu asks Goldberg if he has a wife, his response is exactly the same story as he told McCann about his mother (43), but the word “mom” has been replaced by “wife” and the meal has been changed:

*Goldberg: “Simey”, my old mum used to shout, “quick before it gets cold!” And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate. (43)*

*Goldberg: “Simey”, my wife used to shout, “quick before it gets cold!” And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of rollmop and pickled cucumber you could wish to find on a plate<sup>17</sup>. (59)*

Such a reply illustrates that Goldberg is used to employing cliché phrases, or expressing cliché thoughts instead of anything original.

They continue by playing a game, blind man’s bluff. When it is Stanley’s turn, McCann takes off his glasses in order to blindfold him and breaks them. Stanley, lost without his glasses or personal views attempts to strangle Meg and rape Lulu, which point to the destruction of his sanity. A birthday party, which generally connotes a new beginning, here ironically represents Stanley’s symbolic death as an individual and re-birth as a conformist. The extent of Stanley’s change is observable in Act III. The next morning, while Goldberg and Petey are discussing Stanley’s sudden breakdown, McCann comes down to inform Goldberg that Stanley “tried to fit the eyeholes [of the glasses] into his eyes.” (74) Petey offers to call a doctor, but McCann insists on taking him to “Monty” (74), who might be the head of the organization, or their boss. They decide to finish “the bloody thing” (76) or the ‘job’ and go, but before McCann goes up, Goldberg orders him to look at his teeth while he talks about the advantages of a life without change:

*You know what? I’ve never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing’s changed. (He gets up.) That’s why I’ve reached my position, McCann. [...]. All my life I’ve said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can’t go wrong. What do you think, I’m a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don’t talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I’m telling you, I’m telling you, follow the line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart? Never write down a thing. And don’t go too near the water. And you’ll find—that what I say is true.*

*Because I believe that the world ... (Vacant)....*

*Because I believe that the world... (Desperate)....*

<sup>15</sup> For a stylistic analysis of the play in terms of contradictions, repetitions, pauses and silences see. Nazan Tutaş, *Pinteresque Dialogues: A Stylistic Analysis*, Ankara, Kül Sanat: 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Jeannette R. Malkin, *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.57.

<sup>17</sup> The bold parts are my emphasis





*BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD... (Lost.) (77-78).*

The fact that he is not able to complete his last sentence "Because I believe that the world..." illustrates that he does not have his own personal views. After a brief moment of uncertainty, however, he regains his control and power by relating his father's last words to him at his deathbed: "[...] Go home to your wife. I will, Dad. Keep an eye open for low-lives, for schnorrers and for layabouts. [...] Do your duty and keep your observations. Always bid good morning to the neighbors. ... I swore on the good book. And I knew the word that I had to remember—Respect! (78). Such utterances show that Goldberg is only parroting dominant social values. Thus, he is also a victim like McCann and Stanley. This fact is also supported by their last names. While "Goldberg" is a surname preferred by German Jews, "McCann" is one of the first hereditary surnames in Ireland<sup>18</sup>. So they both represent groups who have been victimized (Jews and the Irish), and now they are working for the system in order to increase the number of subjects complying with the accepted dominant ideology.

When Stanley is brought down, he resembles nothing to the unshaven man in pajamas at the beginning of the play. He is wearing a suit resembling theirs, and is not able to see clearly due to his broken glasses or speak. According to them, Stanley has not been able to "see" straight for a long time, or in other words, did not hold the 'correct' or 'normal' beliefs. So, he needs new glasses, which they will supply, in addition to a 're-orientation':

*Goldberg: But we can save you.*

*McCann: From a worse fate.*

*Goldberg: True.*

*McCann: Undeniable.*

[...]

*Goldberg: we'll watch over you.*

*McCann: Advise you.*

*Goldberg: Give you proper care and treatment.*

*McCann: Let you use the club bar.*

[...]

*Goldberg: We'll make a man of you.*

*McCann: And a woman.*

*Goldberg: You'll be re-orientated.*

*McCann: You'll be rich.*

*Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.*

*McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.*

*Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.*

*McCann: You'll be a success.*

*Goldberg: You'll be integrated.*

*McCann: You'll give orders.*

*Goldberg: You'll make decisions.*

<sup>18</sup>Anthony Matthews. *Origin of the McCanns with a History of the Sept. Drogheda*: Anthony Matthews, 1973.



McCann: *You'll be a magnate.*

Goldberg: *A statesman.*

McCann: *You'll own yachts.*

Goldberg: *Animals.*

McCann: *Animals. (82-84)*

Their future plans include saving Stanley, looking after him, giving him advice, giving him access to the "club", supervising him in order to make a "man" and a "woman" out of him, probably one that will share their ideology and 'speak' their discourse. They ask his opinion, but Stanley is only able to make mumbling sounds: "Stanley: Ug-gughh...uh-gughhh. .../McCann: What's your opinion, sir?/Stanley: Caaahhh...caaahhh. ..." (85). At the end, Stanley has been reduced to a broken, an almost blind and mumbling subject, who has conformed to the rules and regulations of the dominant order and is taken away by the two men in their van. When he does start to speak, it will be the 'standard' or 'totalitarian' language of the dominant ideology or order.

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