
Torture as an Ineffective Tool of Demoralization in Jean Paul Sartre's *Men Without Shadows*

Muhammad Usman

Assistant Professor (English), Department of English, Government Dyal Singh College Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Usman, E-mail: usman712@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: October 30, 2019

Accepted: November 17, 2019

Published: November 30, 2019

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

KEYWORDS

Torture, existentialism, ineffectiveness, demoralization

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts at explaining the ineffectiveness of torture as a tool of demoralization and as a useless method of obtaining credible information during the interrogation practices observed throughout the civilized world by analyzing the play *Men without Shadows* written by Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist and political activist. He was a leading exponent of the existentialist philosophy. In this play he has depicted the horrors of torture on a squad five freedom fighters and the inability of the interrogators to break their morale in order to get information on one hand, and on the other hand there is a streak of Sartre's existentialist philosophy governing the horrible incidents depicted in the play. My aim is to study the incidents of the play in the perspective of existentialist philosophy and depict the ineffectiveness of torture.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to study the ineffectiveness of torture as a tool of extracting credible information from prisoners and a useless method for their demoralization especially when they are working for a cause deemed noble by them. My basic premise is that people working for a cause can only be persuaded by argument and when it is done they stick to it forever, unless and until some other argument makes them change their previous beliefs. Sartre in his play, *Men without Shadows* has depicted a similar situation where a group of five freedom fighters are caught by the German soldiers. Germans subject them to severe torture to extract some credible information, but none of the prisoners tell them anything, and the torturers' efforts go in vain.

Sartre was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist and political activist. He was born in Paris in 1905 and educated at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris, the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, and the French Institute in Berlin. He taught philosophy in various institutes from 1929 till the start of the Second World War. He was conscripted in the army where he served as a meteorologist. He was captured by German troops in 1940 and spent nine months in captivity. He was released in 1941 and resumed his teaching in Paris. He was active in French resistance. After sometime he founded an underground group having the name *Socialism and Liberty* with other writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Toussaint Desanti, and some others. During this time he wrote his famous play, *The Flies*, and his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*. Germans were quite unaware of his underground activities so they allowed the publication of his works.

Sartre wrote this play *Men without Shadows* keeping in view his own personal experiences of captivity during Second World War when he himself was taken a prisoner by the Germans. The detail with which he describes the agony of the prisoners being tortured suggests that he had some personal experience of such a situation before. He not only describes the methods of torture being used to extract information from the prisoners but their long-lasting agonizing psychological effects on the minds of prisoners as well. Prisoners are kept locked up for quite some time without having any contact with the outside world. They are not told anything about their fates, whether they will be freed or kept in captivity or for how long. They are not even sure whether they will be able to come out of it alive or not. A fear of imminent death is dangling over their heads. There may be some firing squad getting ready for their execution. So the prisoners are first subjected to this severe psychological torture before dragging them to interrogation rooms. The purpose of such a treatment is to frustrate them and demoralize them so that they may lose confidence and divulge the information.

When Germans feel that this psychological pressure is not bearing fruit, they resort to torture. Sartre describes in detail not only the agony of the tortured but the sadistic pleasure gained by the torturer as well. He describes how prisoners, in order to save the cause, take extreme step of killing their own companion, whom they deem weak and naïve. On another occasion, one of the prisoners even commits suicide by throwing himself out of the two-storey building, where he was being interrogated and tortured.

Sartre was a leading exponent of the existentialist philosophy. Existentialist philosophy conditions the existence of a person with his decision making power. According to this philosophy, if a person can make his own decisions in his life, he does exist but if he cannot make his decisions or is not making his own decisions or unable to do so, then he does not exist. One can see that this play, *Men without Shadows*, is actually written on this basic premise of the existentialist philosophy. The prisoners are thrown into a situation where they find themselves facing two very difficult choices. Both these choices were leading them to their demise, either physically or ideologically. If they do not cooperate with the oppressors, they are either tortured to death or face the firing squad. On the other hand, if they cooperate and divulge the required information, this would be the death of their cause, for which they put their own lives in danger. That will be no less than death. So in both situations they have to face grim consequences. Sartre depicts that these prisoners were making their choices. They were making their own decisions and were not allowing the Germans to impose their decisions upon them. Sartre indicated that these prisoners were the ones who really existed. On the other hand, German soldiers were just getting orders from the higher ups and subjecting the prisoners to torture. They were devoid of any existence because they did not have the decision making power. Even the prisoners who were bound physically were able to make their choices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The play is set in France during the Second World War when the French resistance had grown quite stronger. It is about a group of six resistance fighters captured by German soldiers. They are Sorbier, Canoris, Henri, Lucie, Francois and Jean who joins them after sometime. Lucie and Francois are siblings while Jean is their leader. Lucie and Jean are in love with each other as well. The resistance squad is ordered to attack a village and take it back from Germans. They try but fail to do so.

The play is divided into three acts, with the first act having two scenes. Play starts with five resistance fighters; handcuffed and locked up in the attic of a school building, contemplating over their actions and their fate. Their discussion starts with a sense of guilt. Their failed attack leaves three hundred innocent villagers dead. This leads them to think whether they are justified in their action? On one hand they have their orders, their passion to serve the cause, while on the other hand they have the gruesome consequence of their action which gives rise to a feeling of guilt.

Amid this dilemma, there is a fear of imminent death at the hands of Germans. They know that they will be interrogated, tortured and ultimately pushed in front of the firing squad. This fear of torture, death and a sense of guilt accompanied by a passion to serve the cause take them to such a frenzied state that they start embracing death in one way or the other instead of fearing it.

Henri, Sorbier and Canoris are brutally interrogated one by one by the Germans. They are asked about the whereabouts of Jean, their Leader, who happens to be with them in their small cell. The torture makes them squeal and cry but they do not tell the Germans anything. Sorbier cannot bear the torture so he jumps out of the window and commits suicide. Lucie is raped and tortured. This puts Jean in a very embarrassing situation as they all suffer just to protect him. Lucie, his love is ravaged and he fails to save her. Francois, the youngest member of the resistance squad, becomes afraid of torture. The resistance fighters sense that he is weak and may divulge their secret. Lucie asks Henri to strangle Francois as he is weak and cannot be trusted. Francois asks for help but Jean fails to save him and is murdered after all. At this point the psychological conflicts reach at their peak. Lucie's love for the cause surpasses her love for her own brother. She bears the torture and rape but cannot bear to see the cause being betrayed. That's why she herself asks Henri to kill Francois. At the same time, Jean's affection for the young boy and his love for a fellow resistance fighter is tarnished by the imminent threat of a betrayed cause.

Sartre depicts the agony of German soldiers as well, who being the tormentors, suffer as well. In their effort to extract some information, they torture the prisoners in a horrible manner but fail to get anything. This frustrates them. They start arguing about the utility of this horrible torture.

In the end, Germans get some made up information from the prisoners on the pretext that their lives will be spared but the three of them are ultimately shot and killed. Only Jean is left behind whose true identity they cannot

ascertain till end. The play seems to be revolving around Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism. The prisoners made their own choices. They were tortured and ultimately killed but the tormentors could not force their will upon them. The prisoners did what they wanted to do, what they had to do. Their bodies were broken but their will remained intact till the end.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses inductive approach and qualitative methodology to form a critical paradigm for research. The sources for this research can be divided into two categories; primary and secondary. The primary source is the text of the play *Men without Shadows* itself. The secondary source is the theory of Existentialism that is undergirding the whole play. Data analysis is done by close reading of the text in order to generate textual references. The inductive approach and qualitative methodology would systemize the research and will produce desired results.

This term paper is divided into six sections. The first section comprises of an abstract which not only summarizes the paper but identifies its objectives as well. The second section introduces the topic, subject matter and writer. The third section reviews the whole text critically. The fourth section introduces the research design including the methodology used for this study. The fifth section is the main discussion. The sixth section concludes the whole research and it is followed by works cited.

4. MAIN DISCUSSION

The France of 1944 was very turbulent. The German occupation was completing its fourth year and the war was claiming victims by thousands. The French resistance was growing stronger with each passing day. Sartre himself was a part of this resistance force. The freedom fighters were collecting arms and information for the final battle that was about to start. But the German forces were becoming increasingly vigilant, capturing freedom fighters and acquiring information from them through heinous methods. It was against this backdrop that Jean Paul Sartre wrote his play *Men without Shadows* in 1946.

The play is about five French resistance fighters who were captured by the German forces. They are Sorbier, Canoris, Henri, Lucie, Francois and Jean who is captured later on and is shifted to the room of these prisoners after sometime. Lucie and Francois are siblings and Francois is the youngest among them and the weakest as well. Jean is the leader of this group and on the list of most wanted as well. Lucie and Jean are in love with each other as well. This resistance squad is ordered to attack a village and take it back from Germans. They make an attempt to liberate the village but fail to do so.

The play starts with the five captured freedom fighters, locked up in the attic of a building under the control of German soldiers. The prisoners are silent but restless, thinking about what is to come. There is silence in the room which frustrates them as well and Francois breaks it by asking others to say something, to make a noise. Suddenly they hear the sound of loud music and Sorbier points to the noise. Francois replies, "Not that – that's their noise." (Sartre 171). The situation shows the frustration of the prisoners. The German noise symbolizes the German oppression and imminent torture. He does not want to hear it. He is averse to it unconsciously so he craves for his own noise, the noise or voices of his own people. This very dialogue shows how frustrated the French had become with German occupation by 1944.

Now these prisoners were being subjected to two types of torture. One was physical that culminated in suicide and execution of the prisoners. The other was psychological, which was equally painful.

As far as the psychological torture is concerned, the prisoners were there with a heavy conscience. On one hand they had the burden of defeat and failure over their minds as they had to liberate the village from German occupation which they could not. As a result of this assault on the village dozens of innocent villagers died as well. Among the dead were the women and kids as well. Some of them burnt alive. There was a sense of guilt too as they had started taking the blame and burden of these innocent deaths upon their heads. Francois and Sorbier engage themselves in a conversation over the deaths of the villagers.

"Sorbier: it is our fault they all are dead.

Canoris [to francois]: you see, it's much better not to talk.

Francois: what of it? We can't last much longer either. Perhaps they are the lucky ones.

Sorbier: they were not ready to die.

Francois: Am I? It wasn't our fault we failed.

Sorbier: Yes it was.

Francois: we were only obeying orders." (Sartre 172)

Now, this conversation of the prisoners depicts their strong feelings of guilt. It also shows that they were dedicated and true to their cause. They did not mean to kill any innocent person. Whatever ensued was collateral damage. But these deaths are weighing heavy on their conscience.

On the other hand there was fear of gruesome death, which may result if they do not cooperate with the German soldiers and divulge the information regarding the whereabouts of their group leader Jean, who somehow managed to escape the arrest.

So these were their fears and regrets that put them in a painful situation. There were not just fears and regrets that were left with them, but hope for the success of their cause as well. They were captured but their leader was still on the loose. While conversing Lucie and Francis talk about Jean.

"Lucie: Listen. There is someone who can help you.... I am not really alone.... [Pause] Jean is with me.

Francois: Jean?

Lucie: They didn't catch him. He is on the road to Grenoble by now. Tomorrow he will be the only one of us left." (Sartre 174)

So, amid fears of execution, the hope for liberation from German occupation is still with them. And this hope is epitomized in the freedom of their leader, Jean.

Another method of psychological torture used by the Germans was delay or keep the prisoners waiting. Germans had this notion that the prisoners know about their harsh interrogation techniques. So they waited in order to make the prisoners think about the imminent torture and possible execution. This increased the stress level that ultimately leads to demoralization. Canoris while talking to Lucie about German soldier says,

"Canoris: They won't come soon.

Lucie: Why not?

Canoris: They believe waiting demoralizes. What a mistake!" (Sartre 175)

Canoris further explains that while in waiting the Germans will lose the advantage of surprise. Then it will not be easy for them to obtain information. So instead of getting depressed and demoralized, the prisoners start gaining strength because of this delay.

Another way of psychological torture was to let the prisoners know about their gruesome fate. They start talking about different methods of torture the Germans may use upon them. The purpose behind this treatment, once again, is to demoralize and discourage, to break the confidence of the prisoners. Sorbier and Canoris while talking about the torture says,

"Sorbier [abruptly]: Suppose they mess you up?

Canoris: What?

Sorbier: Mess you up with instruments? [Canoris shrugs his shoulders.] I think I'd be able to force myself to hold out. Each minute, I'd say to myself." (Sartre 176)

Instead of losing confidence, prisoners were getting themselves ready for the things to come. Sorbier says, "Who is talking of dying? We're talking about what they'll do to us first. We must be ready for them." (Sartre 176)

Finally, the interrogation starts. The German soldiers enter the room and pick up Sorbier for interrogation. After some time the rest of the prisoners hear Sorbier screaming. While the interrogation was still in process,

German soldiers come and push Jean, their ring leader, into the room as well. Jean is the very person whom all the five prisoners want to save.

The next prisoner being interrogated is Canoris. When Germans carry him out of the room, Jean says, "He is going to suffer for me." (Sartre 188). Jean has started feeling guilt, as he is the only person whom they have to protect.

After Canoris, the Germans bring in Henri, the twenty nine year old medical student. They subject him to severe torture but he dies not tell them anything.

By now, the Germans themselves had become frustrated. They brought Sorbier in once more and beat him up. Sorbier had become so miserable that he committed suicide by jumping out of the window. Sorbier takes his life but does not divulge the information. Horrible torture could not break his will, could not demoralize him.

The German soldiers who were inflicting great pain on the prisoners were getting nothing in return. They had started disobeying the orders in frustration. Landrieu and Clochet, the two German soldiers exchange harsh words.

Landrieu: I give the orders here, Clochet. That's the second time I've had to remind you.

Clochet: But...

Landrieu: [shouting] Do you want me to smash your face?" (Sartre 196)

Jean-Pierre Boulé, while describing the torturer's psyche writes,

"Sartre explains in his war diaries that the ideal of sadism is to extract groans. The sadist pushes torture to the point where the victim cannot refrain from asking for mercy. The victim still has freedom since the tortured one could have not cried. For Sartre the victim has a choice; to suffer or to surrender willingly to a practice that repels him/her." (Boulé 163)

The prisoners who come back to the room after being interrogated tell the detail of torture. It makes Francois, the youngest of them all, afraid. The resistance fighters sense that he is weak and may divulge their secret. Lucie asks Henri to strangle Francois as he is weak and cannot be trusted. Francois asks for help but Jean fails to save him and is murdered after all. At this point the psychological conflicts reach at their peak. Lucie's love for the cause surpasses her love for her own brother. The death of her brother is acceptable to her, but the cause being betrayed is unacceptable. Lucie's love for the cause surpasses her love for her own brother. That's why she herself asks Henri to kill Francois. At the same time, Jean's affection for the young boy and his love for a fellow resistance fighter is tarnished by the imminent threat of a betrayed cause. It shows that the torture, instead of demoralizing the resistance fighters has in fact, embolden them.

Next day the German soldiers bring Lucie in. She is subjected to torture and rape but she does not divulge the information.

Now the situation takes an ironical turn. The captured resistance fighters know about the identity of the new prisoner but the German soldiers do not. Germans are torturing other prisoners to extract the information of Jean, their leader who is already in their custody. Jean himself does not meet this treatment. The prisoners suffer and face execution just to save their leader, Jean who is with them. So, in order to save one person, five persons lose their lives. This is their commitment to cause, that they decided to embrace death but did not divulge the information. On the other hand, things became increasingly burdensome for Jean as he sees his men falling, just to save him. It leaves a burden on his conscience. Even his beloved, Lucie is ravished by German soldiers. This puts Jean in a very embarrassing situation as they all suffer just to protect him. Lucie, his love is ravaged and he fails to save her.

In the end, Germans get some made up information from the prisoners on the pretext that their lives will be spared but the three of them are ultimately shot and killed. Only Jean is left behind whose true identity they cannot ascertain till end.

5. CONCLUSION

As the purpose of this paper is to study the ineffectiveness of torture as a tool of demoralization and a method of obtaining credible information during the interrogation practices observed throughout the civilized world, I have come to this conclusion that Sartre has successfully depicted the futility of this practice through his play *Men without Shadows*. The prisoners are subjected to gruesome psychological and physical torture but the oppressors fail to extract any credible information from them.

Sartre has woven the plot of the play around his philosophy of Existentialism. The prisoners do not let the power of making a choice go out of their hands. They prefer death to divulging the information. It shows that they retained the decision making power till the end. On the other hand the German soldiers had become puppets in the hands of the prisoners. The Germans were only getting from them what they were giving them. Hence, in the end, the Germans get false information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muhammad Usman is currently working as Asst. Prof. of English at Govt. Dyal Singh College, Lahore. He has authored numerous research articles. He is currently enrolled in Mphil in English Literature at Forman Christian College University, Lahore. His area of interest is Feminism and Gender Studies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Boulé, Jean-Pierre. *Sartre, Self-formation, and Masculinities*, Canada: Berghahn, 2005. Print
- [2] Sartre, Jean Paul. *Three Plays – Altona, Men without Shadows, The Flies*, UK: Penguin, 1981. Print