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POWER, PROSTITUTION AND SEXUALITY: CHIEF FEMINIST CONCERN IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE HOMECOMING

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ABSTRACT

Dominant themes of postmodern literature as well as of art have been struggling for meaning in a fragmented framework. Harold Pinter too has presented the most complex themes through his most complex characters who keep fighting with a primal drive for territorial possessions. His characters struggle for power between gender specific paradigm shifts. Pinter's plays deal with sexuality in order to achieve power and control between the sexes. In the present paper I want to examine the element of sexuality as a major theme through analysis of the relationship between male and female characters as they lay bare the most intimate sexual negations across the most intimate battlefields his select plays such as *The Homecoming*, *The Lover*, *The Collection* and *Tea Party* deal with power and sexuality.

KEYWORDS: gender, sexuality, power, relationships, intimate, intruder

Introduction

The plays that were written by Harold Pinter during the 1960's presented invariable themes. During this period Pinter was shuttling between stage and screen. The major themes of the plays written during this period are patriarchal bluster, male vanity, and female obduracy. For example, *The Pumpkin Eater* presents the picture of dismay at men's abysmal failure to understand women's needs and desires, *The Tea Party* depicts that masculine preoccupation with power, money, and status affords no protection against private dread. *The Homecoming* deals with the disruptive efforts of a female intruder on a misogynist oppressively male household. *The Collection* presents infidelity in marital relationship with an element of homosexuality between two friends Bill and James. There is also an element of oedipal wish fulfillment. The play deals with the wife/ prostitute polarity, sex in and out of wedlock.

In the present paper, I intend to explore three major themes- power, sex, and prostitution in the play *The Homecoming*. The play effectively delineated these dominant themes with certain dramatic techniques of violence, antithetical imagery, and disorientation.

Power, prostitution and Sexuality in *The Homecoming*

The play presents the shocking picture of sex and prostitution within the family. It presents mother and whore dichotomy as well as status and power battles of opposite sexes. The dramatist uses certain dramatic techniques to efficiently present complex themes such as, through naked violence, dramatic irony, antithetical imagery, disorientation of characters, thoughts and actions, through sudden surprises and unexpected and incredible turns. However, thematically, the play is implicitly about feminist concern and highlights Pinter's attitude towards women in his plays.

The play operates at two levels. It presents the naked picture of extreme realism on one side and through a cluster of symbolic images and poetic metaphors it seems to present a poetic image of human condition with an archetypal dream image of wish fulfillment. Martin Esslin finds the play a kind of oedipal wish fulfillment.

In depth study of the play reveals certain vital issues. Why does Ruth remain impervious to insult and flattery? Why should a woman, the mother of three children and the wife of an American College Professor, calmly accept an offer to have herself set up as a prostitute? How could a husband not only consent to such an arrangement but actually put a proposition to his wife?

In an all male household, a family of predators Max, a former butcher, his chauffeur brother Sam, and his sons Lenny and Joey, a pimp and a part time boxer, - the eldest son Teddy returns after six years (from America where he teaches philosophy) with his wife Ruth -a surprise to the family who did not know he had married or that he had three sons. At the end of the play the family proposes that Ruth should stay, service them, and become a prostitute. Sam collapses after blurting out that Max's dead wife Jessie committed adultery with his best friend Mac Gregor. Teddy leaves for America and Ruth remains there.

In act I Teddy returns to his home. 'I was born here'. (P.38) In Act II Ruth Says 'I was born quite near here'. (P.53). Even in Act I there is a hint about Ruth's homecoming. Teddy gives her his key, which suggests a kind of possession. The title of the play *The Homecoming* indicates a return not only to a house, but also to a state of being; a set of relationships, attitudes, and values; an ineluctable condition: 'Nothing is changed', in Teddy's words, 'still the same'. (p.22)

The whole play disorients. Max, an ex-butcher, cooks what one of his sons calls dog food. A young fighter is knocked down by his old father. A philosopher refused to philosophize. A chauffeur is unable to drive. A pimp takes orders from his whore. The whore does not go all the way with a man. Words are disorienting in the play, for example when Lenny says of Teddy, 'and my goodness we are proud of him here, I can tell you. Doctor of philosophy and all that leaves... quite an impression' (p.31). Through disorientations in the play the dramatist perhaps wants to convey the impression that what is said is not what is meant.

During the opening dialogue Lenny reads the facing section of a newspaper while Max asks for scissors and a cigarette. Although Max wants them, what underlies his requests is demand for acknowledgement and attention. Lenny's indifference to his reminiscences, questions, insults and threats indicates that the exchange is commonplace. Usually Lenny says nothing, a suggestion of his superior status (really, if Lenny had not been dominant, Max would not have behaved as he does with him). When Lenny speaks, it is often to assert a prerogative or to silence Max. When he initiates a subject for example (horse racing), it is to re-establish his status by contradicting Max, and when Max continues on it; Lenny outright changes the subject of Conversation Lenny takes the Mickey out of Max who understands what Lenny is doing when Max loses his temper and threatens to hit Lenny with his walking stick, Lenny mocks him by talking in a childlike manner. Through the dialogues between Max and Lenny, it is apparent that they struggle for power demanding recognition of status and self. Ruth remains impervious to insult and flattery, she takes in the situation -a house full of males who have not had a woman living in the premises since the mother's death. The two dominant males, Lenny and Max, both initially respond to her with a blow of violence and repeated insults. Insults pervade the play. Ruth's encounter with Lenny, a struggle for domination, further reveals her proficiency at dealing with verbal stratagems. When she refuses an offer to provide a refreshment, he says that they do not have an alcoholic drink in the house. She does not respond, even with surprise to his insult. She is well aware of his technique but she does not reveal her technique to him. Lenny tries another tactic; he says that she must be connected with his brother. 'I'm his wife, she states (p.28). Instantly Lenny changes his subject and poses another insult, to which also, she does not respond. Nor does she react to his sexual provocation, which denies her status as his brother's wife; 'Isn't it funny? I've got my pajamas on and you are fully dressed". Maliciously taunting her, he suggests that she has left her husband. He speaks to her as if she were his brother's mistress. (What, you sort of live, with him over there, do you?)" By replaying not to the underlying mockery but to the words on the surface, Ruth denies Lenny's

satisfaction and control. When Lenny twice asks Ruth to hold her hand, she twice, unruffled, asks why? Ruth ultimately controls the situation by refusing to respond to Lenny. Ruth knows that the story about hitting and kicking a syphilis woman who propositioned him shocks or worries her, as she does show it but disconcertingly intimates, by asking him how he knows that the woman was diseased, that his violence does not concern her. More subtly, it is Ruth who in return insults Lenny. At the end of the scene, Ruth bullies him with the same property he used to bully her, a glass of water that, unasked, he gave her to drink. Now she refuses to surrender it. When he threatens to take it, she threatens to take him. Earlier he told her not to call him Leonard because it is the name his mother gave him. Finally it is evident that Ruth dominates Lenny by disregarding his order, and she demandingly puts him in the position of a child, insisting him to sit on her lap while he sips, then while she pours water into his mouth and commanding him to be on the floor while she pours it down his throat.

Further Max insults Ruth by calling her a tart, a slut, a scrubber, a whore, a slop bucket, a bedpan, and a disease, and after striking two men, he commands her to come to him maliciously calling her 'Miss'. Ruth calmly approaches Max -picking up a gauntlet without acknowledging that she does so. 'You a mother?' Yes, 'How many you got?' 'Three' (He turns to Teddy), 'All yours, Ted?' (p.43). Still she does not crack. Ruth remains cool, poised and unruffled. Sometimes she dominates through silence, as if in amused contempt.

What Pinter does so-consciously, it appears as it is carefully done to prepare the ground for Ruth's apparently shocking decision to junk her life as a campus wife and mother. The dramatist does it partly through the use of antithetical imagery. America for Teddy is a land of swimming pools, early morning sunlight, and quiet sedentary work. In London he says, there is nowhere to bathe: 'It's like a urinal. A filthy urinal! This is the view of a cerebral creature whose change of country amounts to an amputation of his animal inheritance. On the other hand, for Ruth, America is a desert populated only by insects: it is not the environment that supports animal life. The dirt and aggression of the London house provide the environment she needs. It conveys Eliotesque dryness and aridity. Max's speech sums up like this, "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died."

The play presents a shocking but matter-of-fact picture of sex and prostitution as well as inexplicable motivations of its main characters which may sound incredible. Is Max right? Is Ruth a whore? What for example, of her bout of snagging on the sofa with Joey?

Ruth's relationship with the family consists of extended bargaining. She has sex to offer, they have the territory, and in the end they strike a deal. In conventional terms she seems to get the worse of it; exchanging her status as a well-to-do wife and mother for life as a prostitute with four men to satisfy free of charge in her spare time Ruth is the sexual specialist, and the exercise of that function robs her of nothing, Sexually she retains the whip hand -a point which Pinter emphasizes in the last scene 'where Max falls on his knees begging for attention from Ruth. She is 'the queen bee' not the captive. As Irving Wardle observes, her own tactics are absolutely clear. She 'wants to translate sexual power into real estate, and she does so by specifying precisely the property she desires -the number of rooms, services domestic assistance, wardrobe -and putting the whole thing in contractual terms. It is a ritualized tournament in which the two institutes of sexual desire and territorial aspiration fight it out under the scrutiny of an emasculated observer on the sidelines." (p.171).

The play grows organically from an image of sexual disharmony. The play still shocks because of the absence of a conventional moral framework. It also reflects Pinter's love-hate relationship towards his characters, but it inevitably expresses certain values. The plot itself is clear enough. B. F. Dukore, putting it as neutrally as possible, says, several members of a male family struggle for power over each other and maneuver to win the favors of the sole woman in their midst.

As a feminist drama, *The Homecoming* presents the picture of feminist challenge to male despotism or women classified either as whores or mothers. From this standpoint the play shows the elusive Ruth escaping from an arid marriage and a sterile academic environment into one where she exercises social, sexual and economic control! Moreover, the play seems to be a radical advance upon all those plays -*A slight Ache, Night School, The Collection, The Lover*, where women challenge

patriarchal assumptions and explore male vulnerability. The play fulfils a pattern common to explicitly feminist drama. For example' Githa Sowerby's play *Rutherford and Son* (1912) presents the picture of a domestic tyrant, a wife having sent her husband packing strikes hard headed practical bargain based on sound economic principles Sowerby's heroine may be motivated by the need to guarantee her son's future rather than sexual power; but the basic dynamic is the same. The play appeals less to that of oedipal wish fulfillment than of female triumph over a male power structure.

Pinter himself has explicitly denied the charge of Ruth being a harlot, in an interview given to the American critic Henry Hewes in 1967:

"If this had been a happy marriage it wouldn't have happened. But (Ruth) didn't want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell she's going to do? She's misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says, "If you want to play this game I can play it as well as you." She does not become a Harlot. At the end of the play she is in possession of a certain kind of freedom, she can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street. But even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind. The most respectable women do this. This indicates total domination on part of Ruth .She gives orders. She destroys her sexuality to gain power and territory. She denies sexual climax to Joey. This provides the proof of her skillfully and tactfully using her sexuality as a weapon of control. She cuts through the male bullshit and dictates terms as she demands three rooms and a bathroom, a personal maid, a handsome wardrobe etc. So Ruth is an agent of change in the household which is obsessed with power, status and position, also one filled with strange eddy ambivalence towards women.

The play presents the inexplicable motives of its main characters through implications. However Pinter does not allow conventional exposition and background of characters' past history and their motivations. The characters never explain each other's past lives and motivation, which may be known to them. For example, Max was a butcher in his past and his friend Mac Gregor was a butcher too. It may be possible that Max and his friend Mac Gregor might have been members of the London half world of pimps and gangsters. As Max reminisces" Huhh! We were two of the worst hated men in the West tradition by taking up the profession of Soho pimp. Lenny's story about the beating up of diseased prostitute establishes his profession early in the play'. It is also possible that Sam could be an integral part of an organization like Lenny's. "Don't worry about the chauffeur" was an old friend of the family. (p.31). Perhaps Sam, who works for a respectable hire-car firm, might, in his past been a driver for prostitutes run by Max and MacGregor. When Sam tells Max that he was looking after Jessie, when driving her about the West End, may indicate that Jessie too might have been a prostitute.

When Lenny asks Max about the circumstances of his concept it would have been because of Jessie being involved in prostitution. When Max praises his dead wife Jessie at one point and calls her a slut bitch on the other point, and talks of her teaching morality to Lenny and Joey, becomes double edged and ambivalent. Ironically Joey and Lenny have the morality of Pimps or rapists. Only a prostitute could have taught them such morality. When Max bursts out indignantly at Ruth when the first meets her he assumes her a tart, I've never had a whore under this roof before, ever since your mother died." (p.42) It may mean that Jessie was a whore. Thus the final proposition by Max and Lenny put to Ruth to stay in the family as a prostitute could be natural because they had been dealing in prostitution for decades.

Teddy being an intellectual perhaps ran away from the home because he did not like his family's filthy business. Before marrying Teddy, Ruth was a nude photographic model -which is quite natural for a prostitute. Ruth recalls the country house as the scene for her nude posing by the lake full of drinks, sounds like the scene of orgies rather than a place of photography. It may be possible that Ruth was a prostitute or a near prostitute before her marriage to Teddy. It is quite possible that she dislikes the life of a respectable college professor's wife. That is the reason that Teddy leaves her and reassures her to manage without her.

Michael Billington agrees with Martin Esslin's view that the play is a form Oedipal wish fulfillment and that Lenny's desire to kill the father and find a mother substitute has been now that has

been of a suffocating husband Teddy, who has chosen the relative squalor of Hackney life over the sterile cleanliness of American academic, and it is she who has reconciled the supposedly incompatible roles of mother and whore. ' (P. 175) Pinter's plays are not statements, but the inference can be drawn from the dramatic action of the play and from the concluding image that at the end Ruth acquires a new freedom and their own empowerment through strength of will and sexual authority. As Penelope Gilliatt has written, "Ruth looks on her body rather as a landlord would look on a corner site. As soon as she has apparently been exploited sexually she really has the advantage because she owns the property."

Moreover, *The Homecoming* is an implicitly feminist play. It can be termed as a very tight East End domestic drama. Though it is specifically a Jewish drama presenting the Hackney society but at the same time it makes total sense in non Jewish societies too. As Supple makes an observation that, Pinter's reference points are autobiographical and are then invested with larger significance. As all his early plays were triggered with personal experience; but Pinter's genius is to apprehend the universal meaning that lies within the particular moment. This is what distinguishes true artists from the recorder of events. (P. 176).

One can be repelled by the cruelty and viciousness and complexity of the play. Even Pinter's closest friends Joan Backwell and Simon Gray found it disgusting. They say that Ruth is an enigma that the writer can not resolve. Ruth is not a sexual fantasy; she's a dramatist's fantasy. She got Harold out of pickle. You do not know enough about her and you don't believe she did marry a British academic, But don't British academics ever marry whores? , not unless they're very lucky' (P. 178.)

Conclusion

To sum up, *The Homecoming* is Pinter's masterpiece. It starts with fragmentary dialogues about marital disharmony, but it transforms all memories into a spectacle recreating the cruel intimacies and day today maneuverings of family life with an abhorrent fascination. I follow Michael Billington's words to conclude that in *Ruth*, Pinter gives us not an empty cipher or a blank theatrical device, but a positive, strong willed woman who both exposes phallogocentric vanity and necessary dramatic feat of disrupting the power structure and changing the situation. (p.178).

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