



Research Paper

## Harold Pinter's "The Homecoming" Athematic Study of Gender and Power

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### Abstract

*This paper aims at examining the gender and power in Pinter's full length play The Homecoming. This work confused audiences around the world with its rich and intricate texture, and was their victory with its meticulous artistic theatrical intent. Pinter's main concerns in this play are gender, power, linguistic ambiguity, and the relationship between joy and power. Above all, Pinter's The Homecoming remains fascinating and offers no solution. It is the relationship between gender and power where characters struggle for authority within the family structure. This paper examines the ways in which Pinter's characters invade power and gender and the various ways men try to dominate one another emotionally and physically, but fail to control females.*

**Keywords:** Harold Pinter, play, The Homecoming, Gender, power.

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### I. Introduction

According to Victor Khan, the central theme that pervades all of Pinter's work is a variety of influences: "a struggle of meaning in a fragmented, immeasurable world" (gender and power 2). )

Is the resulting punishment. All Pinter characters often feel uneasy about their beliefs, perceptions, and themselves. Therefore, this uncertainty becomes the structure and form of his drama, as it makes the situation much more complicated with multiple levels and meanings of text and subtext. In Cahn, when the meaning is uncertain, all objects and areas are definable, and the language is a mask of protection, the relationship between power and gender, and control over others, is accessible only by knowledge and identity (Gender and Power 5).

The main motive of the Pinter drama is the quest for power, and this tendency is closely linked to the acquisition and maintenance of control. His early work introduces many themes that arise from the repeated relationship of power in later plays. Throughout his career, he has experimented with new types of structural and thematic concerns. In his book Harold Pinter: The Theater of Power, Robert Gordon raised concerns about these subjects by fighting the exercise of power in the words of power, gender, gender, and building identity, and defending his territory. Classified as a territorial obligation to protect one's identity. Therefore, the scope of this study is to look at Pinter's play "Homecoming," which is useful for interpretation by the gender and power motif

Teddy: "What do you think of the room? Big, isn't it? It's a big house. I mean it is a fine room, don't you think? Actually, there was a wall across there...with a door. We knocked it down... years ago... to make an open living area. The structure wasn't affected, you see. My mother was dead" (Pinter's complete works: Three 37).

*The Homecoming* is Pinter's third full length play presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in 1965. Pinter is one of the finest playwrights who to emerge in the modern era who has mirrored the truth of man's evasiveness. His main concerns in *The Homecoming* are the gender terror, identity and ambiguity of language as well as the relationship between power and lust. In such a narrative every gesture, action, and word counts for something significant. Furthermore in a minimal space, every word and move has a tantalizing motion. In this paper, we'll explore how Pinter's characters invade space, where men try to control

each other emotionally or physically, but not control women. Therefore, this work is one of the most powerful and symbolic of Pinter's theatrical works.

The teddy speech above sets the storyline for a play about gender, space, family, and their dynamics. This speech suggests the family as a system, unit, or structure. Owning space is the main concern of characters involved in territorial disputes to maintain their identity. They are charged with their respective careers and identities and enter the house. When confronting each other, conflict arises and they fall into a territorial struggle to prove themselves and establish their identity through vocations attributed to them. With the arrival of women, the struggle between territory and the beast shifts to possession of the female figure. She will also enter this game of power with her own strategies to maintain her identity and she disrupts men's homosocial frame.

The action in *The Homecoming* is both simple and shocking. MAX works with his son's son, Lenny and JOEY. Lenny The latest son is smart and smart and does not explore his occupation as a poppong of the second act of the game. Another Joey is an amateur boxer and seems to be awkwardly and slowly. SAM is a set taxi driver, and he claims he is a famous driver of the company. His son's mother, Jesse, died a few years ago, but Max's feelings for her are in conflict between love and hate. Max recalls the memory of his best friend McGregor, who died two years ago. At the beginning of the first act, we learn that the boy turned out to be very rude to Max and he was aggressive against them. Max treats Sam with contempt. Because he runs a house, cooks, and takes care of everyone. The teddy speech above sets the storyline for a play about gender, space, family, and their dynamics. This speech suggests the family as a system, unit, or structure. Owning space is the main concern of characters involved in territorial disputes to maintain their identity. They are charged with their respective careers and identities and enter the house. When confronting each other, conflict arises and they fall into a territorial struggle to prove themselves and establish their identity through vocations attributed to them. With the arrival of women, the struggle between territory and the beast shifts to possession of the female figure. She will also enter

During the night, when the inhabitants are in bed, the unexpected guests arrive. Teddy, Max's third son enters the house with his wife, Ruth. Teddy had left home six years ago and is a doctor of philosophy at an American university. Meanwhile Ruth's equanimity is most remarkable when she meets Lenny. She is brought back home by Teddy to be introduced to the family but she seems quite at ease while Teddy is tense. *The Homecoming* is strikingly baffling, convulsive and terrible. The characters behave shockingly and the dialogue is ambiguous. It seems that the occupants of the house live in a modern jungle in which social values are of least importance. Ruth's transformation from a "respectable woman into a whore" and "with such complete nonchalance" is disturbing (Esslin 4). Walter Kerr points out that Pinter, "has drugged us all, aching , through a half drugged dream" (New York Times 29). Above all, Pinter's *The Homecoming* remains fascinating and offers no solution. It is the relationship between gender and power where the characters struggle for authority within the family structure.

In *The Homecoming* every character looks for his or her advantage using whichever weapons that are available to overcome one another. However, Ruth, turns dominant in this animalistic climate. Ruth's sexual process is a potent tool for altering the territorial authority of the house. Thus, she "translates her sexual power into a real state" (Wardle 44) and subjugates the wrecked male characters who are sexually repressed.

The play is a form of Oedipal battle which provides fulfillment for Ruth and provides her freedom of choice over how she chooses to live. One can say that Ruth is in power when Lenny desires to overcome Max and have her as his surrogate mother. In every encounter with the inhabitants Ruth achieves advantage using her sexuality as a weapon to control the dynamics of the situation. One such example is the scene where Lenny tries to force her to sip the glass of water and she displays the terror of female sexuality:

**Lenny:** Just give me the glass.

**Ruth :** No.

**Lenny:** I'll take it then.

**Ruth:** If you take the glass...I'll take you.

**Lenny:** How about me taking the glass without you Taking me?

**Ruth:** Why don't I just take you? (Complete works: Three 50)

Teddy's homecoming is, in actuality, interpreted as being Ruth's because she is the one who once again identifies with her former self and claims territory. The new role she wishes to adopt is in conflict with her current role as a mother. In the opening scene it was Teddy who wanted to stay but now it is he who wishes to leave because of his identity being at stake. Ruth cannot reconcile finally with her former career of nude modelling and present role as a wife and mother. She rejects Teddy to redeem herself to re-enter into her former identity. Teddy is also unable to reconcile with the self who was before and the self as a dutiful son to Max and loyal spouse to Ruth. Ruth invades the territory though Max and Lenny bully her, but she dominates over the

males through her sexuality. She retains her former identity to fulfil her needs by her choice and also becomes the surrogate queen who rules the house. Max loses his territory but in return achieves Ruth's attention. Lenny and Joey neither win nor lose in achieving sexual favours from Ruth.

With the entrance of Ruth to the house, the focus shifts from possession of territory to possession of the female. Teddy and his wife return home. The focus shifts from the possession of territory to the possession of the females. Teddy and his wife return home after six years, so Teddy feels insecure when he explains about the structure of the house. What actually affects him is the empty space of his dead mother, otherwise the structure would have remained intact. Teddy tries to comfort Ruth and placate her saying "I am with you. There is no need to be nervous" (39). This reflects an attempt on his part to have possession over her. However, the power in their relationship belongs to Ruth as she remains beyond his control.

Ruth finds that all men in this house lack masculinity because of the situation they are in. Max devotes himself to cooking and nurturing the boys. Lenny is hesitant to continue with his proposal, while Joey turns failed to go "the whole hog" (82), and Sam is still bachelor at age of sixty-three. Ruth establishes her identity as a woman and confirms it when she reveals that she was a nude model and she has guts to deal such contacts with men in her former vocation. Therefore the power in the domestic space as well as in the commercial space is hers whereas the men are emotionally and physically dependant.

In the entire scenario, Teddy remains shockingly uncertain, weak, and defeated. He cannot prove himself intellectually as a doctor of philosophy and behaves passively like his wife would have been expected to behave. When Joey finishes unsuccessful in his sexual session with Ruth, Teddy comments "He had her up for two hours and he did not go the whole hog" (84), while on one hand it is not expected of a cultured professor who reports his wife's illicit affair on another, it could be of a fact that he has already decided to return home according to a fixed plan. He is meticulous in his calculation and redeems himself in a more liberal manner than divorce in this democratic jungle.

After Teddy is gone, Ruth reinforces her new identity in the centre of the family, a certain kind of power which is in her control. As Pinter himself has said "she's in possession of certain kind of freedom" (Hewes 57), while Margaret Croydon calls her, "the modern bitch-goddess, who finds pleasure in the contemporary materialistic jungle"(49).

*The Homecoming* depicts how a female exploits her body as a tool to retain her identity and rule over the opposite sex. Ruth is successful in this game and performs in different identities and roles to dominate the men in the household.

The dominant ideology of this peculiar family is that of their dual notion in respect of a woman as a maternal figure and whore. Max's words regarding Jessie and his words about Ruth are indicative of the family ideology. Jessie is described as a woman with "a heart of gold and a mind" (62) and "a slutbitch of wife" (63), while in his first encounter with Ruth she is "stinking pox-ridden slut"(57), and later according to Max, she is wonderful and "a charming woman" (65). Teddy's treatment with Ruth also follows this ideology when he met her as nude model, and later he tries to transform her into a maternal image.

Taylor-Betty believes that Ruth is the "victim of male obsession"(45), so their patriarchal power stems from their psychology, which constructs Ruth's identity. They decided to belittle her from her status as a wife to a whore and then they decided to upgrade and overvalue her from a photographic model to a wife.

*The Homecoming* is the story of a typical Western woman who is depicted by Pinter as a disaffected and inferior character. She is attacked on all sides but ultimately chooses her own way to master her desires in a patriarchal circle. Pinter's own remark about this woman goes like this, "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 if she will go off to Greek street" (Hewes 57). Ruth is the individual who should decide if she wants to live in the house or leave it. She is yet not sure about the situation which has happened and is seeking hope to be treated affectionately. When she confirms of the agreement, Lenny asks for the time she would like to finalize it. To which she responds "Oh, we'll leave it till later" (94). One could also approach the character of Ruth from different point of view opposite to her aforementioned caricature. Throughout the play Ruth is consciously and consistently misread and misinterpreted by the men. Her husband Teddy is the one who cannot understand her and remains indifferent to the needs of his wife. Lenny and Max both are deliberately hostile, aggressive and rude to Ruth and they ignore her existence. In this dark situation where she is absurd, insulted and ignored, Ruth tries to go her own way for survival.

Ruth only emphasizes on her former vocation as a "nude photographic model" but Martin Esslin in his book, *The Peopled Wound* claimed that Ruth has been known for prostitute (159), which is not true. This is what the men decide for her as they translate her identity. So, Ruth in the battle for gender and power stands to defend herself as she chooses her own tactics by accepting to kiss and dance with Lenny and then to roll on the couch with Joey and tease him in bed. It is as Kathleen Tynan claims that Ruth's reaction only stemmed from her sheer despair (8) and it is not related to lust.

Despite all interpretation that Ruth deliberately breaks with the bondage of marriage, I believe that Ruth holds some hope of maintaining her matrimonial life with Teddy when she says "Eddy. I become a stranger"(97), but she sides with her husband's family as a kind of rebel where her needs are ignored and her essence is disregarded. On the other hand, Teddy's negligence stems from his effort to gain the family's approval, when he makes the proposal to her. Ruth, who doesn't like to hear such words from her husband, thus, turns against him and chooses to stay to gain power over the entire family.

The struggle for power and dominance over one another is the crucial means for every character to gain identity, though inevitably such struggle destroys love and friendship. Ruth's position at the end of the play is dominant and it is she who chooses to command. Penelope Prentice calls Ruth, "a model of virtue" because her strength is threatened by the circumstances around her, but she acts wisely to achieve her best at last (148).

In the domestic theatre spaces of Pinter's theatre, where the four walls of a room are the center of the conflict, space becomes a site for contestation between the sexes over power and territory. Robert Ardrey believes that it is misunderstood that competition between males is motivated only by the possession of females, but it is more often than not also for the possession of territory (11). Ruth is the only woman in the play who succeeds to gain territory and as an outsider she asserts her identity within the house. By her arrival into this arena, she disrupts the existing struggle for power within the house. She dislodges the patriarchal order of the family and defies power and gender role of the household.

I would like to bring in Hanna Scolnicov's notion regarding rational between female and space which illustrated to feminine as an element of space while the masculine is an agent for action. Where a male character claims for a space by his action, a female character assimilates itself with the space (2). Thus, Ruth is an element of space. Teddy says to Ruth that the structure of the house was affected After the death of his mother. The walls are removed and the new structure is associated with the absence of the mother. This illustrates the feminine assimilation with the space while Mark Silverstein writes of Teddy's attempt to "re-situate Jessie" in the house where patriarchy had tried to articulate Jessie's removal as "a kind of architectural defeminization of space" (81).

In *The Homecoming* Ruth mimics a subversion of masculine subject position which Lacan referred to as the "symbolic father", as an identity or ideological representation that is illustrated through cultural code of patriarchy. Thus, Ruth tries to struggle for victory over the symbolic father and undermines the patriarchal structure of the family as well as relocates her symbolic return. However, Ruth appears to negate and at the same time empower the political regulation between genders. *The Homecoming* focuses on the psychoanalytic and transmutes patriarchy. The play deals with these spaces to deconstruct the patriarchal family and the way it struggles over the possession of a woman. In the contract scene, Ruth challenges men's position of authority but her exchanges in this scene reaffirm her status a commodity. This is in conflict with what Pinter claimed regarding Ruth as her exchanges with Lenny represent her identity both as wife and whore.

Ruth: I would naturally want to draw up an inventory  
Of everything I would need which would require your  
Signatures in the presence of witness.

Lenny: Naturally.

Ruth: All aspects of agreement and conditions of  
Employment would have to be clarified to our mutual  
Satisfaction before we finalize the contract.

Lenny: Of course. (Compete works: Three 90).

Ruth asks for a flat with "three rooms and a bathroom ...a personal maid... supply my wardrobe... otherwise I wouldn't be content" (92-93), which reveals the social and ideological practices that makes a woman a subject or object within the patriarchal family. According to Silverstein, Ruth's conditions in the contract indicate her notion of power which "may seek to transform prostitution from a form of exploitation into an instrument of empowerment" (79).

*The Homecoming* focuses on the crisis of patriarchy within the structure of family as a site for ideological production to examine the individual's place in the system of social relation. The role of mother is prominent in such social apparatuses as Max says it was Jessie who "taught those boys everything they know" (61). Thus, Ruth is the agent of transmission of ideology, involving the family members for the subject position manifested in patriarchal culture.

Ruth resists different forms of masculine power. To what extent she succeeds, is to be argued in her ability to challenge what Barthes terms fascination, authority ... power to castrate to assign to the symbolic father (36). Further, Ruth takes advantage of her subject position and her mimicry which leads her first to dismantle the family as an institution of masculine power and then to reconstitute the family as a unit in which power shifts from Max as father to Ruth as a mother. This play *The Homecoming* is a sort of play in which the structure of patriarchy has been examined through social identities which are articulated with dominant gender ideology. This ideology locates itself within Ruth's matriarchy and in Silverstein's words "It challenges the patriarchal economy of power only to invalidate all association between desire and power" (108). Ruth exercises different forms of power over the men in the household. One of these forms of power is to deconstruct and reconstruct the patriarchal family. She proves triumphant through exercising phallic power: the power to castrate and to fascinate. Ruth's victory disrupts the space of patriarchal power and her own imitation saves and restores the identity of symbolic father. In reality, it is Max with his lack of action who provides a new channel for Ruth to return home successfully.

Pinter portrays male violence against women as well as gender inequality in this play quite subtly. When Ruth learns that there is no way except sexual power to compete in such patriarchal and unequal space, she chooses to utilize her body as a tool of empowerment. When Ruth is confronted with the household's pimp's offer for prostitution, she chooses to negotiate about her facilities, expensive garments and other luxuries in the given flat as her privileges. Pinter actually depicts how abuse of prostitution becomes a social trauma in the patriarchal culture. Subsequently, Ruth takes advantages of her sexuality as a tool for power to survive in such an unequal space of patriarchy.

To conclude the climax of the play and the shocking menacing power and gender is related to Ruth when she agrees to become a prostitute. *The Homecoming* portrays a human being whose suffering arises from his inability to form living human contact with others. Teddy, who is an exponent of ideas, a doctor of philosophy, cannot enter into interpersonal relationship with the sexually maladjusted and instinctive members of his family who prefer degeneration to refinement. Teddy's wife Ruth seeks fulfillment in the family. Teddy who lacks strength of passion to sustain marital bond, leaves home to look for shelter in his works of Philosophy. However, the play which deals with a family, probably seems to dramatize the themes of gender, betrayal, territory, quest for identity, degeneration and inter-personal relationships. It also aims to dramatize the theme of power of dominance with language and sex as matrix of power. The present paper attempts to study the gender and power. Teddy, the central character of the play, a doctorate in Philosophy, sets before himself the goal of a happy respectable life with his wife Ruth and three children. But two main problems stand in his way of a life of happiness. One is related to himself and the other is related to his wife. Therefore as Wardle Writes *The Homecoming* "has to be understood in territorial terms or not at all" (40). One sees that *The Homecoming* deals with the power, gender and space of the self and divided self, left in the old home, but now revisited and challenged by people who are returning to the space where it has high dynamic potential for power, sexuality, and maintenance of dominance.

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