

THE AMBIGUOUS REPRESENTATION OF PINTER'S WOMEN IN "THE HOMECOMING"

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the linguistic tools employed by Harold Pinter in depicting women in the context of the twentieth century. A close reading of the play exhibits a particular reference to the ideological representation of gender, articulated mostly through the cultural codes of language and the attributes of the patriarchal society. As the argument goes, *The Homecoming* identifies the source of a series of ambiguous instances that resonate in Ruth's and the male characters' behaviours throughout the play. This paper reacts to the articulation of cultural power through the linguistic exchange between Ruth and the male members of the family. Language is, indeed, a tool used to gain control over the other. The fragmented discourse of Max at the end of the play proves that it's Ruth who is manipulating the male characters and it is not the opposite case. To conclude, this paper expands on a thematic study to demystify the representation of women in the new era. The play produces its own form of cultural power through a disruptive linguistic discourse.

Keywords: Ambiguity; Cultural Power; Female Representation; Fragmentation.

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter, known for his unique theatrical style and enigmatic discourse, often presents an ambiguous and complex representation of women in his works. Critics have engaged in extensive analysis of Pinter's plays. They often delve into the complexities of female characters and their roles within the broader thematic context. The female figures in Pinter's plays, such as the characters in "*The Homecoming*" or "*The Birthday Party*", are frequently depicted with a sense of mystery, their motivations, inner thoughts as well as their social lives are shrouded in ambiguity. Many critics argue that Pinter's treatment of women reflects societal restrictions and power dynamics, while others explore the psychological and emotional complexities embedded in his portrayals. For instance, Carolyn A. Brown, in her book "*Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*" (2007), analyses Pinter's works, and examines the ways in which he addresses and reflects upon societal rules and power structures, particularly concerning the portrayal of women in his plays. Critics like Brown explain how Pinter's characters, especially women, steer and challenge the constraints imposed by societal expectations, highlighting the broader socio-cultural context within the playwright's body of work.

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2. Literature Review

The playwright's use of language and silence further adds layers of interpretation, leaving room for speculation about the true nature of the female characters' agency and autonomy. Pinter's elusive approach to female characters has sparked discussions on gender roles, identity, and the representation of women in literature, making his works an intriguing subject for scholarly exploration. Pinter's play "The Homecoming" draws upon a newly formed dramatic construct. His dramatic style has been given a particular label which goes hand in hand with the display of a critical situation the modern world goes through. There is no doubt that Pinter's style stirs up the reaction of the reviewers, in different ways, the various Pinteresque aspects of the play confirm Pinter's dramatic gift. "Although the critical reactions to the play *The Homecoming* were not in fact wholly favourable, and the majority of the reviews express reservations, the reviewers nevertheless acknowledge and accept Pinter's dramatic talent" (Raby, 2001, p. 217).

In fact, this paper handles two essential issues; the ambiguity of the world and how Pinter adapted to that ambiguity and reflects it in his dealing with the female presence in the play. In the second part, he constructs the image of a free woman, a woman who quits the social restrictions to face manly aggression. By the time when the play was written, an intense controversy revolving around the representation of women had emerged. Reviewers estimated that Pinter's use of a quite unfamiliar linguistic style can be perceived as a direct reaction to the intense expression of an unfathomable reality. As an attempt to challenge the patriarchal constructed image of women, Pinter seems to contribute to another image that emanates from an enigmatic sense of being. By examining the play; "it becomes clear that Pinter's female representation undergoes a shift within this [ambiguous] milieu" (p.233). Faithful to his old conviction that the writer's language should never be isolated from the situation of the world he or she lives in, he insisted on an elusive representation of women. The world is heading blindly towards meaninglessness and confusion; consequently, the role of women undergoes a shift.

To many readers, it appears that Harold Pinter expresses a biased and sexist vision in the play. The forged image of "the mother" and "the whore," cultivated by patriarchal society, often misleads critics into regarding Harold Pinter as a misogynistic writer. A profound analysis of the play, however, suggests that Ruth's character refrains from any such patriarchal scrutiny. Actually, Pinter "seems to have realized the limitations of a totally masculine standpoint and to have set out to forge a new image of a woman. Every new creation shows the artist attaching fresh attributes to various aspects of the feminine" (Sakellaridou, 1988, p. 11). Ruth, the most enigmatic of all the play's characters, holds a powerful presence over the hostile male figures. In the terms of Harold Pinter, Ruth is "in a kind of despair that gives her a kind of freedom. Certain facts like marriage and family have clearly ceased to have meaning" (Raby, 2001, p. 222). Ruth is the sole female figure who appears on stage, and she is the most perplexing character.

In the play, Max talks about another female figure, Jessie, the mother. He says to Ruth, 'Listen, I'll tell you something. Since poor Jessie died, eh, Sam? We haven't had a woman in the house. Not one, inside this house. And I'll tell you why. Because their mother's image was so dear any other woman would have...tarnished it. But you...Ruth...You're not only lovely and beautiful, but you're kin. You're kith. You belong here" (Pinter, 2001, p. 61). Jessie, the mother, does not appear on stage and it is Ruth who replaces her. The most elusive thing about women in the play is their contradictory descriptions. On one hand, Jessie is portrayed as "not such a bad woman, a charming woman [...] who taught the boys everything they know, taught them all the morality they know." She is described as "the backbone of the family with a will of iron,

a heart of gold, and a mind" (p. 75). On the other hand, she is depicted as a filthy creature. Max expresses, "It made me sick just to look at her face," and he refers to her as "a slut bitch of a wife" (p. 15). Harold Pinter does often use contradictory descriptions which place the reader in front of contradictory interpretations. Indeed, he perceives the world we live in as an absurd wasteland, where confusion constitutes its essential creed. In other words, he adapts his dramatic style to the worldly confusion we experience.

3. Methodology

In this analysis, opting for a thematic study provides a thorough and comprehensive lens through which to analyse the complex portrayal of female characters. By highlighting important themes such as power dynamics and familial relationships, a thematic approach allows for a significant analysis of how these elements coincide and shape the representation of women in the play. uncovering the various threads that connect various scenes and character conversations, a thematic study ensures the identification of patterns and contradictions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the women's roles within the domestic sphere. Through this analytical framework, readers can gain insights into the intricacies of gender interplay "The Homecoming," going beyond individual character examination to unveil broader social representations incorporated within the play.

4. Discussion

At the play's outset, Pinter depicts Ruth as being the sole character in the play who unchains herself from any moral restriction and reduces any possibility of falling into the abyss of linguistic misinterpretations. Max and his sons, in contrast, "have become lost in their personal level of being and confuse the contents of their minds with an assumed concrete reality" (Haney, 1998, p.122). The dissonance between male and female characters in the play expands on Pinter's notion of language as a tool to exploit the gender conflict. To investigate this assumption about language and cultural power, Gordon argues that "Sex, gender and the construction of identity: focus on how the performance of gender is formative in the construction of identity, and how sexuality manifests itself through, between and across gendered identities, manifesting its force in language and behaviour." (2). Ruth assumes the conventional roles of wife and mother, a characterization reinforced by her husband Teddy, who extols her virtues as a supportive partner. Teddy praises Ruth's qualities, declaring her a "wonderful wife and mother" and describing their life together as idyllic, complete with a lovely house and all they desire (p.12).

However, when the spotlight turns on Ruth, her responses are marked by deliberate silences and pauses, creating an air of mystery. This verbal reticence becomes a source of dominance for Ruth, as exemplified in a pivotal scene with Lenny, known as "the glass scene." Despite her brevity, Ruth manipulates Lenny's thoughts, employing short sentences and strategic pauses to assert control. As Knowles (1995) notes, the male characters attempt to confine Ruth within predefined roles, yet their efforts prove futile. Ruth's enigmatic presence and linguistic prowess challenge societal expectations, casting her as a compelling and elusive figure within the play's intricate dynamics (p. 493). She is not only a mother, she is not only a wife, she is not only a whore; in fact, she is a combination of all of that at once. Whenever a man attempts to impose a singular role on her or simplify her into just one defined character, she defeats him, transcending limits and skillfully manipulating the situation. She embodies freedom, and any attempt to confine her within limits proves futile.

Indeed, Lenny “can’t intimidate her, Joey can’t go whole hog with her; Teddy can’t make her leave, Max is left begging her for a kiss at the end of the play, and while they may think they have convinced her to do what they want, it certainly appears as though she has the upper hand” (Coe, 1977, p. 422). It is crucial to highlight that, in the power dynamics between Ruth and the male characters, Harold Pinter employs language as a formidable tool, “a weapon with which each character tries to impose his rules on the other” (Almansi & Henderson, 1983, p. 61). The brevity of Ruth's sentences not only reflects her self-confidence but also underscores the formidable position she holds over the other characters. In the linguistic confrontation with Lenny, Ruth effectively wields her language to assert dominance, defeating him in the process. Even the enigmatic silences woven into her speech carry an unparalleled charm. This dynamic is particularly evident in the following passage, where Ruth's linguistic prowess not only establishes her authority but also adds an intriguing layer to her character.

Lenny: My name’s Lenny. What’s yours?

Ruth: Ruth.

She sits and puts her coat collar around her.

Lenny: Cold?

Ruth: No.Pause.

Lenny: It’s been a wonderful summer, hasn’t it? Remarkable.

Lenny: Would you like something? Refreshment of some kind? An aperitif, anything like that?

Ruth: No. Thanks.

Pause. (Pinter, 2001, p. 42-43).

An imminent perlustration of this conversation is evocative of the dominance of Ruth’s verbal force. With few words she is able to draw the attention of the male ‘other’. According to Leslie Kane in her book *The Language of Silence on the Spoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama*, the language of the play “heralds to the nature of the characters. Characters stand outside their non-participation in the speech act. [It] symbolizes their withdrawal from temporal, spatial, or social reality” (p.19). In this respect, Ruth’s withdrawal from long speech acts alludes to her withdrawal from any social abides. She is too strong to be limited by social restrictions.

In an interview with De Mel Gussow for the *New York Magazine* in December 1971, Harold Pinter argues that “the Pause is a pause because of what has just happened in the minds and guts of the characters. They spring out of the text” (Gauthier, 2003, p. 102). The use of pauses often adapts to the inner thoughts of the characters. When they speak with Ruth; the male characters resort frequently to hesitations and long pauses. When their language fails them, they try silence but, in both cases, they fail. Ruth is too strong to be manipulated. Indeed, in the play, the female character is “seen and heard against a silence” (Knowles, 1995, p. 42). The unsayable and the unspeakable endow her with a great power. Her power is one of experience and not of words and the greater her power is the more difficult is its articulation with words. The play centres on the character of Ruth as the representative of women. In Pinter’s dramatic world, “women continually play the double role of [...] the lover, the role of wife and mistress [...] and in the *Homecoming* Ruth sends her respectable professor husband back to their three children in America while she remains with all-male family in England in the combined role of mother, wife and whore” (Burkman, 2001, p. 92). No matter how shocking Ruth's attitude is in the play, Harold Pinter embraces the condensed violence of the

world and mirrors it in the new portrayal of women. Women start to challenge patriarchal limits by rejecting singular role statuses. In brief, "The Homecoming" delves into themes of both "love and lack of love," to encapsulate the prevailing mood of the twentieth century. In an attempt to escape the surrounding ugliness, people turn to pipe dreams, with women, in particular, resorting to their sexuality as a means to assert their power.

According to Katherine H. Burkman, "Pinter's own treatment of the eternally traitorous wife is often deeply sympathetic, although the focus in his plays varies, sometimes lighting on the suffering husband" (p.96). In "The Homecoming," Ruth remains in the company of the male members of the family with the approval of her husband, a situation that proves to be quite shocking. Indeed, the play serves as an "overstatement of Pinter's recurrent identification of woman as mother and whore" (96). Ruth the wife appears at first with all eminence, then she gradually counts up on the whore status. The whore "by definition, lacks definition". According to Walter Kerr; "existentially speaking; we are life's whores to the degree that we are in motion and have not arbitrarily codified and thereby stilled ourselves" (Burkman, 2001, p.103). Harold Pinter concentrates on the whore figure just to adjust and adapt to the fragmented sense of reality. One of the charms of the play is the sophisticated mechanism with which Harold Pinter was able to establish the conception of a character "as potential rather than as something fixed [which] suggests that the playwright's recurrent use of the whore image in his plays is his way of [adapting] to the fluidity of identity" (Free, 1969, p.103). In a highly fragmented world, identity is no longer a fixed whole. The gradual change in the character of Ruth conveys the reality of the modern world, a torn world where "the wholeness is replaced by its fragments" (p.103).

A woman is no longer a fixed thing. A woman is neither an eternal mother nor an eternal whore. She is set in "a modern sophisticated world with which a character can hardly cope" (p.107); thereby she unveils her different hidden sides to challenge the world's fragmentation. Despite her power, this has left her with a kind of psychological trauma. In fact, "on a realistic plane, Ruth's behaviour in the play is both shocking and bizarre" (107). She left her comfortable life in America to face the hardship of a torturing male house in England. She is going to play the role of a prostitute with each one of them. Indeed, she dances with her husband's brother Lenny and kisses him, rolls on the couch with his brother Joey, and contracts to stay on with her father-in-law Max as a general housekeeper, prostitute, and mother- all before her husband's eyes and finally with his consent, realistically speaking, such macabre behaviour is only comprehensible if Ruth is regarded as a nymphomaniac whom her husband willingly unloads. (Burkman, 2001, p.108) Ruth is supposed to be a female whose sexuality is shockingly high, but in this context of a hostile world, she uses her sexuality on purpose to defy the male characters. In the play, Max does often "greet Ruth as a slut who will replace his wife" (p.108). This is obvious in the following excerpt:

Max: I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, and he shacks up in my house!

Teddy: She's my wife! We're married!

Pause.

Max: I've never had a whore under this roof before, ever since your mother died. They come back from America; they bring the slop bucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. (To Teddy): Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me" (Pinter, 2001, p.32).

Despite Max's insults, Ruth maintains full control of the situation. She has perfectly demonstrated her power over him, culminating in his plea for a kiss at the play's final blow. She emerges as a symbol of the fertility Goddess within the narrative. Notably, Jessie is portrayed by Max as both an angel and a betrayer, labelled alternately as a bitch and a whore; Ruth, in turn, is more willing to embrace the dual role accurately assigned to her by Max (Knowles, 1995, p.109). In this regard, Ruth is the selected character to embody this dual role for the male figures. Harold Pinter is keen on presenting life-like characters that capture scenes of real life. His dramatic technique which reflects the enigma of the world puts the nail on the fragmented identity of women. Harold Pinter is projecting the image of a woman who succeeds in asserting her superiority despite the aggressive nature of those who surround her.

In many instances throughout the play, she was able to defend herself and gain her freedom. In this respect, Pinter argues that despite the male characters' attacks, Ruth overweighs their verbal battles and wins the game. Despite the initial impression that a woman possesses an immoral presence due to her sexual nature, it becomes evident throughout the play that Harold Pinter invests her with significant power over the household once her sexual desires are unleashed. It is noteworthy to mention that "The Homecoming" stands as the first play by Pinter to depict a woman initially portrayed as subservient, facing attacks from all sides, ultimately transforming into a dominant figure who successfully attains something positive – her freedom (p.110). He says that “she 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’” (Hewes, 2005, p.57).

Representative of the patriarchal society in the twentieth century, this family reflects social norms that unfairly condemn women while overlooking men's actions. In line with this, Teddy's family contradictorily judges Ruth without evidence, labelling her as a whore, while simultaneously accepting Lenny as a pimp. This family's distorted perspective transforms a wife into a mere prostitute by reducing the significance of the term "wife" to a mere identifier, subverting the integrity of marriage. This becomes evident in the following quote: Teddy's family ironically condemns Ruth without evidence for her guilt as a whore or as a slut, whereas accepts Lenny as a Pimp.

Thereby, this family converts a wife to a mere prostitute, by regarding the word wife, as a mere label and to make marriage be off of any bounds. This is clear as Sam exclaims against the family's proposal to keep Ruth, ‘but she's his wife’” (p. 68). In this context, Ruth's behaviour is just an attempt to protect herself from the males' behaviour. Teddy is neither able to protect Ruth nor to keep the bond of their marriage. She is not immoral but being a whore is her only alternative to defeat the males of the house and protect herself. Ruth thinks that “if she has to be a whore, she will be a whore in her way and style and not theirs” (p.68). She is the sole character in the play who can decide on her own without the interference of the others. She is free. Besides, “She is not a nymphomaniac” (Penelope, 2013, p.127) or as Austin Quigley estimates that “when she comes with Teddy, Ruth is indeed coming to her home to her former self” (Quigley, 1975, p.205). Her husband ceases to show her respect and he becomes a kind of damage to her.

It is noteworthy to mention that it is Teddy who first talked with Ruth about his family's proposal, “Ruth...The family has invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As... as a kind of guest” (Pinter, 2001, p.75). In these terms, Teddy acknowledges his disrespect and filthiness towards his wife. Indeed “it is with his behaviour that Ruth decides to go on her struggle to gain freedom. From that point on, Ruth turns against Teddy to gain power over the whole family by attaching to their proposal a series of conditional demands for clothing, rooms and personal maid” (Hewes, 2005, p.134). Needless to say, Harold Pinter reflects the situation of many women who are suffering from the despair evoked by the patriarchal society. It is out of this

kind of oppression that many women start to strive for their freedom and prove their strength. This situation “deepens the [female] character and breaks up the differences between the characters. Hence the end of the play serves Ruth in that it presents her as equal to other characters” (p.134). Ruth proves to be the equal of the male characters and she shows great capabilities in manipulating the game.

Ironically, in the play, Teddy the philosopher, “the lover of the truth, claims that Ruth is unwell and that he offers the family a model of virtue, by claiming that superiority is the intellect and not emotion. His inability to face himself of his own faults and desires makes him lose his wife” (Hewes, 2005, p.57). Teddy tries to prove that he is more respectful than others and hence, “his inability to face his own faults and desires makes him lose his wife. In his attempt to prove that he is better than the others, Teddy loses the battle for he tries to get respect by taking it from others” (Ganz, 1969, p.185). To phrase it another way, the philosopher symbol in the play, ironically, neglects the concept of the truth and he attempts to gain respect over the supremacy of freedom. However, for Ruth, “the truth is essential. It is obvious that she quits any restriction and becomes free “(Almaarroof, 2013, p.1).

In brief, Ruth is the sole free character. She does what she wants in a way that asserts her freedom. Indeed, “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” (Ganz, 1969, p.185). In other words, the Homecoming is a play about “the triumph of a woman who keeps doing what she wants to do, that she is in spite of the terrible injustice, her husband, Teddy brings about by taking a lead in the family’s plan against her, and she keeps open the door of the relation and even the possibility of love” (p.1).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Pinter adapts his play to the situation of women in the twentieth century. He adapts to the enigma of the modern world and he uses a dramatic construct that suits the fragmentation of the era’s great values such as love, truth and freedom. This fragmentation has a direct impact on the situation of women. He demonstrates that a woman is strong and free when she breaks free from social restrictions and begins to make decisions independently; in other words, she does as she pleases. Whether choosing to be a nonconformist or a traditional wife, a woman remains free as long as she is not coerced into actions she dislikes. In this context, Elizabeth Sakellaridou, in her book "Pinter’s Female Portraits: A Study of the Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter" (1988), contends that in "The Homecoming," Harold Pinter is "preoccupied with many thoughts such as fascination with the unknown and love of philosophical contemplation, presentation of strong male friendship, prevalence of male thoughts, isolation of the woman, and ambiguity of feelings towards her" (p.17). This paper posits that Pinter adeptly adapts to the challenges of the modern world to portray the emergence of a new woman—a character endowed with strength and contending with the enigmatic aggression of patriarchal society.

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