

# Women Characters in Pinter's Play's

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**Abstract :** This paper examines five female characters from the British dramatist Harold Pinter's five works, putting them in the sense of depicting "The Feminine." Pinter female characters must be seen not only in the tradition of stereotypical portraying women, but also in the light of the patriarchal structures they face—male domination, male gaze and male bonding. The second chapter background to discuss female characters—reasons for doing so are provided and the idea of a woman is introduced as the other. This concept led to women being stereotyped and subsequently misrepresented in the fiction. The traditional wife/whore dichotomy is explored. The chapter also discusses the aspects of on-stage representation with reference to drama. The third chapter involves close reading of the plays by Pinter—the Homecoming, the Birthday party, Betrayal and Old Times. The position of female characters are discussed in relation to the structure of power which they attempt to abolish. The chapter argues that although they achieve it, success as such does not challenge the patriarchal system. The fourth chapter focuses on Pinter's understanding of the Czech stage. This describes the past of the staging's, with a particular focus on two productions that took place long before the political change and were seen as a threat to the official regime. It also analyzes two contemporary Betrayal stages in Divadlo celne focusing on the female roles in these productions. In conclusion it is mentioned that the fictional woman does not release Pinter's works. Even though the female characters challenge the patriarchal structure fighting for them in the world, it's patriarchal world they can't escape or alter, so they have to play according to their rules. Thus, although patriarchal deconstruction is a part of Pinter's deconstruction of the dominant power, it is never fully accomplished.

**Index Terms - Harold Pinter, Homecoming, Birthday party, Old Times, Betrayal, caretaker, Female Characters, femininity in fiction, patriarchy, Malestream, Simon De Behaviour.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dramatic work on Harold Pinter's is difficult to define. In *The Absurd Theatre*, published in 1961, Martin Esslin ranked him among the ridiculous English dramaturges. In an interview he gave Pinter that same year, saying that what goes on in my plays is practical, but what I do is not realistic. In his thirty years as a dramatist he has tried different styles—realist, surrealist, absurdist, lyrical—and he created a number of plays that sometimes took him close to the work of the modern theatre's great masters, Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Pirandello and especially Samuel Beckett.

Despite similarities or direct influences from those authors Harold Pinter's theatre is a highly individual and original artistic creation with a unique personal seal, as suggested by the coinage of words such as 'Pinterish' and 'Painteresque' to describe his distinctive style of writing. Pinter is an author with a creative mind and varied interests. He made adaptations of several of his major plays and wrote screenplays based on works by other authors. During his childhood, he had been a stage actor, occasionally acting in minor roles even in productions of his own works. His work also includes a long career as a stage director and film director.

The breadth of his interests and the expertise he gained from his participation in various media and different output, that appears as diverse as his own artistic activity. In his analysis of Pinter's, Simon Trussler notes that more nonsense was written about Harold Pinter than all his contemporaries put together. In fact since his appearance in the English Theatre in 1957 Harold Pinter has been praised as much as by one group of critics as by another.

Between Harold Hobson's unreserved admiration and early greeting of Pinter as English stage's most promising young playwright and Nigel Dennis's relentless accusation of Pinter's art as an empty form, a theatre of actors, is rich variety of critical points of view, the vigour of which not reflects the controversial nature of dramatic art of Pinter's, but also the vitality it brought to the contemporary English Theatre and the curiosity it stimulated in the average theatre-goer and the skilled critic. The most negative reviewers have often expressed as to whether Pinter's plays will be performed over all fifty years.

Despite these acidic predictions, Pinter has continued to occupy, for a major, if not the most prominent, position among contemporary English playwrights for a quarter of a century. His latest triple bill of *Other Places* shown at the National Theatre (Cottesloe) in October 1982, sold out before the opening night and received critical support almost unanimously. Its main constituent, *A Sort of Alaska*, was later awarded the best new play by the British Theatre Association.

A recent revival of his first great success, *The Caretaker* (1959), at the Young Vic in May 1982, attracted a mixed audience of Pinter enthusiasts, through a performance of medicine. Hostile criticism of Pinter's work stems mainly from his puzzling (though much celebrated) ambiguity. Those critics resented the lack of practical and meaningful data and the impossibility of verification in his plays, that formed the most important and vital credo of dramatists.

In an early speech he gave at the University of Bristol in 1962 Pinter stated that: The desire on the part of us all to verify, our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. I say there can be no complicated distinctions between the true and the imaginary, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. A stage character who cannot make any convincing argument or facts about his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, are as legitimate and worthy of attention as one who, can do all these things alarmingly.

The more acute the experience the less expression articulates. He also made it clear that 'no declaration I make ... should be viewed as absolute and conclusive. Many cite this speech because it is one of the rare moments of, self-engagement and self-definition. In his dissertation he usually rejects any formal conceptualisation. The idea that truth and reality are only relative values has always been at the heart of his art and for so his adherence to this fundamental belief gives that early declaration the status of a real artistic manifesto.

Pinter's refusal to commit themselves to any socio-political-religious cause in connection with this general relativism. Critics like Nigel Dennis' and Ronald Bryden, who see Pinter's theatre as mere stagecraft, of a situation' theatre, and deny him an interest in the development of a character. Pinter defended himself against Dennis's by ordering actors to behave on the stage: But it comes second. The characters are there first. 'Henry Hewes on the other hand, tells us - 'Pinter aficionados that his presentation of the misery of society as it occurs in the most successful way to attack it and that his attack goes deeper than that of playwrights who choose specific social objectives.'

In a speech he gave at East Anglia University in October 1981 Pinter reiterated what he had always said before; that he has strong political beliefs, which do not penetrate his plays for reasons he has never stated. He has often taken a distinct role in his life for or against a particular public cause. At the age of eighteen he refused to serve in the army by becoming into a conscientious objector and for this he was summoned twice to tribunal. He declared much later in an interview that 'in Viet Nam I am categorically anti-Americans. so I feel strongly in of Israel's favour.' He made yet another open political speech addressing his audience in East Anglia,.

I am convinced nuclear unilateralist but I don't see how I can write a piece about it. I guess it is something that never occurred to me, I assume that there is one such consideration. I'm sure some writers can sit down and write plays from a political ideology very easily and properly. I can not do that. This was a lifetime

attitude towards his work. He has deliberately abdicated the dramatist's as a moralistic and prophet. If an interviewer once discussed Robert Brustein's claim about a modern dramatist that 'the rebel playwright becomes an evangelist proselytising for his Pinter of faith, he replied flagrantly, 'I don't know what he's talking about.

I don't know what faith I might be proselytising for.' However, his continued denial of conceptualisation should not undermine his work's validity or consistency. For one thing, Pinter is surely aware of what he does in his drama even though he professes ignorance. The lack of a national social or religious message shows neither moral indifference nor a void of values. In fact, What appears on the surface as stem, arid amorality pinches exclusive attention to the workings of the human mind and psyche, which are often unconscious, instinctual and pre-conscious and have little relation to the social structure or moral codes of political ideology. His characters words are private world, not a public one.

Pinter's interest in humanity does not manifest itself through society and a social cause, but through a human beings microcosmic universe alone in his room or in contact with few other people, who usually belonging to his immediate environment. Therefore This the image of the room as a warm haven becomes such a powerful theme in his work. It actually grows into a symbol of the human minds private regions and the psyche 's secret chambers which he set out to explore. In the room when he is 'pretty much alone', face to face the individual is approached. Seen from this aspect Pinter's plays is very close to the concepts of 'intimate theatre', related to the type of psychological drama Maeterlinck and Strindberg have developed.

The pivotal centre of the world of Pinter's is the human search for to self-definition and human relationships to be established before becoming 'fit and equipped to go out and fight the battles that is mostly fought in outside world abstractions'. The clarity and firmness of this statement made in 1960 suggests that the playwright had formulated certain fundamental convictions and principles in his mind at that time. Twenty years later, in an interview he gave about his role in the production of John Fowler's . The French Lieutenant's Woman in 1980, he reiterated his life-long obsession with 'another man's mind'.

## II. PINTER'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

Female characters from three plays will be presented in this chapter. They are arranged chronologically - Ruth from *The Homecoming*, Kate and Anna from *Old Times* and Emma from *Betrayal*. *The Homecoming* was chosen because of its controversial treatment of the main female character, which was claimed by both feminist and anti-feminist critics.

*Old Times* is exceptional within Pinter's work, because it dramatizes a relationship of two female characters. *Betrayal* was an obvious choice, because the analysis of performance is an important part of writing on female characters from a play, and there are currently two productions of this play in the Czech Republic. One might object that all the plays are from the relatively same time of Pinter's writing career - *The Homecoming* from 1964, *Old Times* 1970 and *Betrayal* 1978.

However, the aim was not to present a diachronic approach which would focus on Pinter's development, categorizing his characters into artificial categories. Rather I hope to illuminate the nature of gender relations in these three provocative works. The chosen characters all face dominant, patriarchal power in various forms (Ruth in the form of a fight for dominance, Kate and Anna in the form of the male gaze and Emma in the form of the male bonding). The aim is to demonstrate that although Pinter allows his female characters to challenge the patriarchal structure, they cannot dismantle it because they are trapped in the traditional depiction and schemas of a "Woman." *The Homecoming*, one of Pinter's most widely known plays, is considered controversial even today. Ruth, the main character, has been labelled differently by various critics.

No matter what the "right interpretation" of the play is (it was mentioned that Pinter does not attempt to be realistic - looking for the "objective truth" in Pinter's world is therefore futile), one of the key concepts in the play is power and its shifts. Ruth has to defy men who are trying to assert their authority over her. According to William S. Haney, Ruth "succeeds in converting her prostitution from a form of male exploitation to an instrument of power and dominance."<sup>1</sup> She is the one dictating the terms and making men financially

dependent on her. However, this victory is ambiguous. Firstly, as a whore she becomes a commodity, and secondly, her success reinforces rather than challenges the patriarchal structures.

As Haney puts it, "the power she wields is not her own but that of the symbolic father working through her."<sup>2</sup> In order to dominate, Ruth must occupy the symbolic male position. To succeed in the world dominated by men, women conventionally have been obliged to adopt certain masculine traits. In extreme cases, this also leads to cross dressing, which has numerous examples in the theatrical tradition (many Shakespeare's characters, i.e.

Viola or Portia) who adopt masculine identities to protect themselves or to be allowed things that they would be denied as women. The idea of a woman who must be more "male" in order to succeed is not an unusual concept even today - the word "feminine" still has negative connotations - at worst it can just be a synonym for "weak." The qualities traditionally associated with masculinity (which is, of course, itself a complex concept and it is full of culturally enforced stereotypes) are seen as a key to success.

According to Mark Silverstein, this concept is paradoxical, because it attempts to "invert cultural norms while preserving the forms of the larger patriarchal order - the order privileging the masculine subject even if a woman should occupy the place of that subject."<sup>3</sup> If Ruth's succeeds by adopting a male role, the patriarchal order in the family is restored rather than challenged. In contrast to this interpretation, it has been argued, most prominently by Martin Esslin, that "homecoming" is the homecoming of matriarchy: "It is not Teddy who has come back home but the mother who has returned."<sup>4</sup> There are indeed aspects in which Ruth is identified with Jessie, the mother of the boys. As one of the examples, Ruth addresses Lenny as "Leonard:"  
LENNY. Don't call me that, please. RUTH. Why not? LENNY. That's the name my mother gave me.<sup>5</sup>

This similarity is stressed throughout the play. She often adopts a motherly - or mock-motherly - tone when she talks to Jessie's sons: "Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip" (42). When Teddy and Ruth first come to the house and she decides to go outside, Teddy is left in the dark room with a child-like gesture; according to the stage directions, he "goes to the window, peers out after her, half turns from the window, stands, suddenly chews his knuckles" (32). Teddy's position as a child is stressed by his relationship to his real mother. "SAM: You were always your mothers favorite. She told me. Its true. You were always the ... you were always the main object of her love" (71).

Ruth is also, as well as the real mother, talked about or addressed exactly in the framework of the "wife/whore" symbolic - either as a respectable mother, "MAX: She's an intelligent and sympathetic woman. Eh, tell me, do you think the children are missing their mother?" (59) or a whore: "We have had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We have had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night" (50). Paradoxically, Max praises Ruth's motherly qualities the most when she is kissing Lenny and later on lying on the sofa with Joey: "She's a lovely girl. A beautiful woman. And a mother too" (67).

Haney even claims that Ruth can be seen as the "duplicate of the mother, Jessie."<sup>6</sup> But the fact that Ruth is similar to Jessie does not prove Esslin "homecoming of matriarchy." Ruth's identification with Jessie does not have to mean her identification with matriarchy. It is necessary to distinguish between actual, biological mother and "Mother," the ideological function she should fulfill in the patriarchal order. And Jessie, despite being the first, was not the latter. In order to find out about Jessie's role within the family, it is necessary to see how she is presented.

Max is making an attempt to current her as the obedient, ideal wife, in his clichéd narrative: Then I came downstairs and I made Jessie put her ft up on a poufs - what occurred to that poufs, I haven't seen it for years - she put her feet up on the poufs and I said to her, Jessie, I assume our ship is going to come home, I'm going to deal with you to a couple of items, I'm going to purchase you a costume in light corded blue silk, closely encrusted in pearls, and for informal wear, a pair of pantaloons in lilac flowered taffeta. Then I gave her a drop of cherry brandy.

I have in mind the boys got here down, in their pyjamas, all their hair shining, their faces pink, it used to be earlier than they started shaving, and they knelt down at our feet, Jessie's and mine. (54) This is however, only Max's fantasy in which Jessie fulfils the ideological expectations. The position she is given, the "Mother" role, is a concept, "ideological stability of the issue position, [...], phrases that encode the values

of patriarchal structure."7 Max, solely a second later grumbles: "A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slut bitch of a wife" (55).

Sam claims that Jessie had committed adultery: "Macgregor had Jessie in the lower back of my cab as I drove them along" (86). This undermines the whole household structure, as Silverstein notes: "Patriarchy relies upon for its copy on reaching a match between the proper spouse and the ideological characteristic of the wife."8 If Jessie had disrupted the difference between the classes of "wife?" and "whore?," Max's reputation as father is shattered - he may now not even be the biological father.

This would possibly be hinted by using the fact that Sam, mentioning that Teddy was once Jessie's favourite, asks Teddy about Macgregor: "What did you suppose of him? Did you take to him?" (70) The blurring of the normal roles within the household used to be a section of this play from the start. In his Nobel lecture, Pinter describes the process of growing *The Homecoming*. He explains that he first saw two figures, A and B: It seemed to me sensible to expect that they have been father and son. A used to be also truly the cook dinner and his cooking did no longer appear to be held in excessive regard. Did this suggest that there was no mother? 9 Jessie as the biological mother is lacking from the household, however there is the "Mother.?"

It is Max, the feminized father. Max overtook the function historically associated with the mother, cooking serves a true example. He identifies himself even with the bodily mom - "Don't talk to me about the ache of childbirth - I suffered the pain, I've nonetheless acquired the pangs - when I provide a little cough my lower back collapse" (55). When Max adopts the role of the "Mother,?" from which subject position does Ruth act? To become aware of it, Silverstein borrows a Laconia time period "symbolic father.?"

This does now not have whatever to do with proper fatherhood but it is an "ideological representation, an "identity?" articulated thru the cultural codes."10 He claims that the attributes of the "symbolic father?" are (in phrases of Roland Barthes) "power, fascination, instituting authority, terror, strength to castrate."11 (Interestingly, in accordance to Laura Mulvey's view on phallic centric psychoanalysis, it is a woman who "first symbolizes the castration chance via her real absence of a penis."12) Ruth's strength to castrate is in reality proven in her come upon with the youngest brother, Joey. JOEY. I didn't get all the way. LENNY. You didn't get all the way? You didn't get all the way? But you've had her up there for two hours. [...] LENNY.

Are you telling me she's a tease? (74) According to Haney, "by withholding her desire first from Joey and then from Max, Ruth effects a redistribution of energy by way of usurping the regulation of the father for herself."13 Apart from other distinctions that mark Ruth as a "symbolic father?" (as fascination) her dialogues with Lenny are especially important. It is because Lenny, no longer Max, is the remaining male figure in the household and in order to be dominant, Ruth must assert her electricity over him.

LENNY: And now possible I'll relieve you of glass.

RUTH: I haven't pretty finished.

LENNY: You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

RUTH: No, I haven't.

LENNY: Quite sufficient, in my opinion.

RUTH: Not in mine, Leonard. [...]

LENNY: Just provide 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 besides you taking me?

RUTH: Why don't I just take you? (42)

Ruth's authority is asserted already when they arrive with Teddy. He is attempting to pressure her to go to mattress however she leaves the house and - symbolically - takes the key (32).

Teddy loses domination all through the play completely - he sounds ridiculous when he gives Ruth, at the give up of the play: "You can assist me with my lectures when we get back. I'd love that. I'd be so grateful for it, really" (63). But aside from taking the role of the "symbolic father," Ruth has more roles to function - though being in the male function of power, she is a woman and there are solely two positions she is allowed to occupy - she changes from the class of the "wife" to the "whore" category. But, according to Silverstein, Ruth's position of both challenge and object of alternate "quite actually deconstructs the opposition between 25 spouse and whore."<sup>14</sup> The blurring of those two classes poses a threat for patriarchy.

Ruth's regulations of alternate - "I would favour at least three rooms and a bathroom" (84), "You'd furnish my wardrobe, of course?" (85) - may be similar to what she used to be promised in the marriage with Teddy. She also says: "I would naturally desire to draw up an stock of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses" (85), which again reminds the reader about the signing of the wedding ceremony register. By setting the guidelines this time, she "reveals the ideological rhetoric and social practices that produce women's subjection."<sup>15</sup> The centre of attention of the play is on the disaster within patriarchy, on the level of the family: "Family constitutes a web site of ideological production in *The Homecoming*, a web page for producing suitable gendered subjects, ready to anticipate their area in the system of social relation that supports the perpetuation of patriarchy."<sup>16</sup> This is examined in one of the most necessary feminist works, *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett.

In this book, Millett claims that "patriarchy's chief group is the family. It is each a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole."<sup>17</sup> The typical family, in her view, serves as an agent, it "not only encourages its own individuals to adjust and conform, however acts as a unit in the authorities of the patriarchal state."<sup>18</sup> In the play, Max tells Ruth that Jessie "taught these boys the whole lot they know. She taught them all the morality they know. Every single bit of the moral code they live by using - used to be taught to them by way of their mother" (54).

In the context of the play, this is rather an ironic statement. Silverstein also claims that the collapse of Max's authority is the fault of the wife, who failed to improve this structure and the "Fathers World as Law."<sup>19</sup> Millett argues that the man is nevertheless viewed as the head of the family/household, which comes from the Judeo-Christian historical past and it still demonstrated nowadays (The book was once first posted in 1970): "Female heads of household have a tendency to be viewed as undesirable; the phenomenon is a trait of poverty or misfortune."<sup>20</sup> And this is what takes place in the play - a house led by using a feminized father needs somebody, embodying a masculine position, to claim authority and dominance over them - the reality that it is a female is, according to Silverstein, "both ironic inversion and subversion of patriarchal norms." Kate, Anna, Deeley. Already the listing of characters in *Old Times* shows something as a substitute untypical for Pinter - the majority of girl characters.

"In Pinter's work, most ladies are isolated,"<sup>33</sup> notes Sakellaridou. With the exception of *Tea Party*, *Old Times* is the first play with the theme of female ties and this theme even becomes "the centre of dramatists concern."<sup>34</sup> It replaces the "male-cantered perspectives focused on struggles of male bonding and female exclusion,"<sup>35</sup> which we can see later on in *Betrayal*. The presence of the female bonding is important, because, according to Sarah Gamble, it "demonstrates the endurance of significant emotional, spiritual and intellectual bonds outside of marriage,"<sup>36</sup> which is something unusual for not only Pinter, but also the history of depicting women - and a source of threat for the husband in this play.

The story takes place in a farmhouse of a middle-age couple, Kate and Deeley, who are awaiting an arrival of Kate's old friend, Anna, whom Kate has not seen for twenty years. Anna is, however, already present - she is standing at the window, "still and dim"<sup>37</sup> while the two other characters talk about her. She "arrives" simply by turning from the window and joining the conversation, making herself "visible" for the other two.

### III. CONCLUSION

Ruth , Kate, Anna and Emma continue to be the fictional women, not just because they are fictional characters. They challenge patriarchy 's power structures, but the deconstruction is never accomplished , maybe because it's not the main goal- power structures are generally examined .Despite the characters resisting subjection, silver stein claims, Pinter can not imagine a form of mastery that departs from the dominant of cultural power. often the only way to claim power for his female characters is to take the masculine stand . Pinter does not offer a solution in his misogyny portrayal –only dubious (Ruth) or only partial (Kate) ones.

The reason for this accusation is not the lack of female characters, nor their bad qualities (as creating a female character with problems and being badly treated does not inherently mean being misogynist)- but the persistent dramatisation of misogyny in his plays leads to a question as to whether the objectives is to strengthen misogynist structures or to demonstrate oppressive actions towards them.

Pinter claims that the realistic accuracy was never an intention. But his work challenges the basic power structures as a writer associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. As mark Ravenhall explained in his recent open lecture in Prague, certain generations of writers – including Pinter – challenged patriarchal power only in so far as it was an intrinsic struggle towards his great father the ultimate figure of might and authority.

The four characters- Ruth , Kate , Anna , and Emma- face circumstances that petrify or objectivise or undermine them. The fact that they slide from the category of wife to the category of whore especially Ruth, Emma , and Anna, is (apart from taking the male place) the only way they threaten patriarchy but is still within the framework of the patriarchy categories that they have created. In stereotypically female situations , they are portrayed –cast aside, alone or as objects of desire.

In stereotypically female situations, they are portrayed – cast aside ,alone, or as objects of desire. As Sakellaridou puts it, the woman is always presented in solitary isolation and has to fight alone to assert her separate personality, assisted solely by the approval and sympathy of the dramatist. In contrast to the universal male world, their situation is always specific. They become a vehicle to demonstrate the oppressive power and they are still more signs than characters to some extent. Like in the real world women are still objects in Pinter's plays, divided into stereotypical categories. The fact that they are in patriarchal Positions may not yet be significant: however one can argue that the female characters of Pinter are not freed from the woman sign. The characters are all unmistakably feminine. In the first place , all four women are seen as sexual objects-objects that men may handle as they wish. They have no relationship with other women besides Kate and Anna and as has been stated , the Anna – Kate dynamics is much more similar to the relationship between woman and men. The men around them which are mostly husbands and lovers define them. unfaithfulness is a part of nature. Emma has an affair with her husband, whilst Kate and Anna are portrayed as promiscuous. They all make references to their looks as opposed to men they need confirmation and praise from men : what do you think of my shoes? (Ruth) what will I put on tomorrow ? (Kate) what do I look like ? Do I look good ? ( the Emma) . its not only a collective vision, however , Pinter also targets individual and objective portrayal.

Ruth stands victorious at the end of *The Homecoming* ( although the value of victory and the position she gained it from is doubtful ). Kate is able to free hersefor the whole play where "seeing? and "being seen? are the key concepts. The characters in the play are talking about past, whether real or imagined.

When Anna says: "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place" (270), she talks about the main method she and Deeley are employing: re-creating the past according to what they are trying to achieve. Silverstein claims that "the action of *Old Times* centres around the battle for possession of a woman, a battle in which Anna and Deeley vie for control of Kate, Delays wife."38 The "male gaze? has a prominent role in their attempts.

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