

An Enigmatic Depiction of Women Stereotype in Harold Pinter's the Birthday Party and the Homecoming

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Article Info

Volume 81

Page Number: 1272 - 1279

Publication Issue:

November-December 2019

Article History

Article Received: 3 January 2019

Revised: 25 March 2019

Accepted: 28 July 2019

Publication: 28 November 2019

Abstract

The repercussions of the World War II in the post-war period have been devastating for the humans to survive. This devastation is seen endorsed by the patriarchal arrogance of the homosocial men, who have deteriorated the life of women both on and offstage. It brought the suffering and predicaments in the post-war human life thus worsening the aim of survival. This suffering is seen as alarming to the human world and Harold Pinter has depicted it in his plays. His narratives reflect upon the post-war humans who have given up the life and chosen to live an isolated and secluded life. The paper focuses on the abused image of women in the post-war period by their male-counterparts. It portrays the exploitation, excesses, sexuality, masculinity, patriarchal mindset, deprivation of rights, injustices so on and so forth through the analysis of Pinter's magnum opus *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*.

I. Introduction

The post-war period has been the worst time in the history of mankind that brought chaos and pathos in human life. The life in English London society has taken a much harder edge due to World War II. The two World Wars have destroyed the human civilization and rendered the human status loathing and suffering. The suffering has adversely affected the women more than the men. The women have been the victim of every injustice, exploitation and suffering and they experienced the worst affairs in this period. Pinter and other absurdist

playwrights have revealed the exploitation of women in the post-war period through their sole dramaturgies. The first decade of Pinter's playwrighting is labelled as 'comedy of menace' that deals with the lower middle class of the post-war England, in which ordinary and simple women have been maltreated. His representation of women begins with everyday life i.e., from kitchen chores, cooking to serving and cleaning the stuff around. Pinter has used the home—the centre to represent the oppression on women carried out through domestic environment both on and off stage (Terpollari 679). Pinter's

housewives are confined to rooms only as their ways are clipped and controlled by patriarchal masters. However, these female characters are seen acting spontaneously, and they seem responsible towards duties and obligations than their male counterparts.

II. Women Identity and Stereotype

Pinter's artistic feature is the representation of status quo of post-war women in his narratives. The masculine domination has been the topical issue in this period. The women have been dragged to live a miserable life and deprived of their identities and personalities. In modern period, the women have been considered insignificant by homosocial men for life appeasement in English societies. The existence of a woman in man's life was taken as a bad omen to shake his affairs in the human world.

At the outset, the play *The Birthday Party* signifies the women in the mid-20th century. The way Meg looks at the birth of a girl child given by some Lady Mary Splatt flashed on the newspaper seems ridiculous. It gives the impression of the post-war mentality in which a female is considered insignificant and worth inexistent, "Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry" (TBP 11); and yearns for a male baby to define her progeny, "I'd much rather have a little boy" (TBP 11). The pressure that she imbibes within herself outbursts in hate towards a female child and acceptance of a male one. It is all her worldly experience wherein adoption of a boy is accepted and preferred over a girl due to the animalistic attitude of the society. So, Meg is seen adopting Stanley discreetly at her boarding house, "he's my Stanley now" (TBP 55).

The depiction of motherly love and regard is centre to the play. The way Meg offers unconditional love, care and affection to an unknown lodger Stanley at her boarding house is appreciable. Her simplicity is overlooked and is exploited in a subtle manner both by protagonist

Stanley and antagonists Goldberg and McCann. The arrogant attitude of the post-war individuals displays their mental dilemma inevitably being ridiculous. There is unnecessary hegemonic intimidation on mediocrity depicted through Stanley, "Horrible"; "The milk is off" (TBP 14-15). At first instance, such individuals are offered benefaction with utmost care and still they vulgarly depreciate, "This isn't tea. It's gravy!"; "I can't drink this muck. Didn't anyone ever tell you to warm the pot, at least?" (TBP 17). The way Stanley suggests Meg represents that there is no morale among post-war adults and so they disregard their parents and other elderly people. Stanley yells at Meg who is a motherly-figure, "Get out of it. You succulent old washing bag" (TBP 18). At certain occasions the play infers the reality that happiness is directly proportional to richness and so morality takes the back seat in miserable life. Stanley is a lazy man who has lost the battle of life and has given up everything. The isolation is the only tool he has adopted and is hypnotised badly, "He must be still asleep" (TBP 10). Pinter in his Nobel lecture reports, "In my play *The Birthday Party* I think I allow a whole range of options to operate in a dense forest of possibility before finally focusing on an act of subjugation" (Qtd. in Weales 606). Lesser submits:

In [this] play there are six characters and they constitute a microcosm of society. They mirror the economic division of the society and the division between exploiters and exploited. Goldberg and McCann are exploiters, managers, operators, and control the life as well as decision makers (37).

The conventional roles in which mid-20th century women are seen reflect their subordination to their masculine partners. Meg is seen serving her husband Petey and Stanley and tries to exert her power over them and fails eventually. Also, she made certain enquiries and asks many questions to Petey and Stanley, both

of whom turn out deaf ear to her enquiries. Stanley is seen playing with her emotions despite her motherly love and care towards him. She offers him the breakfast, which is straightaway considered rotten and not to be eaten. The word “succulent” used by Stanley for Meg had a derogatory connotation on Meg’s part. Meg is a naïve oppressive woman in struggle to dominate the male world. The masculine superiority has been topical in mid-20th century especially in relation to women. The hegemonic intimidation was a working tool to get things done through women. Stanley commands Meg, “Look, why don’t you get this place cleared up! It’s a pigsty. And another thing, what about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs papering. I need a new room!” (*TBP* 19).

There has been an imbalance due to the absence of a woman-figure. A man cannot enjoin pleasure in absence of a woman in his life. Both men and women mutually form a society in which they are complementary to each other. In the world, the men and women have distinguished their duties and responsibilities as soon as they live in harmony with each other. The moment a commotion takes place in a certain family, roles and duties take a spontaneous turn. In the play *The Homecoming*, the death of Jessie has rendered the house horrendous along with its inmates. Due to absence of a woman-figure, Max the head of the family is seen doing the traditional roles, “Who do you think I am, your mother?” (*THC* 16). Max is emotionally involved in childbirth, “don’t talk to me about the pain of childbirth - I suffered the pain, I’ve still got the pangs” (*THC* 47). Max feels aggrieved with the behaviour of his progeny, “Honest. They walk in here every time of the day and night like bloody animals. Go and find yourself a mother” (*THC* 16).

Cahn states that in Pinter’s plays women are naturally superior to men and indicates that the element of mystery troubles Pinter’s male

characters far more than female characters (07). In this play we realise Ruth is intimidated to adopt the multiple roles and identities. Ruth understands the nature and personality of all family members; and therefore, becomes a whore, a “smelly scrubber, a “pox-ridden slut,” so that she can be accepted as kith and kin by them. Cahn writes:

The women in Pinter's plays seem to have greater awareness, both of their own natures and of the nature of men, and this understanding gives women a strength, a capacity for survival, that the male characters lack (132).

The women in Pinter’s work have still to fight for their feminine integrity and their acceptance as human beings. (Sakellaridou 27). The women in Pinter’s plays are haunted by the anxieties that they have to provide solid reasons and replies to their counter partners, so they are seen preparing themselves for such moment. From down the line women have been responsible for their fall in post-war period, where they themselves had wittingly allowed male domination to prevail over the milieu. The life of Ruth, Meg and Jessica is depicted through the same prisms of mother, wife and whore. The moment Ruth enters into the London family, she is welcomed by Max, the father with derogatory words and abuses, such as, “smelly scrubber”, “whore”, “disease” etc. Commenting on such miseries Terpollari writes:

In Pinter’s world reality and fantasy are always in constant interplay and they are mixed. We never get to know properly whether [Ruth] had previously been a whore or not, but this is not important. What is important is the fact that she bears the stamp of whoredom, a grave vice connected with women since a long time, like so many other Pinter heroines. [Ruth] finds herself in a vulnerable position, Meg in *The Birthday*

Party is ridiculed as a silly and sluttish mother.

Pinter reflects the power of women in times of chaos and pathos. The depression with which certain individuals are living life in colossal and fortunately somebody knocks their misery out. In the case of Stanley, who's reincarnated by Lulu, "Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible"; "Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me looking like that" (*TBP* 26). Lulu appears an uncomplicated character and a girl of little depth (Naismith 47). However she struggles to rejuvenate the numb Stanley and revives him at large.

III. Masculinity and Sexuality

Pinter once said that "we are all in the same boat" (Thompson 09). In the post-war period, there was an absurd stereotype towards women who were seen merely through the prism of sex and lust. The significance of a woman in man's life was negligible and she was just used and exploited to quench this ugly interest. Meg and Lulu present the archetypal image of the mid-20th century women who have been merely exploited at multiple stages despite their reluctance. Women have been badly exploited by muscular power as depicted in the case of Meg and Lulu in *The Birthday Party* and Jessie and Ruth in *The Homecoming*. Pinter has exposed the reality of men who ensnared women for their lust and sexual gratification that degraded the status of women in the society. The innocence is marred to the extent that a victim's complaint is promptly rejected with arrogance,

LULU (*with growing anger*). You used me for a night. A passing fancy.

GOLDBERG. Who used you?

LULU. You made use of me by cunning when my defences were down.

GOLDBERG. Who took them down?

LULU. That's what you did. You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl

shouldn't know before she's been married at least three times! (*TBP* 80).

The exploitation of women in the post-war period has terrorised the aura of rights and security of female existence. The magnitude of the terror among post-war women is such that they feel weak and helpless to defend both the subtle and willed attacks carried out upon them. The innocence is ruined by homosocial men who despite ruining their virginity retreated their complaints with arrogant prudence, such as, "You wanted me to do it, Lulula, so I did it" (*TBP* 80). Lulu is distressed at Goldberg's abusing her (Naismith 37). Similarly, Stanley tries to strangle Meg while his attempt to rape Lulu is explicit, "*Lulu is lying spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her. STANLEY, as soon as the torchlight hits him, begins to giggle*" (*TBP* 65-66). In the words of Arieti: "Instead of feeling, some patients feel driven to attack, to catch the enemy unawares and take revenge for what they have already suffered, and to forestall what they fear" (Qtd. in Kirby).

Pinter and other absurdist playwrights made dynamic efforts to clarify the growing controversy over family, sexuality and gender roles. In patriarchal system women do not find any right to voice their views. Rubin points out:

[. . .] for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. [. . .] the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves (177).

Ruth is entrapped into the male-dominated world wherein the homosocial beings are craved to quench their lust through every possible means. The magnitude of lust is such that even the Ruth's voice overheard by Lenny snatches his sleep all night and he is seen waiting desperately as a hunter to satisfy his absurd lust.

Escapism has been a worst tool employed by post-war men, who felt the need of many things to fulfil their dreams and lead their life comfortably, such as job to run their home and personal needs, cleaning that makes a man a social animal, wife to fulfil their desires which is a natural phenomenon so on and so forth. Lenny in a lustful attitude loses his senses and sees Ruth as a satisfaction to his sexual desires. He seems to be a debauch and perfect exemplary of immorality, uses cunning ways to induce, convince and exploit Ruth—his sister in law, “Do you mind if I hold your hand? [. . .] Just a touch, Just a tickle” (THC 30). He further intimidates her with sexual advances and constant violence, “Just give me the glass. [. . .] I’ll take it, then” (THC 34). Commenting on the lustful pulse of Lenny, Terpollari remarks:

Male subjects do not have anything more than women. In fact Lacan implies that women have a better understanding of the human condition and therefore a better understanding of existence and a greater opportunity for self-knowledge. He stresses as well that definitions of gender are constructed by the patriarchy's desire to create an imaginary sense of psychic completion. In a patriarchal society women are always invisible (680).

Lenny narrates his experience to the Ruth at their initial encounter. He recounts a fable wherein he is accosted by a lady with her persistent proposals and he straightaway rejects her. She was a sick lady and Lenny wanted to strangle her to death. In his analogical narrative, he strangles an old lady nearly to death for her unreasonable demands, “so I just gave her another nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that” (THC 31). However, Lenny’s lustful frustration alarmed Ruth to take a shift in her approach and to intimidate him. Ruth is seen repeatedly requesting Lenny that

she is wife to his brother, and they are married, “I’m his wife”, and “we are married” (THC 29).

IV. Image of Women through the Lens of Wife, Mother, Whore

Pinter has written plays about families wherein gender discrimination has marred the feminine figure of all essential rights. The domestic and social livelihood of women have been perusal of miseries and frustrations instilled by the maleness. In second half of the 20th century, the women have been rendered towards many roles and identities in the male dominated environment. The woman has been possibly seen through the lens of a mother, wife, whore in the society wherein she inhabits. Ruth is seen describing her real multiple identities, “I was ... different ... when I met Teddy ... first” (THC 50). She has multiple identities such as ‘Dolores’, ‘Spanish Jacky’, ‘Cynthia’ or ‘Gillian’ besides being labelled as a whore and prostitute.

Pinter’s plays bring to the surface the power relations including frequent concerns that organise the family, sexuality and gender roles. Ruth arrived at the scene as a reincarnation of Jessie the wife of Max. She is not received with warm greetings rather her husband Teddy is rebuked by his father Max, “I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died” (THC 42). Jessie could not survive long among homosocial beings, and so her soul gives up. She has been labelled as a whore and Ruth is trapped into the same nature. “Looked at existentially [. . .] no woman is essentially wife or essentially whore, she is potentially either or both at once. [. . .] Personality is not something given; it is fluid” (Kerr 32). Despite Teddy’s defensive claims, “she’s my wife! We’re married!” (THC42) during family interrogates them and mostly Ruth is abused by the head of the family, “I haven’t seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings

a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!” (THC 42). On female personality and individuality Terpollari contends:

that female characters are oftentimes absent from Pinter's plays; moreover, even if they are physically present, they might be mentally or emotionally absent among a band of male personae. Moreover, they are made to act against their conscious will and, therefore, female mentality may not be accounted for by male characters in his drama (679-680).

The post-war humans have overlooked at women of the age who have been marginalised and thus subordinate to masculinity. They have been rebuked and abused, “Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?”; “We’ve had a smelly scrubber in my house all night”; We’ve had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night” (THC 41).

Ruth is obstinately chased down by the homosocial family members and eventually she gives up against their lust—by Lenny, “Just one dance, with her brother-in-law, [. . .] Lenny kisses Ruth. *They stand, kissing*” (THC 58), by Joey, “*He sits with Ruth on the sofa, embraces and kisses her. [. . .] Joey lies heavily on Ruth. [. . .] Joey and Ruth roll off the sofa on to the floor*” (THC 59-60) and in the scene at the end of the play, “[Joey] *kneels at her chair. She touches his head lightly. He puts his head in her lap. [. . .] [Max] I’m not an old man. [. . .] He raises his face to her. Kiss me*” (THC 80-82). Ruth is a “fractionized” image of a woman who is forced into completely contradictory roles: mother and whore, wife and sister, matriarch and handmaiden, guardian and hostage (Nelson 160). Sakellaridou believes that sex plays a dominant role in their struggle for survival (139). They are characterized by adultery and seem not to be in control of their passionate desires or unable to resist male sexual gaze at them. Nancy

Chodorow reflects upon the masculine uncertainty:

Dread of the mother is ambivalent, however. Although a boy fears her, he also finds her seductive and attractive. He cannot simply dismiss and ignore her. Boys and men develop psychological and cultural ideological mechanisms to cope with their fears without giving up women altogether. They create folk legends, beliefs, and poems that ward off the dread by externalizing and objectifying women...They deny dread at the expense of realistic views of women. On the one hand they glorify and adore...On the other they disparage. (Chodorow 183).

The narrative reflects upon the deprivation of a wife from her husband in a messy home wherein inmates fell to their lustful desires before the guest Ruth. Ruth is trapped into the whirlpool of urge and feels inevitable to save herself from the clutches of Lenny and other family members. Sedgwick compares Adam Bede’s Hetty and Henry Esmond’s Beatrix to Pinter’s Ruth:

[The women] enter into sexuality [. . .] as the only avenue to power [. . .]. For each woman, the sexual narrative occurs with the overtaking of an active search for power of which she is the *subject*, [. . .] her sense of purposefulness, proves her to have been the designated *object* (159).

Pinter has presented the sexual urge of post-war individuals, who have been craving for lust and whosoever comes their way, they are deprived of their innocence. Jessie is exploited by MacGregor and the questions of legitimate progeny are raised in the family among its inmates, as Teddy asks, “That night . . . you know . . . the night you got me . . . that night with Mum, what was it like?” (THC 36).

Jessie likes her son Teddy among the trio—Teddy, Lenny, Joey; and Sam confirms, “You were always your mother’s favourite”

(*THC* 63). The reason for such liking could be the legitimacy that is confirmed by Max, “But you’re my own flesh and blood” (*THC* 49). Max is well aware of the Jessie’s illicit sexual terms with MacGregor,

He was very fond of your mother, Mac was. Very fond. He always had a good word for her. (Pause.) Mind you, she wasn’t such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn’t such a bad bitch. I gave her the best bleeding years of my life, anyway (*THC* 09).

The magnitude of adultery and fornication has been common that it became harder for life-partners to believe each other. It has arisen dilemma among the parents to believe and own the progeny undeniably. Seldomly, questions of legitimacy are erupted, as father Max asks Teddy, “All yours, Ted?” (*THC* 59). Dutton writes:

In the nature of things, there is rarely any doubt about who is the mother of a particular child. But paternity is a far more open question, hardly susceptible to proof. In normal circumstances we assume that the woman’s husband is the father, but we do so on faith rather than evidence – faith in the wife/mother’s chastity in marriage (131).

Ruth cares about her progeny, “I think ... the children ... might be missing us” (*THC* 22). This gives a clear inference that Ruth is completely insecure at London family and wants to go back to America to look after her children. However, her husband Teddy drags her into family and wishes her to stay a little longer, “Ruth ... the family has invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As a ... as a kind of guest” (*THC* 75). This invitation is merely out of homosocial men’s absurd lust and to extend the harassment for Ruth. Teddy is least bothered the moment his family abuses and harasses his wife verbally and later physically, Max states, “she

can have more. Here. If she’s so keen” (*THC* 75). Further Teddy assures Ruth that he can manage the stuffs at home, “if you like the idea I don’t mind. We can manage easily at home ... until you get back” (*THC* 75). He actually acts as an escapist who despite seeing his wife under hard circumstances of family trap tries to get rid of her as well as his family by giving Ruth into prey’s mouth. Through this act, he loses his family as well as his life-partner.

V. Conclusion

The women in the second half of the 20th century have gone through a series of prejudices and hardships. The patriarchal attitude has devastated the nature of relationships between men and women in the post-war society. Pinter has reflected this scenario in his plays bringing forth the real aspect of human life that needs a certain alteration, wherein equal respect and regard is shown to both genders. The plays under analysis depict the exploitation of women depriving them of their personal identities and social characters through the hands of homosocial men. Meg and Lulu are abused enormously both by the protagonist cum victim Stanley and antagonist Goldberg and McCann throughout the acts of the play. Similarly, Jessica and Ruth are viciously dragged into sexuality by the inmates of the family depicting their sense of corrupted morale. Jessica and Ruth are chased down by MacGregor and Max, Lenny, Joey respectively. This reflects the image of women in post-war period who are seen through the prism of lust only by homosocial men. At times, the post-war women have modified the living status of the men who have completely given up the life. The way duties and obligations are fulfilled by women are unconditionally appreciable to a large extent. All the roles dispensed to these post-war women have been notable, for they have acted upon with utter determination.

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