

The Discourse of Desire in the Construction of Identity: A Study of Harold Pinter's Ruth in *The Homecoming*

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Abstract: One of the constant premises in the plays of Harold Pinter, throughout his literary career, is the struggle for dominance and subordination in the construction of identity, between the male and the female characters. This strife is not merely confined to the subjective establishment of authority within the family structure but also entails an expression of their sexual selves in their familial relationships as well as outside the domestic sphere. Consequently the issue of power needs to be analysed in relation to the issue of sexuality. This chapter shall explore the wife-whore paradigm of the female characters in the middle and later phase of Pinter's dramatic career where the women emerge out of their disguised selves, unlike Meg in *The Birthday Party* or Rose in *The Room*, and combat the battle more blatantly and with a brazen demeanour. Though the psychoanalytic theories of 'castration complex' and 'penis envy', as propounded by Freud, view women as inherently subservient to men, Ruth in *The Homecoming* showcases how a woman capitalises upon sex to reverse this power equation, thereby, transcending the limitations of the Freudian boundaries. It is this emancipation that, I argue, can be interpreted in the light of the Lacanian phallus.

Keywords: desire, phallus, identity, power

Talking about the origin of Oedipus complex in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess on October 15, 1897, Freud states,

I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood, even if not so early in children who have been made hysterical. (Similar to the invention of parentage [family romance] in paranoia – heroes, founders of religion) – If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate; and we can understand why the later 'drama of fate' was bound to fail so miserably. (qtd. in Storr 33)

Freud's theory further explains that during the stages of growth, the infant boy develops sexual inclination towards his mother, desires to win her absolute possession and unwittingly fosters hostile sentiments for his father. The incestuous drives for the mother and the bitter resentment for the father posit the boy into a conflict with his parents and he views the dominant rival as an inescapable threat. His fears revolve around the apprehension that the father may harm his genital organs since they are the source of his lustful feelings. Freud calls this 'castration anxiety' which induces repression of the desire for the mother, ushers the child into latency period and enables him to identify with the father (Hall et al. 55). However, in the case of a girl, when she realizes that she is already castrated, she blames her mother for depriving her of the penis and directs her libidinal feelings towards the father. According to Freud, it is in this deprivation of the penis that the powerlessness of the females is rooted. However, Lacan does not fully agree with this notion of Freud. In *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian*

Psychoanalysis, Dylan Evans observes, “castration is defined by Lacan as a symbolic lack of an imaginary object; castration does not bear on the penis as a real organ, but on the imaginary phallus” (23).

Here, two significant domains of the definition that draw our attention are ‘lack’ and ‘phallus’. Since Lacan speaks of this ‘lack’ not as that of the male physical organ but as “a symbolic lack”, I contend that it is not just the females who experience this ‘lack’ but the males as well. This calls to mind Karen Horney’s theory of ‘womb envy’ according to which men’s bodies lack the child bearing capacity with which females are endowed giving rise to feelings of jealousy among males. While Freud endorses that it is the woman who suffers from this ‘lack’, I argue that in the plays of Pinter it is the men who undergo this suffering in Lacanian terms. In *The Homecoming* Max lacks a wife, since Jessie is dead, his sons lack a mother and the whole house lacks a female figure. Consequently the arrival of Ruth arouses the desire of all the starving males as it promises a possible fulfillment of their lacks. Though it is doubtful whether, by the end of the play, this goal is achieved or not, Teddy is undoubtedly victimized as he is perpetually left lacking a wife.

The ‘phallus’, in Freudian sense, is homologous to the male sexual organ, the penis. However, Lacan prefers to differ. In *Jacques Lacan* Sean Homer mentions, “The phallus in Lacanian theory should not be confused with the male genital organ although it clearly carries these connotations. The phallus is first and foremost a signifier and in Lacan’s system a particularly privileged signifier” (54). It is my contention that Pinter’s women characters can be viewed from both the aspects of Lacan’s notion of the phallus, that is, the imaginary and the symbolic. In the process of psychosexual development, the child gradually realizes that it is not the only object of the mother’s desire and her desire seeks fulfillment not just with the child but elsewhere.

The simple dyadic relationship between the mother and child is thus turned into a triangular relationship between the child, the mother and the object of her desire. The child attempts to seduce the mother by becoming that object of desire. Lacan calls this third term the imaginary phallus. (55)

Therefore, the intervention of the father leads to a schism in the imaginary unity between the mother and the child. This father, however, is not the actual father but, what Lacan calls, the Name-of-the-Father that plays a symbolic function. It is this symbolic phallus that assumes a position of authority in the child’s perception. In Pinter’s plays, it is in the depiction of being the object of desire and acquiring the position of power that the women become the Lacanian phallus. Thus, the female characters here substitute the Name-of-the-Father for it is a signifier signifying the seat of dominance as, according to Lacan, “masculinity involves the posture or pretence of having the phallus, while femininity involves the *masquerade* of being the phallus” (95). Masculinity and femininity, for Lacan, are not biological essences but symbolic positions, and it is fundamentally by assuming femininity that the women construct their identity.

In the 1960s the plays of Harold Pinter exhibit a shift in focus from the ‘room’ and the intrusion of the outsider to how the characters realign their positions in the most intimate of battlefields, that is the family and within the most intimate of relationships, that is marriage. The search for identity, the exploration of sexuality and the dialectic of male-female relationships become the central emphasis. The dualism in the depiction of the women as against the vulnerability and inadequacies of the men achieves greater prominence in the works of this period. Pinter becomes obsessively occupied with the understanding of feminine psyche and, thus, embarks on a journey where he endeavours to question, analyse and dissect feminine problems with an intention to trace a woman’s growth to self-discovery and self-realisation. His preoccupation with feminine duality can be traced back to his early works in the roles of Meg and Lulu in *The Birthday Party* and Mrs. Stokes and the Girl in *A Night Out*. However, the fragmented feminine selves of the wife and the whore which were shown in separate portrayals find an integrated depiction in the characters of Flora in *A Slight Ache*, Stella in *The Collection*, Sarah in *The Lover*, Ruth in *The Homecoming* and Emma in *Betrayal*. The dichotomy of the female image in the sacredness of venerable wives and the profanity of lustful whores has been most explicitly articulated by Richard in *The Lover*,

[...] I wasn't looking for your double, was I? I wasn't looking for a woman I could respect, as you, whom I could admire and love, as I do you. Was I? All I wanted was ... how shall I put it ... someone who could express and engender lust with all lust's cunning. Nothing more. (*Plays* 2, 136)

Sarah, therefore, plays the role of the mistress that combines the traits of both the wife and the whore. In the early plays of this period, Elizabeth Sakellaridou observes in *Pinter's Female Portraits*, the heroines "fight the mutilation of their discourse and the conditioning of their behaviour" that is finally metamorphosed in "Ruth's triumphant self-declaration as a complete and autonomous human being in *The Homecoming*" (72). In this sense, Ruth reflects the strength of Sally in *Night School* which, Billington believes, "deals with women's desire for unclaimed independence and the power of choice over how they live" (137). Ruth exactly establishes herself on these grounds, capitalizing not only upon the crises of the male members of the family but also upon her sexuality.

Ruth is the wife of the intellectual Teddy who brings her to his home in North London after six years of their married life in America. The arrival of Ruth triggers a series of repressed desires among the members of the household who vie with each other for her. It is when Ruth realizes what they lack she initiates her control over them and paves the path for her own liberation. She exploits the lacuna created as a result of Jessie's death to carve a niche in the family.

Ruth exudes an unquestionable aura of superiority since the time of her arrival at night. Her silent manoeuvre round the house, punctuated by occasional utterances, does not indicate her discomfort being at a new locale but subtly insinuates her close surveillance of the house she is destined to govern. This is further implied when she wishes to go out for a stroll and no amount of coaxing from Teddy convinces her to stay back. It is similar to the manner in which the predator surveys the arena prior to victimizing its prey; and in this human jungle Ruth turns out to be the leader of the pack. This rising to authority is tacitly hinted when Teddy hands over the keys of the house to Ruth before she leaves for a walk. Thereafter, she emerges with an indomitable spirit in her first encounter with Lenny. That she will not be subservient to male domination is suggested in her first words to Lenny where opposing his greeting of "Good evening", she says, "Morning, I think" (*Plays* 3 23). Later, when Lenny proposes to hold her hand, her non-compliance shows that her will is a hard nut to crack. As the power game continues further, it reaches a climactic moment when Lenny decides to take the glass away from Ruth.

RUTH. I haven't quite finished.

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

RUTH. No, I haven't.

LENNY. Quite sufficient, in my own opinion.

RUTH. Not in mine, Leonard

[...]

LENNY. Just give me the glass.

RUTH. No.

Pause.

LENNY. I'll take it, then.

RUTH. If you take the glass ... I'll take you.

Pause.

LENNY. How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH. Why don't I just take you?

Pause.

LENNY. You're joking. (*Plays* 3, 25-26)

The three pauses here, all before Lenny's responses, unmistakably reveal how deeply he is thwarted by Ruth's words and actions. It not only exasperates him but also exposes his deep-seated unconscious fears. Thereafter, when she insists him to recline on her lap while she will pour the water down his throat, Ruth regresses him into infantile debility while finalizing her victory in the battle of wills. In this episode, Billington points out, the ruthless Ruth "challenges him on two fronts: as a sexy woman

and surrogate mother" (173). In 'The Flight from Womanhood: The Masculinity-Complex in Women as Viewed by Men and by Women', Karen Horney states, "The only thing in which she [a woman] ultimately has the advantage over the man is the, surely very questionable, pleasure in the act of birth" and later adds, "woman has in motherhood, or in the capacity of motherhood, a quite indisputable and by no means negligible physiological superiority" (60). It is along this ground that Ruth initiates her authority in the family that lacks a mother figure.

It is undeniable that the central emphasis of *The Homecoming* is the character of Ruth. Her actions and words set in motion all that have hitherto been unattended, undiscovered and unrealized. In this context, Lenny's first encounter with Ruth draws significant attention. In the opening scene of the play, he appears to be quite a dominating individual, combating his father's tirades strongly and calling him either a "daft prat" or a "stupid sod". When he confronts Ruth, he retains that domineering demeanour which unfortunately is annihilated by the latter. Though he attempts to establish his authority upon her by narrating his past encounters with women where he had been oppressive, Ruth remains unmoved and unaffected. His towering self-assertion is thoroughly shattered into smithereens and he is so completely defeated that after Ruth departs when Max enters the scene, Lenny desperately seeks solitude, insisting his father repeatedly to leave him alone. His recounting of his past experiences with the two women fails to destabilize Ruth because she does not fear castration in the Freudian sense but this failure deeply unsettles and unnerves Lenny because it exposes his infantile fears and castration anxiety, which Billington calls, "macho posturing and mother-fixation" (172). Thus, the hunter becomes the hunted. Consequently his attitude towards Ruth completely changes when he meets her next. He is so deeply disturbed by her presence that when she chooses to respond to his philosophical questions to Teddy, Lenny prefers not only to remain silent but leaves the stage immediately with his father.

Ruth, by being the object of Lenny's desire, also unleashes his jealousy for Teddy. Speaking about infantile jealousy in Book 1, Chapter 7 of *Confessions*, St. Augustine says, "I saw with my own eyes, and I observed carefully, a young child devoured by jealousy: he was not yet able to speak, yet he could not prevent himself from going pale at the bitter spectacle of his brother at the breast" (qtd. in *Family Complexes* 24). Lenny could never enjoy the undivided love of his mother for she harboured greater affections for Teddy. He had, thus, always been envious of his brother. Jacques Lacan in *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual* states, "jealousy can still manifest itself long after the subject has been weaned and is no longer in a situation of vital competition with his brother" (27). The infantile jealousy of Lenny is aroused by Ruth when she integrates into the family both as a wife and as a mother. This jealousy is implicitly suggested in his first meeting with Ruth when he proposes to remove the ashtray out of her way. An ashtray is a receptacle for burned-out cigarette stubs. In psychoanalytic terms, while a cigarette is an unmistakable phallic symbol, a burned-out cigarette would imply impotence. Thus, Gabbard observes, "Lenny has suggested that he get rid of the impotent male who lives at her side" (191). Later again it is out of jealousy that he attempts to corner Teddy by asking intellectual questions outside the latter's domain of study. In Ruth's presence it becomes a disguised effort to prove Teddy's unworthiness and thereby displace him from the position Lenny covets. It is only when she becomes, as Martin Esslin puts it, "available to them as a sexual partner" that Lenny strips off all his disguise and blatantly proposes to dance with Ruth (*Playwright* 159). Therefore, in the Introduction to *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* Arthur Ganz rightly states, "Her position as a desired sexual object gives Ruth ... her triumphant status at the end of the play" (qtd. in Gabbard 185).

In 'From Myth and Archetype to Reality: Integration of the Female Image' Elizabeth Sakellaridou says, "Ruth achieves what previous Pinter female characters failed to achieve. She breaks through at the point where Flora was stopped midway, where Stella was turned mute, where Sarah gave unfinished or negative definitions" (109). It is in this stance Ruth challenges the female boundaries. For her, her body is the weapon to establish her authority over the others. She even states that she had been a photographic model for the body before marrying Teddy. The truth of this assertion, how-

ever, is unverifiable. It is quite possible that to build her present dominance she is falsely inventing the past, as A. R. Braunmuller in 'Harold Pinter: the Metamorphosis of Memory' observes, "Ruth has the ability not only to form the future but also to reconstruct the past according to her wishes" (qtd. in Sakellaridou 114). Yet, what becomes obvious from her musings is that her conjugal life in America has not been one of bliss and felicity – "It's all rock. And sand. It stretches ... so far ... everywhere you look. And there's lots of insects there" (*Plays* 336). There is an inevitable sense of Eliotesque gloom in her words, symptomatic of the sterility that her marital life has reached. Coming to Teddy's house, she feels more at-home and given a chance to stay back, she does not let this opportunity slip by. Talking about her decision to abandon her children and husband, Pinter says, "If this had been a happy marriage it wouldn't have happened" (qtd. in Prentice 135).

It is in the role of a seducer, Ruth evokes the latent desires and repressed libidinal drives of the male members of the family, capitalizing upon which she thrives among these horde of savages. When Lenny indulges in a philosophical discourse with Teddy about the known and the unknown, about being and non-being, Ruth demeans the seriousness of the conversation from the metaphysical to the physical by drawing Lenny's attention towards her body.

Look at me. I ... move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear ... underwear ... which moves with me ... it ... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg ... moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict ... your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear that ... possibility ... in mind. (*Plays* 3, 35)

That she becomes the centre of their desire is indisputable as Max, who had previously regarded her as "a smelly scrubber" and "a stinking pox-ridden slut", now views her as "a lovely girl" and a "beautiful woman". It is by choosing to be the object of their desire that Ruth becomes the Lacanian phallus. Lacan views the phallus not as the penis but as a signifier that constitutes the imaginary object of the mother's desire. In *Ecrits: A Selection* Lacan states, "If the desire of the mother is the phallus, the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy that desire" (221). Ruth in the play identifies the lack of the family that constitutes their sexual longings which she utilizes to her advantage. It is by adopting the role of the whore that she becomes accessible to them. Lacan further says, "I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved" (221). This rejection in Ruth is discernible in her decision not to return to her children and husband, thereby giving up the role of the mother and the wife. However, whether she metamorphoses into a tart or not remains an irresolvable question for she wishes to be desired, in Lacanian terms, 'for that which she is not'.

The character of Ruth has raised quite a lot of controversies among the critics as she is denounced as a lustful woman, even a nymphomaniac, who chooses to become a prostitute. She not only agrees to dance with her brother-in-law, Lenny and ends up kissing him passionately but she also, a little later, rolls on the floor with Joey embracing and kissing him. Thereafter, she spends two complete hours with Joey in the bedroom upstairs, inevitably implying her transformation to a whore. This is explicitly evident in Teddy's proposal to his wife – "Ruth ... the family have invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As a ... as a kind of guest" – and her silent acceptance (*Plays* 347). However, what is to be noted here is that she agrees to such an offer because that will grant her centrality in the family, she will be able to manipulate others according to her wishes. Rejecting Esslin and Quigley's opinion, Pinter himself asserts, "She does not become a harlot," and points out, "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" (qtd. in Prentice 127). This freedom enables Ruth to acquire a strong will and a form of sexual authority which is hinted in the subtle apprehensions of Max.

But there's something worrying me. Perhaps she's not so up to the mark. Eh? Teddy, you're the best judge. Do you think she'd be up to the mark?

Pause.

I mean what about all this teasing? Is she going to make a habit of it? That'll get us nowhere. (*Plays* 3, 46)

These practical fears of Max unavoidably reveal not only how much Ruth shall be empowered once she is assimilated into the 'bosom of the family' but also his jealousy of the woman who might marginalize him further in the family.

Once her position is finalized, Ruth asserts absolute authority over the family "as a quasi-matriarch", in the words of Mark Taylor-Batty (93). Towards the end of the play she reduces the inmates of the house to sketchy effigies craving her favours helplessly. This grants Ruth with the power to control them as per her demands. In *Gender and Discourse* Deborah Tannen observes Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's definition of power,

One person may be said to have power over another to the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other. Power is a relationship between atleast two persons, and it is non-reciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behavior. (25-26)

Though the family decides the fate of Ruth, her plan of action in the future and her role as a wife-whore, she does not let that happen according to their terms. Her ascension to a powerful position in the family is unmistakable when she authoritatively demands for food and drink, and later dictates the conditions of living. She speaks with determination and self-confidence. Bernard Dukore points out that she bargains calmly because "The power is hers, for no one else has the supply and everyone else has the demand" (*Pinter* 80). Her dominance portrays her as "a businesswoman", says Elizabeth Sakellaridou, who "exhibits surprising ability for negotiation, a thorough knowledge of the process of financial transactions and a mastery of legal terminology" (113). Thus, Ruth adopts a very paternal identity. It is in this sense that she becomes the symbolic phallus in Lacanian terms. In *Ecrits: A Selection* Lacan observes, "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognise the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (qtd. in Evans 122). In the last act Ruth plays the legislative function by setting the laws of her stay. She can, therefore, be associated with the Name-of-the-Father in the prohibitive function of the symbolic father. Lacan often plays on the homophony of *le nom du père* (the Name-of-the-father) and *le 'non' du père* (the 'no' of the father). Ruth can also be equated with the latter as she does not acquiesce to the others without a fight. Her first word in the play is a 'No' and she uses this as many as six times in the next three pages. Thereafter, this becomes more prominent when she disagrees with Teddy to return to America, denies Lenny the glass and refuses Joey to 'go the whole hog'. Thus, she attains, in Pinter's words, "a kind of freedom" which is derived from, as Penelope Prentice observes, "having nothing more to lose" (134). It is this freedom that empowers Ruth and makes Max apprehensive.

MAX. I don't think she's got it clear.

Pause.

You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

Pause.

She won't ... be adaptable! (*Plays* 3, 50)

Despite being the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father, Ruth does not restrict the incest taboo, rather she indulges in it quite blatantly, thereby transcending into the primal father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* who is believed to be beyond the law. Thus, Andrew Wylie in *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre* rightly states, "Gradually, attempts by the men to dominate Ruth are turned by her to her advantage, and she emerges as probably the most powerful figure in the play" (73-74).

Thus, Ruth's character exposes the innate vulnerability of the all-male family. This exposure in turn allows her not only to escape the aridity of her marriage and the loveless milieu of America but also to bring about her social, sexual and financial emancipation. With marvelous skill and compe-

tence, she participates in the power struggle that operates in the family and emerges victorious by homogenizing the opposing polarities of the Madonna and the tart, the mother and the whore. Billington's estimation, therefore, is worth noting,

In Ruth, Pinter gives us not an empty cipher or a blank theatrical device, but a positive, strong-willed woman who both exposes phallogocentric vanity and achieves the necessary dramatic feat of disrupting the power-structure and changing the situation. (178)

Ironically, though the play is “a feminist challenge to male despotism”, Ruth ultimately becomes the phallic mother (168).

What Billington says about Pinter's cinematic adaptation of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Wife* – “Women progress and profit from the past; men remain insecure and exploitative” – is also applicable to *The Homecoming* (274). This struggle for power, control and authority is what defines Pinter's characters and beneath this struggle lies, in the words of Penelope Prentice, “an attempt to assert identity in order to gain attention, admiration, love” (137). This chapter has, thus, explored the intricate connections between desire and power in the construction of identity within the family structure. Starting with the Freudian notions, it shows the limitations within which Pinter's heroines do not remain confined, challenging the boundaries of feminine roles. Thus, it takes up the Lacanian principles of the phallus to explicate how the female characters acquire liberation not by ‘having’ but by ‘being’ the phallus which Lacan asserts in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as “nothing more than a signifier” (314). In *The Homecoming* we have Ruth who withdraws from conventional marriage, for succumbing in it would subject her either to an arid sexual life or to the husband's dominance. Ruth, therefore, finds herself emancipated from the bonds of motherhood and wifedom by leaving her husband like Flora in *A Slight Ache* and envisaging a possibility of wish-fulfillment like Sarah in *The Lover*.

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