



PINTER'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN 'THE HOMECOMING'

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Abstract

The present research paper aims at discussing the portrayal of women characters in Harold Pinter's The Homecoming. Here, Pinter focuses on animalistic needs of people in community.

The desire for food, violence, sex, aggression and power seem to be chief motif of characters in this play. The play attacks on extreme physicality lust for sexual relationship at its unexpected limits of inhumanity and ruthlessness. The research paper discusses the aspect of the portrayal of women characters in The Homecoming.

Introduction

The Homecoming (1965) is Pinter's full-length play which shocks the audience for depiction of inexplicable motivations and unbelievable sexual expressions of its characters.

The play works simultaneously on two levels realistic and Metaphorical. On the first level, it is a socially accurate criticism of the tribal behavior of family members. On the second, as Martin Esslin views, it is a fulfillment of the sons' oedipal fantasies. Michael Billington interprets, the play "As a feminist challenge to male despotism and to the classification of women as either mothers or whores" [168].

Ruth is the chief female character in the play. Ruth enters in the male dominated atmosphere of Max' family. She, presently, is the only female in the family. The family is a very household of father, uncle and sons who decide amongst themselves to employ Ruth, the wife of one the sons as a prostitute. We observe a brutal intimacy amongst the men. They are often abusive of one another and there is little warmth in their relationships. The relationship of father and sons seems full of hatred and dishonor.

Throughout the play we find constant hatred of women. Max speaks of his dead wife Jessie as either Madonna, a caring, loving or exalted woman or a Whore, a sluttish sex object. Max blames his dead wife for betraying him with his best friend. A great mystery seems to surround the dead wife of Max and the mother of three sons, Jessie. Ruth is described at one stage as 'slopbucket' and a dirty tart but she is elsewhere called 'kith and kin' 'who is expected to live in the bosom of the family. Lenny, in his monologue about an old lady and an angle, brutishly conflates sexuality and women with violence. The story implies that Lenny is, in some way, connected with the world of prostitutes and gangsters.

In the scene when Joey and Ruth are upstairs for two hours and Joey comes back, Lenny asks Joey how he got on with Ruth. Joey replies he did not go all the way. Lenny becomes angry and starts scolding Teddy for having a wife who is tantalizing. Teddy indifferently replies that perhaps Joey hasn't got the right touch. Max and Sam are also informed that Ruth is merely a tantalizing kind of woman. Max is upset and asks Ruth if she had merely tantalized his son Joey. He suggests that Ruth should stay on in the house. When Teddy asks how they would bear the additional cost of her staying there, it is decided that each of them will contribute a little from his wages towards the cost of maintaining Ruth. Thus, Ruth is employed to be a Whore by this brutal family. What is most shocking for the audience is Ruth's final acceptance to be a whore.

On the contrary, when we observe Ruth's background history, we find she used to be a model. She constantly craved for glamorous world. The culmination of her deep subconscious desire seems to find a way of fulfillment towards the end of the play. In the final scene when Teddy accepts the proposal of family members and leaves for America, Ruth sits in a chair. She is relaxed. Joey kneels before her. She touches his head and he puts it in her lap. Max is agitated and says, "I am too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man. I'm not such an old man" [Pinter, 80]. Ruth remains silent. Max becomes more and more pleading, more and more insistent. Evidently, he,



too, is sexually attracted towards his daughter-in-law. He falls to his knees and crawls towards Ruth. Michael Billington's remarks on this aspect:

Ruth is enthroned in Max's chair; the chair she eyed enviously at the start and that is clearly the seat of domestic power. She has Joey kneeling at her feet, still clamouring for, and denied, sexual satisfaction. Max, having suffered a mild stroke in the final moments, is left as an impotent supplicant begging a kiss—It is Ruth who has come home, who has rid herself of a suffocating husband, who has chosen the relative squalor of Hackney life over the sterile cleanliness of American academia, and it is she who has reconciled the supposedly incompatible roles of mother and whore [174-175].

Another underlying aspect regarding portrayal of a woman in this play is also noteworthy. The image of a woman in minds of these family members (especially men), should be also taken into account. The men in this play generally hate and hesitate to do work of women. Max cooks in the house. Lenny is a pimp. Though Joey is a boxer, he lacks strength and zest, as we observe it through Max' criticism of Joey, "You don't know how to defend yourself and you don't know how to attack" [Pinter, 17]. Max gets annoyed at Sam and Joey, "Who do you think I am, your mother? Eh? Honest. They walk in here every time of the day and night like bloody animals. Go and find yourself a mother" [Ibid. 16]. While talking about his dead wife, Max is sure that Jessie had illicit relationship with his friend, MacGregor, still he attempts to protect his own masculinity:

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 [Ibid. 9].

It seems that all males of this family are in search of a female whom they could exploit like a victim caught amidst brutal beasts. Though they have extreme hatred for women in their minds, still they seek for a woman who could perform various roles for them. As if the position of Jessie is replaced by Ruth finally. As mother, wife, and whore Ruth fills the vacuum created by the death of Jessie. Commenting on this aspect of Ruth's character, Mark Taylor-Batty remarks:

Arguably, Ruth might be considered as a victim of male obsession as, from the male perspective, she is transformed and degraded from a wife, to a sexual object, to a whore. And yet, she might also be considered to have effected a liberating transformation from an object of male desire (a photographic model) to a wife, to an independent being who exerts her own control on those who would manipulate her [...] The reduction of femininity to mother, wife or whore is, after all. A simplification that reflects a predominantly masculine psychology [45].

Conclusion

Harold Pinter's portrayal of his women characters is dark and gloomy. He achieves the final impact of startling his audience through dark portrayal of Ruth directly and that of Jessie, indirectly. Ruth's choice to become a whore is unquestionably obscure. The question still remains in mind Is this right way to challenge the male despotism and dominance? Why should a well-educated wife of a University Professor choose such an option which is absolutely unexpected? But there lies true success of the dramatist in unclothing reality of life. Life that seems less meaningful, less fruitful and absolutely futile is depicted here by Pinter. Violence, bestial sexuality, need of power, brutality, can never be essential part of human culture across the globe. What Pinter seems to focus upon, is the negative side of human nature in society.

References

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