

Ruth: Harold Pinter's Voice of Postmodernist Politics

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Ruth acts as a postmodernist woman in a new avatar. On one hand she perhaps, evolves as a new woman in ultra postmodern terms, bold enough to accept what she is, taking all power in her hands. On the other hand, she falls prey to her own design by generating what the power structure of all-male family wanted. Ruth who was a nude model in the past at the end of the play accepts the profession of prostitution and stays with Teddy's family. On realistic grounds, what happens in the play seems quite impossible but when we consider Ruth's previous occupation and get hints about Max's dead wife Jessie, and Lenny's occupation as a professional pimp, we begin to understand the motives very clearly. Interviewed by Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler Peter Hall (one of Pinter's big collaborators and interpreters) suggests that this play is about "space"(140) in which all compete for their territory, power, control and free will. Here, everybody's space collides with other's space, only to give room for vexed situations and shocking revelations. Pinter talks about this politics of space which Ruth utilized may be effectively or ineffectively.

The delineation of women characters in this phase of his writing was of much interest. Simon Trussler in her book *The Play of Harold Pinter An Assessment* believed that Pinter who presented "duality of the female psyche"(128) emerged as less effective. Mark Batty in his *About Pinter: The Playwright and the Work* on the contrary, refutes this point by stating that it is not merely duality which Pinter examines but the picture that society and its men outlined. It is the frame of "femininity defined by men to satisfy their desires or insecurities" (42). Ruth silently displaces Max and Lenny from their position of authority. She did not hesitate to accept the offer of prostitution from her in-laws. She accepts the mother/whore duality which actually shocks the audience/reader in no time. She explicitly expresses her material needs to be fulfilled by them, if they want her for prostitution. John Peter in "The Homecoming to No Man's Land" says that "she becomes, materially and erotically, the dominatrix of the family" (95). When Ruth encounters Lenny, he tries to subdue her with all his aggressiveness, male ego and female hatred. Ruth wins through her aggressive feminine sexuality and immediate erotic attack, which Lenny never expected.

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.

(I.51-52)

She subverts all conventionality about women by openly exploiting what she has and accepting prostitution, not only externally but internally as well. As Batty observes in *About Pinter*, Pinter offers a design of a family which:

. . . in the total absence of women, is torn between idealisation and vilification of the sex, and can see them only as saints or sinners. Madonnas or tarts, mother or whores (170).

There is a proper distance kept between language and reality - a deviance from the referential aspect of language. Ruth tries to find her existence outside the prevailing norms. According to Mark Batty, this play gains its force from the challenge a female gives to all male dominion by "taking control of the factors (male physical and emotional needs) which inform them" (39). It seems to be a play about some aspects of family which are always there in every family in some way or the other - an attitude which remains inert in every being. It can be maximum to a level where it becomes irresistible as he believes in Teddy's case and minimum where it seems normal. George E. Wellwarth states that this play is about:

. . . the centripetal tentacular grasp of family relationships : the suffocating pressure of unwanted emotion and social expectation from the family and the conflict between the infantile and the independent as the adult seeks his own identity (105).

It is Ruth's homecoming to her own original and genuine life of prostitution, nudity and free-will. For Pinter (interviewed by Miriam Gross, comp. *Pinter in the Theatre*), this play is all about love and:

. . . the violence of the family towards their son when he comes back from America, using his wife to embody their own rage or spleen or whatever, comes about because they don't know where to put their love. (17).

Hal Crowther in his e-article suggests that *The Homecoming* "signaled a tectonic shift in the theatre towards a postmodern consciousness where neither wit nor honesty can save us from ourselves"¹. At last, Ruth is neither saved by honesty nor wit. The acceptance is just another way of feeling bound. Indubitably, here Pinter reflects "the cosmic suffering of human beings in an age in which a deep problematic of dehumanization is experienced"². Ruth's doubly trapped position is much problematic as her mental dehumanization and physical oversexualisation takes place. Pinter wrote a play that lays bare suppressed and self-veiled undercurrents of our so-called existence. According to Katherine H. Burkman, this play:

. . . depicts the struggle within the family unit for salvation, as Max, Lenny, and Joey reach out to Ruth for whatever grace she can offer, and the "intellectual" Teddy relinquishes the struggle even as he has relinquished life itself (137).

All these members try to attain 'nirvana' in their own ways. From one perspective, it is Ruth who in the thought of liberation is again brought in the ever-binding and politically postmodernist structures of society.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson see the play as a blend of two contradictory facets: "tainted by misogynist and one imbued with feminist values" (67). Irwing Wardle in his essay "The Territorial Struggle" interprets the play in territorial terms, in which every character wants to maintain his territory. In traditional terms whatever happened with Ruth is shocking and gains nothing for her. In territorial terms, Ruth emerges as a woman who boldly uses her sexual power to keep all males on their knees before her as it happened with Max when in the end, curtain falls. There is a:

. . . ritualized tournament in which the two instincts of sexual desire and territorial aspiration fight it out under the scrutiny of an emasculated observer on the sidelines. There is no doubt that territory is the winner (44).

Pinter creates a world where characters' wildness is palpable and primary and where sophistication and naiveté coexist and interact. In this regard, Ruth is no exception. Since, this play reveals odd madness and cunning dualisms in dialogue,

it touches the comedy of manners class, and furthermore because Pinter exposes what is hidden in people's mind which never comes to surface, it probably touches primitive ritual as well - "the animality locked up in their flaccid middle-class bosoms" (56). *The Homecoming* portrays a family in which relationships, roles and actions continually shift, adapt and contradict themselves - a prime point of postmodernism. On one hand ethics as Susan Hollis Merritt in her essay "(Anti-) Global Pinter" observes, love and affection are the only basis to survive in this competitively ambiguous world and on the other hand contain "no-easy answers" (157). Ruth herself stands as a primary question in this respect. To explain Ruth's position, this play is a:

. . . plot between him and Ruth, whom he has paid bounteously for her acquiescence, to destroy his family, all of them already important, as Teddy is also. When Ruth will have done her work, the octopus and Teddy . . . will be vindicated, revenged and liberated (107).

Austin Quigley believes that it is Ruth who makes Teddy's duality come into light. She provokes Teddy to criticize his London home from the side of the self that exists outside the self of his London home. Ruth knows Teddy's divided self and becomes a tool for its projection. After Ruth's instigation Teddy's outside self declaims his own home as a "filthy urinal" (II.89). It is just not indicative of America but suggests the sterility and philosophical dryness of Teddy which Ruth has assessed and wants to get rid of. The dialogues of Pinter invite the audience to reinvent the very foundation of family at large, to dive into the sub-texts, to relook the absurdity of our basic situation and to relocate our location of existence. Imbibed with animalistic and primitive desires, these characters play the game of dominance and power to get hold of each other. Through Ruth anti-America stance of Pinter also comes up. Pinter makes this new American (Teddy) go back. There emerges a clash as Quigley analyzes in *The Pinter Problem* between the self "operating in the London home and the self that now operates outside it" (211). This postmodernist subject is divided, unpredictable and ambiguous. As Christopher Butler puts it in his book *Postmodernism*, this postmodernist subject attracts our notice to:

. . . the 'subject-ed' condition of persons who are, whether they know it or not, 'controlled' (if you are on the left) or 'constituted' (if you are in the middle) by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the society they inhabit (50).

Ruth pursues what she wanted and refutes all conventionality. This feminist challenge:

. . . attacks the legitimating metadiscourse used by males, designed to keep them in power, and it seeks an individual empowerment against it (57).

She plays a mother/whore dichotomy and exhibits a duality in her character by taking over the authority of late Jessie. The first encounter takes Lenny aback and makes him understand her overriding and bizarre postmodernist-political stance. At one point, it is a stance of Ruth in which a woman though acted according to her own wish ultimately ends at nothing. It is a picture where women in this era can never ooze out of the power structures, no matter what and why they want. Ruth got her own alternative that left her with no other alternative. At the other point, it can be her wish to incessantly enjoy her body to the full. She cannot change the existing frame but can be happy in the limited means. She feels free in the bound structure of female oppression seeing this not as an oppression but liberation. She finds her own way of authority and its means can be anything.

It is shown how a marginalized subverts what is conventional and outmoded. As Quigley believes in his "Pinter, politics and postmodernism (I)" the characters

cope with "self and others in the local spaces" (10) they occupy. The situation which Ruth faces is much more suppressed and therefore not easy to bring to surface. Pinter actually has shifted "to the realm of political situation the exploration of complex local social interaction" (10). The oppression of a marginal female is not shocking but "self justified" (10). This justification is not only self but also made by the legitimized people and governments that is our sole consideration. As Miriea Aragay puts, Ruth did not emerge victorious but remained "an object in the man's homosocial traffic, 'inside' rather than 'outside'" (251). She in the face of her overt feminist challenge only emerged as a marginal entrapped in the dominant order — an entrapment that lies somewhere inside. This intricately woven trap appeared as a sort of liberation from the authoritative order but in reality it was not so. Ruth herself chooses a place inside the dominant order.

For Aragay this play exhibits this gender and class tension on the surface, and also a new "contemporary conflict within working-class culture: that between the impulse to 'better' oneself and the suspicion that those who do so may be 'getting above' themselves" (249). Therefore a conflict develops between a better educated Teddy and his shabby ill-mannered lower class family. Being a postmodernist drama, it displays multifaceted vexed situation of our life that emerge through various shoulder-rubbing voices of dominance, power, money, gender and culture. Here, Ruth "becomes a conduit through which class resentment between the male characters is mitigated" (249). The play moreover, with the ultimate defeat of Ruth apparently says the postmodernist theory of the political where powers are internalized in a natural and hardly imposed way. This is how Louis Antonio Gramsci's 'hegemony' and Althusser's 'repressive structures' maneuver. For Michel Foucault, power operates from the bottom and multiple areas. As Smart puts it:

. . . the intelligibility of power does not derive from the decision of an individual subject but from the fact that relations of power are pervaded by calculation, and by aims and objectives (123).

To be precise, there is no 'outside' possible, outside the internalized system in which everyone like Ruth is trapped and feels liberated. Ann C. Hall in her review of Charles Grimes *Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence beyond Echo* analyzes how Grimes observes that people who revolt in his plays are always made mute. His "political theatre is ultimately pessimistic" (236). Nothing can expunge massive power of the oppressors and utter weakness of the victims.

The characters except Ruth speak in cryptic way as they stay behind the smokescreen of intentional ambiguities and hideous personalities. In his plays, "Verbal or silent thrusts and parries and piss taking or donning masks, are not mutually exclusive", (59) according to Dukore. When Lenny questions Teddy about a table, Ruth's spontaneous and bold reply immediately makes everybody float in silence. She says:

Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear . . . 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 .

. . .

Silence.

(II. 85)

Fjelde very rightly says, "In the guise of conquest, a triumphant business deal, the dreaded surrender takes place, and the dual victimization of Ruth and Teddy is ironically reversed" (104). It is the homecoming of Teddy in America and Ruth's in Britain, in a contrasting way. Both are at home, in the home which is not their own.

Postmodernism "rests on 'money', on 'buying power'" (2) as Simon Malpas suggests. Pinter shows this when Ruth in the final scene demands material comforts and financial security.

John Lahr analyses that whatever characters lament and say they "have a life beyond explanation" (125). It is here, where the whole family plays "the game of survival, where invective takes the place of confrontation" (125). Here, Ruth moulds herself, according to the established attitude of Teddy's family and hence, manages to survive. Teddy perhaps, never liked his family's attitude and did not change himself. He emerged as a failure and at the end lost everything he had.

This contemporary world constantly forms various contracts to make individuals at least respire in this apocalyptic world. Ruth also makes a contract that should have signatures. Making a professional contract for her happiness, she says:

All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract.

(II. 136)

Pinter introduces us to the culture of postmodernist contractual relationships. Pinter through Ruth exposes the intricate 'System' and oppressive power relations at work. Ruth highlights how a marginal is bound to be a marginal in this postmodern world as she bought herself a contentment that was both bound and unbound. In this regard, Paranjape scrutinizes that ". . . whatever the content of postmodernism, its form has remained elite, exclusive, and closed to outsiders" (153). Unquestionably, Pinter's double-positioned Ruth asserts herself, but more than this it is also true that the trap which she frames for the dominant all-male family, in a way becomes her own: a duality symptomatic of postmodernist politics.

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