

**Explicating the theme of Adultery in provisos of Reality-Illusion paradigm: a Reading of Harold Pinter's the *Homecoming***

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**Abstract**

The theme of adultery has been used in an extensive range of literature through the ages, and as a theme it brings strong emotions into the forefront. This has been a common theme in literature and Harold Pinter, the renowned British playwright of the twentieth century too in his plays explains this theme in terms of the Reality-Illusion paradigm where he presents people who are either really betrayed or who live in world of fantasy. Harold Pinter should have thought that it is necessary to represent those who are really betrayed and those who live in fantasy. In *The Homecoming*, it is real and everyone knows about it.

**Keywords:** adultery. Pinter, reality, illusion, paradigm

Ever since God created man, man-woman relationship is considered divine. One-man-one woman norm is universally accepted and hence the concept of adultery is considered a breach of the divine law. But neither man nor woman is assured of loyalty and devotion. This has been a common theme in literature and Harold Pinter, the eminent British playwright of the twentieth century too in his plays negotiates this theme in terms of the Reality-Illusion paradigm where he present people who are either really betrayed or who live in world of fantasy.

The theme of adultery has been used in a wide range of literature through the ages, and it brings intense emotions into the foreground. In *The Bible*, incidents of adultery are present almost from the start. The story of Abraham contains several incidents and serves as warnings or stories of sin and forgiveness. Adultery is a social act, and literature deals with the social or socio religious repercussions of infidelity in marriage as well as with questions of individual identity. Shifts in the social identity of the adulterer or adulteress are ultimately shown to be of more significance than the personal in certain literary genres and historical periods. The

plot of adultery has been mythically generative from ancient times: The Trojan war, centered on Helen's unfaithfulness inspired Greek epic and drama. The Arthurian cycle contains as important feature Guinivere's adultery with Sir Lancelot, leading to the fall of the Round Table. Such transgressions are heroic not only in that are they of highborn heroes and heroines but also in that they cause their society to become tragically uprooted. Several other literary traditions have developed and form part of the ongoing treatment of adultery in literature. One is the comic tradition of the cuckold, often an older man with a young wife, as in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* or in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. These are tales in which adultery has relatively little moral, religious, or social implications.

Harold Pinter, one of the most eminent and influential British playwrights of the twentieth century should have thought that it is necessary to represent those who are really betrayed and those who live in fantasy. In his play, *The Collection*, it is a mere fantasy, whereas in *The Homecoming*, it is real and everyone knows about it.

*The Homecoming* begins in the evening of an apparently normal working day. Max and Lenny are sitting in the large, slum like living room in North London, which is the realistic setting for the entire action of the play; they are arguing. Sam returns from work, and Max verbally attacks him. Then Joey returns from his boxing gym, and Max also verbally abuses him. Later that night, after all three have gone to bed, Teddy and Ruth arrive from the United States, impromptu, and while Ruth goes out for a breath of air, Lenny enters and converses nonchalantly with Teddy. Teddy retires to his old bedroom upstairs, and Ruth returns, to be greeted by Lenny, who engages in provocative banter and storytelling. This leads to an incident with a glass of water that Ruth offers to Lenny with clear sexual implications. When Lenny recoils, she laughs, drinks the water, and retires upstairs to bed. Max, awakened by the conversations, comes down and abuses Lenny. The next morning, when Teddy and Ruth come downstairs, Max reacts violently, particularly against Ruth, and orders Joey to throw both of them out. Joey is unwilling, and Max hits him. Max then changes his mind; the act ends with Max about to embrace Teddy.

*The Homecoming*, a two-act play written in 1965, is set in an old house in North London. The play has six characters: five men namely Max, a retired butcher, his brother Sam, a cabdriver and the three sons of Max; Teddy, an expatriate American Philosophy Professor, Lenny who appears to be a pimp, and Joey, a would-be boxer in training; and a woman named Ruth who is Teddy's wife. Max lives with his two sons Lenny and Joey, and Sam too occupies the house. Into the family there comes the eldest of his sons, Teddy with his wife Ruth.

Teddy had married her just before leaving to America and the family never had a chance to meet her. They have three sons who have been left behind in America. Ruth becomes sexually involved with Teddy's brothers and it gradually emerges that Lenny is

earning his living as a professional pimp. He tells Ruth that she could stay in the house as a prostitute. Teddy too seems to agree with her idea and he goes back to the States. Old Sam, who suffers from a heart attack, reveals that the boys' mother had once made love to MacGregor. Ruth at last reveals herself as the queen of a circus plummeting all others into clowns and beasts, throwing baits at them, and at the same time pulling the strings. This is evoked by the final tableau of the play. Joey kneels at Ruth's chair and puts his head on her lap, Lenny stands still watching, and Max kneels raising his face. The way she bargains over the proposal to become a prostitute to financially help the family is a brilliant strategy she uses to jockey herself into a dominating position: "I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses" (Pinter 3: 85). Martin Esslin observes: "*The Homecoming* . . . represents the sons' dream of the sexual conquest of the mother and the discomfiture of the father" (*Theatre of the Absurd* 256). The sordid behaviour of the family members and Ruth's choice to become a prostitute in the family violate all our sense of sagacity and moral decorum. She may be trying to construct a whole man out of a motley collection of parts as she was unable to discover a man capable of interacting with her on all levels. She has finally given up the cerebral and the intellectual for the physical and the sensual like Flora in *A Slight Ache*.

Irving Wardle comments on Pinter's adroit use of animal imagery thus: "Pinter used the animal metaphor with discretion encased in a reassuringly human mask . . . all Pinter had done was to remove the mask and show the naked animal. It is a family of predators in which power contest is going on" (44). Ruth is a queen-bee as has been rightly noted by Wardle. She, like Flora in *A Slight Ache* is the image of fertility and sex. Bernard F Dukore comments that "Included in this distillation is a demonstration of the human being in the role of human animal"(109). The presence of Ruth, the only female figure arouses bestial instincts in the hearts of the male members of the family.

The work of women is done by the men folk in Max's household. After Jessie's death, Max had to become the mother substitute in the family. He is compelled to take over the role of his wife to feed the house-hold. Lenny is a pimp. Joey, though a boxer lacks masculine strength and virility. Max ridicules him saying: "You don't know how to defend yourself and you don't know how to attack" (Pinter3: 25). The household of Max is an asymmetrical, male dominated family which desperately needs an absorbing female. What they seek is a fulfillment of fiscal need and emotional urges. The proposal is offered to Ruth and it is almost instinctively confirmed. Her statement, "All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract" is a clear indication of this (Pinter 3: 85). It is Ruth who completes the pattern of sex and power in the family. She becomes the real heir to Jessie who, as reported by Sam had illicit relation with another man. The homecoming for Ruth becomes a journey into her inner self. Revolting against the dull and restrictive life imposed by her husband Teddy, Ruth escapes into a more free world inhabited by human animals. She becomes the foundation

of both physical and emotional sustenance and also the moral focus for Max, Lenny and Joey. Only she can rescue this “English male domain laid waste because of the absence of the fructifying Earth Mother” (Adler 382). Pinter’s characters in the play could also be members of pimps and prostitutes. Lenny too is an uncouth, ironic, scheming and disparaging type of person who never respected his father. His offensive treatment toward Max clearly illustrates his spiteful nature. Max is being insulted and ignored but he goes on reminiscing, filling in a good deal of the plot of the play. He always shifts from one subject to another as the play progresses. But Lenny is uninterested and is quite disturbed by Max’s domineering presence.

Uncle Sam has been a taxi-driver for many years and a private chauffeur for five years. Max knows why Sam has not got married. Being a homosexual, he could not dare to have a wife. It is to this male household that Pinter brings the two unexpected characters, Teddy and his wife Ruth who create a drastic change in the lives of all characters there. When Teddy senses the situation and understands that things are going wrong, he compels Ruth to return. Ronald Hayman observes:

One of the most effective dramatic moments comes when Teddy, sensing that something is going to go wrong, tries to persuade Ruth to cut the visit short and go back with him to the States. But again Teddy’s manner of handling Ruth is very odd indeed, without coming into focus as indicative in any way of his relationship with her. (110)

But instead of listening to her husband, she had given in to her to brothers-in-law. She becomes an anti-domestic protagonist who plays the dual roles of a whore and a mother. He had been a perpetual victim in the hands of his mother, Jessie in his juvenile days, and Ruth in his prime age. Ruth had suppressed her instinctive sexual desires when she married Teddy and finally she opted the way of prostitution to let loose her instincts. Martin Esslin remarks:

For Ruth sees herself - has resigned herself to be seen- as a passive object of desire . . . She has tried to fight her own nature and she has been defeated by it. Now she yields to it, and surrenders beyond caring. (*Pinter, the Playwright* 144-45)

At the end of the play, it can be seen that the entire house is ruled by Ruth as it had been by Jessie. Even Max, the most elderly character, is seen kneeling upon her and begging her sexual favors.

I’m not an old man.

*Pause.*

Do you hear me?

*He raises his face to her.*

Kiss me.

*She continues to touch JOEY’s head, lightly.*

*LENNY stands watching.*

*Curtain (Pinter 3: 89-90)*

Batty comments: “The play ends with her in a clear position of power, and as Pinter argued, ‘it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street. But even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind’” (44).

More than Teddy’s homecoming, what is significant is Jessie’s coming home in the person of Ruth. Teddy becomes a victim to the pleasure of his kith and kin who get madly obsessed with sexual instincts. His life is completely absurd and pointless. The wholly amoral life of his mother, arrogant nature of his father and extremely rotten ambience at home had disturbed his early life. Austin Quigley comments:

Just as the opening of the play revealed fixities and instabilities in the domestic scene, so, too, does the closing situation. As everyone else is still and silent and grouped around the new family focus, Ruth, a new figure wanders uncircumcised on the periphery of family affairs. (222-23)

Even though the concept of adultery is not tolerable in any society, it is a reality which happens in varied social spheres around us and it has become a usual phenomenon. In *The Homecoming*, the only woman character, Ruth agrees to become a whore-figure, finally with her husband’s permission, just to satisfy the sexual needs of the male members of Teddy’s family. If in *The Collection*, it is a mere illusion, in *The Homecoming*, it is an absolute reality.

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