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Male Authority and Female Marginalization: A Feminist Re-reading of Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party

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Abstract

Female characters in the plays of Harold Pinter are often neglected because they appear subservient (except in 'The Homecoming') and 'The Birthday Party' is no exception to this paradigm. However, simply because the characters do not heroically slam the door on patriarchy like Ibsen's Nora they cannot be ignored as ideal representatives of all the injustices carried out against women. Through a feminist and contextual analysis of characters like Meg, one can uncover the deep rooted seed of male dominance which has become normalized over time. This paper seeks to examine the women characters of 'The Birthday Party' against their male counterparts to uncover the conditioning that women undergo. Meg is represented as merely caring about her food or her party and domestic chores and her character is reduced to the stereotypical image of a woman who does not seek autonomy, only acceptance. This power of acceptance which is granted to men by society is so strong that women might feel forced to mould themselves according to the men they wish to impress. Meg does not have, what Mary Wollstonecraft said was 'power over themselves', she merely has power over domestic chores. Hence, there emerges a need for a thorough examination of the constant marginalisation of women in order to promote a dialogue on the prejudices that have become naturalised and are being represented as such.

Keywords: *Patriarchal Normalization, Gender Conditioning, Domestic Marginalization, Female Subordination, Feminist Re-reading.*

> One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (Beauvoir 330)

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* manages to create a menacing atmosphere that becomes a metaphor for the unpredictability and 'absurdity' of human existence but the power dynamics that exist between Stanley, McCan and Goldberg should not overshadow the dramatic tension that is also created by female characters like Meg. Her role, in a very broad sense, is merely to show the performativeness of her gender identity where she is tasked with representing the stereotypes of being a woman and isn't imbued with a subversive potential. Even though the major concern of the play may not be to bring about a feminist uprising, one cannot simply ignore how women characters are presented and treated by other members of the household.

The broader tension created by male characters of patriarchal authority suppresses the role of Meg and presents her actions as largely inconsequential to the household within the play.

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The domestic space (boarding house) where the drama takes place is managed by Meg and Petey but since Petey has a job, Meg is tasked with managing all the chores. From the very beginning of the play it is clear that Meg is the primary person who takes care of all the day to day household work. But her role as a homemaker is hardly brought out because she is made a conduit of the perceived superficiality of women which is also evident through her dialogues which are limited to domestic concerns. Her first dialogue with Petey is:

> Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes. Are they nice?
>
> Petey: Very nice. Meg. I thought they'd be nice" (Pinter 9)

This seemingly insignificant conversation is enough to showcase how the character of Meg is being represented, her concern solely lies in gaining validation for her domestic work and if she is not appreciated for the same, her identity becomes unstable. Within the context of society, this construct becomes exceedingly problematic because Meg is almost made a character of ridicule because she takes care of everything within the household, hardly gets any acknowledgment but still focuses all her time and energy in looking after the male members of the house including Stanley. It is important that the audience does not accept her character at face value but rather engages with it critically to find out all the ways in which she represents the broader patterns of gendered domestic marginalisation.

The repetition of this opening scene is often viewed as a classic example of the *Theatre of The Absurd* that portrays the meaningless routine of life underlying its unpredictability. However, when viewed specifically through the character of Meg Boles, it portrays a problematic repetitive routine in which a woman becomes trapped by figures of patriarchal oppression. The first scene is indistinguishable from the last scene:

> Meg: What are you doing?
>
> Petey: Reading.
>
> Meg: Is it good?
>
> Petey: All right. [She sits by the table.]
>
> Meg: Where's Stan? [Pause.] Is Stan down yet, Petey?
>
> Petey: No...he's....
>
> Meg: Is he still in bed?"(Pinter 86)

Her concerns always remain confined to the people within the domestic sphere. Whether or not Stanley is up yet? Whether or not Petey likes (or rather approves of) the food prepared by Meg? This domestic space, hence, becomes a tense arena where the woman of the house has to constantly prove her usefulness by gaining the approval of male members of the house. Meg is not blessed with the chance to critically consider her situation and ponder upon the very narrow and limited autonomy that she has. She is not troubled by her situation because the subtle oppression has caused Meg to normalize these 'patriarchal rituals'. Meg Boles is perhaps not the only person who has quietly accepted patriarchy without realising it, her character can be seen as representative of how patriarchal expectations become internalised and diminish one's ability to why they must do everything that is demanded of them by men even though they do not like it? If women are not educated enough, in ways of society if not theoretical knowledge, they will never be able to find out how they are being wronged everyday in the name of custom or tradition. Almaroof and Isa have rightfully commented on the women characters of the play that:

> The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter explores the hypocrisy, dullness, and deception of male chauvinists in a so-called patriarchal society. Female characters in the play, such as Meg and Lulu, are subjected and oppressed, ostracized, and mistreated. They are just like puppets. They are programmed to operate following masculine philosophy. Their conscious fights against oppressive dominance are ineffective because patriarchal monsters cannot recognize their equality.(65)

Calling Meg and Lulu puppets might seem harsh but it is an inevitable label that must be attached to them in order to acknowledge their subjugation. Meg lives within a scripted framework where her roles are clearly defined by society and her identity is an imposed construct rather than a self-created idea. Even when her monotonous routine is broken by organising a 'Birthday Party' it becomes another act requiring validation rather than a way for her to express her individuality and give life to her own ideas.

Masculine identity, by contrast, is outspokenly presented in the play. Characters like Goldberg and McCan are very assertive about their patriarchal authority and masculinity. Their identity is also shaped by societal expectations but they are in control of their life narratives and are capable of asserting dominance over others (both Stanley and Lulu). They are emboldened and encouraged by their gender identity to rightfully demand things from others. Goldberg shows his idea of masculinity time and again through subtle dialogues like, "Goldberg: All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong."(Pinter 77) This idea of the 'line' that Goldberg constantly invokes is not clearly defined but it is expected that

men adhere to it. The concern hence, is not only to act according to the socially accepted definition of masculinity but rather to appear masculine. Goldberg is more concerned about showing his gender's superiority through actions and words rather than anything else. This idea of a performative masculinity is a recurrent theme in society where men are constantly concerned with not being perceived as feminine in any way. Any display of emotion or traits that are traditionally considered 'feminine' might call their masculinity into question. There are certain traits that have gained recognition as 'feminine' in society and they are not desirable when exhibited by men. These traits are not only important but necessary for every person to have irrespective of their gender because they include the ability to articulately express one's emotions, show vulnerabilities and overtly care about people. But most men choose to hide these qualities even if they possess them in order to be seen as a masculine. The notion that a person can have characteristics that only belong to one sex is fundamentally not possible because every human being is equal in everything and they will possess some similar qualities regardless of their gender. This paradox of performing one's gender causes most male members of society to become extremists and act in an irrational manner. Beauvoir's analysis of male identity illuminates this dynamic:

> Man is consumed by the concern to appear male, important, superior; he plays so that others will playact with him. The male's vocation is action; he needs to produce, fight, create, progress, go beyond himself toward the totality of the universe and the infinity of the future. It is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills. (Beauvoir 851)

Goldberg is not an insecure or doubtful character like Stanley, he does not ask or request he merely takes as he deems is his right. Yet, he shrouds this violence in the language of tradition and order which shows that his superiority is not earned but rather assumed. He expects people to abide by his directions because he embodies the masculine role convincingly and within the boarding house, no one has the authoritative power to challenge him. (Petey tries at the end and fails to rescue Stanley)

The boarding house also reinforces the idea of gaining power through performative masculinity. Although the house belongs to Meg and Petey, Stanley's declaration 'I run this house' undermines the feminine authority, unofficially and indirectly stating that domestic labour does not transform into autonomy and this house will never be run by a woman. Regardless of the fact that Meg does almost everything in the house, the claim of its ownership can only be made by a man. Even if a woman tirelessly offers her services for domestic chores, she is not believed to be the owner of anything. Her labour is essentially one that will never

be rewarded, either through any monetary compensation, respect or equal dignity as other members of the house. Dalia Abu-Arja presents a psychoanalytical reading of Pinter's domestic spaces and comments:

> A closed room, according to Freud, is highly suggestive of the womb image and how it protects the fetus by providing it with safety and warmth. The room/womb interpretation needs to be addressed in Pinter's plays, because the characters are exposed to tensions, evil and interrogation all the time.(30)

If we consider the boarding house to be a womb (which it is for Stanley) then its violation by Goldberg and McCan becomes a symbolic metaphor where the maternal space is invaded and re-organized by patriarchal forces where Meg is neither able to protect herself or her somewhat surrogate son Stanley. This 'womb' does not act as a protective layer against patriarchy but rather gets subsumed into it.

Pinter's language further reinforces a certain gendered imbalance throughout the course of the play. Stanley and Goldberg's speech is also absurd but it is still much more declarative than that of Meg Boles. Meg's dialogues and actions are repetitive in the sense that they do not result in anything positive. Her language is not only ambiguous but also that of confusion where she tries again and again to reaffirm the idea of her adequacy as a host. If we consider the broader problem of the breakdown of language in 20th Century British literature, we still must concede that the content of that broken down speech is very disturbing. While the speech of Goldberg and McCann is also confusing, they are always demanding power and trying to control Stanley but Meg's speech is only looking for approval. During the interrogation scene Goldberg and McCan exhibit very assertive language:

> McCann: Who are you, Webber?
>
> Goldberg: What makes you think you exist?
>
> McCann: You're dead.
>
> Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (Pinter 52)

Conversely, Meg's dialogues are merely an exhibition of her domestic insecurities:

> Meg: Here you are, Petey.
>
> He rises, collects the plate, looks at it, sits at the table. MEG re-enters.
>
> Is it nice? Tasted it yet.

Meg: I bet you don't know what it is.

Petey: Yes, I do.

Meg: What is it, then?

Petey: Fried bread.

Meg: That's right. He begins to eat. She watches him eat.

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I knew it was."(Pinter 11)

The language used by Goldberg and McCan is that of patriarchal authority which serves to strip away the identity of any sane (if not troubled) individual like Stanley Webber. The constant barrage of interrogative questions that serve to undermine Stanley's character, lead him to internalise this menacing feeling. Goldberg and McCan's authority does not come from any visible show of physical power, only a rhetoric about their superiority. In this sense, their characters subtly reflect the idea of patriarchy in society that does not always assert its power through a show of force but rather through the power people assume that patriarchy is levied with. The conditions for women in society are no better than that for Stanley or Meg who have to surrender to an authority that claims to be all powerful and rightfully oppressive. Beauvoir analyzed deeply how such systems endure:

> when an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they are inferior…Yes, women in general are today inferior to men; that is, their situation provides them with fewer possibilities: the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated. (Beauvoir 33)

Meg is made inferior and subservient by her circumstances and a lack of alternatives. The idea of a different life was presumably never presented to her and she had to internalize the social constructs that suppress women because that was her only mode of survival. Her proclamation that she was the 'bell of the ball' is a vain attempt at asserting some sense of importance in a patriarchal setup that only values masculine traits. She tries to imagine herself as central to the party because in every other aspect of her life she will always be on the periphery. She is central to the boarding house, as we've discussed repeatedly, it is her 'womanhood' and its perceived inferiority that keeps her on the periphery and unable to perform any acts of outright assertiveness. Even at the end, she is unaware of what happened to Stanley, a boy whom she admired like her own son. Meg and Petey do not have any children living with them and it is also suggested by critics that Meg perhaps cared so much for Stanley because he became like a surrogate child which she did not have. Even if their relationship

was problematic and not very easy to understand, it is imperative to remember that Meg valued him deeply but when asked about him, Petey does not tell Meg what has happened. This underscores how women of the family are kept out of decisive actions and not even informed about things that might affect them deeply:

Petey: Yes, he's...still asleep.

Meg: Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.

Petey: Let him...sleep. [Pause.]

Meg: Wasn't it a lovely party last night?

Petey: I wasn't there…

Meg: You should have been there.

Petey: It was good, eh? [Pause.]

Meg: I was the belle of the ball.

Petey: Were you? Meg Oh yes. They all said I was.

Petey: I bet you were, too.

Meg: Oh, it's true. I was. [Pause.] I know I was. (Pinter 86-87)

The arrival of Goldberg and McCan, whom one can see as representatives of patriarchal forces, completely changes the history of the boarding house. From their arrival, reality is what is constructed by these 'intruders' and not what is factually correct. Meg's preference for a male child reflects how patriarchal expectations have taken root in her mind, revealing the shallow nature of a male centric household that seeks to exploit characters like Meg and always gives preference to a male child. Meg can also not be easily blamed for having such a preference because the life of a woman born in such a household would probably not be very pleasant. The existence of a girl child within the Boles residence would probably condemn her to the same fate that Meg shares where her identity would be essentially reduced to the domestic chores that she would perform and the constant male approval she would have to look for. This preference for a male child is not a mere whim but could be a potential indicator of the years of conditioning that women have gone through,

Petey: Lady Mary Splatt.

Meg: I don't know her.

Petey: No. Meg. What is it?

Petey: (studying the paper). Er-a girl.

Meg: Not a boy?

Petey: No. Meg. Oh, What a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather have a little boy.

Petey: A little girl's all right.

Meg: I'd much rather have a little boy."(Pinter 11)

Ultimately, one realises that patriarchy in a Pinter play is not embodied by one character but rather emerges as a network of oppression designed to systematically degrade women and keep them confined within the domestic sphere. Gender becomes a performative construct for both women and men but it manifests in completely different ways. In one instance, the performance of masculinity invites power and respect while that of womanhood only invites subjugation. The patriarchal structure almost seems impossible to erode because challenging it requires a certain power over oneself that only empowered women who are economically independent might possess. Within the structure of the play, a character like Meg Boles appears unable to challenge or even recognise the oppressive framework that is present in her own home and exerts unseen pressure on her identity any day. Even in her own home, she is strangled by Stanley when he faces an emotional breakdown, "[STANLEY rises. He begins to move towards MEG, dragging the drum on his foot. He reaches her and stops. His hands move towards her and they reach her throat. He begins to strangle her. MCCAN and GOLDBERG rush forward and throw him off. BLACKOUT" (Pinter 63-64)

Through Meg's eccentricities that manifest in her anxieties like fidgeting, hesitation or speaking in fragments, one can understand Meg's anxiety as her safe domestic space is invaded by menacing objects. Pinter's plays are often analyzed for their silences and repetitions as being representatives of the deeper anxieties of people, but in the case of The Birthday Party, these silences also reveal a gendered fear through the character of Meg Boles. From the very first mention of the 'two gentlemen' we see Stanley getting restless and uncomfortable about their motivations and intentions but Meg is also getting slightly agitated by this intrusion. While Stanley's anxiety is much more obvious, Meg's anxiety appears through symbols in a covert manner. Her nervousness comes out in brief episodes:

Stanley: Come here.

Meg: What do you mean?

Stanley: Come over here. Meg. No. Stanley. I want to ask you something. (Meg fidgets nervously. She does not go to him.)

> Stanley: Come on. … Tell me, Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? (Pinter 21)

Through these conditions created by a patriarchal society, women have been suppressed and subjugated for decades. *The Birthday Party's* Meg Boles becomes an ideal representative of the subtle gendered discrimination that remains pervasive in society to this day. Even when men personally feel inadequate or inferior to other men (like Stanley), they still consider themselves to be more prominent than any women of the house. Although Meg carries out the definition of the home maker perfectly, she is never applauded for it and never given her due autonomy. She enjoys her life in a sense of blissful ignorance, rather unaware of the power dynamics within her own home but for the reader it becomes important to dissect the subtle nuances of the play. It cannot be expected from Meg to resist but it is certainly expected from the people who view or read this play that they understand that the character of Meg is not merely there to show her individual superficiality but rather she can be seen as a mirror to society that shows countless injustices. Pinter's representation of women is less than ideal, but his intention might not have been to propagate the stereotype but rather to merely present reality as it is and urge the reader to negotiate the tensions within the play. Pinter, like many playwrights of his time, could not tackle every societal issue at once. The play majorly deals with the absurdity and uncertainty of the human condition but does not mean that 'The Birthday Party' cannot have more than one interpretation and approaches. If critics have deliberated upon the tragedy of Stanley then it is also of equal importance for readers and viewers to critically analyse what happens with the women characters of the play and how their life fits within this broader question of existential anxiety that haunts the play.

The Birthday Party, hence, is an appropriate place of examination of how patriarchy is empowered and constructed within a domestic sphere which although primarily managed by women, is still controlled by men. One must not consider that the tragic fate of Meg Boles has to be the fate of every woman but rather it should be seen as a cautionary tale to be avoided by anyone who reads the play. Women of modern times must understand the difference between being in charge of the domestic space and being domesticated as these two constructs have been problematically intertwined by society for far too long and such traditions must not continue. Even if a woman does not financially contribute to a household it should not mean that her work is devalued and her contributions overlooked. Women such as Meg Boles also contribute to society in a meaningful manner and deserve their share of autonomy and sovereignty; if they are denied the same by patriarchal forces then it becomes the duty of others to help them in overcoming their subjugation. Meg's subservient nature can be attributed to a social environment where domestic identity becomes linked to external recognition. But intervention is necessary to drive this 'normalised' paradigm towards

extinction and give birth to a new accepted norm where equality doesn't have to be negotiated but is given as a basic human right.

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