

Subversion of Gender and Moral Truth in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* and Lars Von Triar's *Antichrist*

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Abstract

The character of Ruth in Harold Pinter's drama *The Homecoming* and the protagonist She in Lars Von Triar's film *Antichrist* are not only the 'only woman characters' in their respective texts but being so, subverts rather than asserts normative gender roles and moral values. Whereas Pinter's femme fatale uses sexual guile and economic prudence in establishing herself as the centre of power in the play and in Teddy's household, She in Lars Von Triar's *Antichrist* breaks out of the conventional performative of the Woman and inverts her role as a mother by intentionally (and physically) harming her own child and later as a wife when she tries to kill her husband in the woods. A comparative study of these two remarkable characters reveal the feminine self's close intimacy with the supernatural, the anarchic and the 'anti-moral' in nature and their inherent aversion to social order and the conventional religio-moral construct.

Key words: gender roles, subverts, moral values, performative, feminine

Introduction

I dare do all that may become a man
Who dares do more is none (Shakespeare 42)

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* succeeds as a theatrical phenomenon in its organic depiction of the fundamentals of *essence* and *existence*, and transcends beyond the workings of a literary text by evaluating the binary not only in terms of contemporary culture and gender concerns but by implementing its analogies, so as to subvert the basic foregrounds of western socio-theology itself. Thematic subversion is the basic premise for Harold Pinter's play *The Homecoming* as well as Lars Von Triar's masterpiece *Antichrist*, the first in the Depression trilogy. This thematic subversion doesn't only occur at the cinematic (*Antichrist*) or theatrical (*The Homecoming*) level alone but delves deeper into the ideas of sexuality, ontology, moral introspection and gender identity coercing the contextual value of both the texts and connecting them elementally.

In Pinter's play, it is Teddy's [literal] homecoming eventually turning into his wife Ruth's reconciliation with her natural state, while in Von Triar's eerie retelling of 'The myth of Eden', the movement is within the ontology of the *Woman* in nature, and a demystification of the same by the gradual manifestation of the woman's psychological symptoms upon a

man's physical experience. Thus while *Antichrist* suggests a titular subversion as a manifestation of the moral 'Other' [the Antichrist as the satanic in nature], *The Homecoming* pursues the topic at hand and establishes the same at the textual-theatrical level. Thematically the latter thus precedes the former in the sense that while Pinter's play reveals the female stratagem of 'a sense of empowerment' over the man, *Antichrist* furthers the gynocentric¹ appeals of the theme by completely exposing a world that is dominated by supernaturalism, defamiliarization², and chaos.

Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that the female "body is not a *thing*, it is a situation" (46) and that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283), and both texts denominate moral structures that arise from such anti-theological premises or eschatological origins and therefore distinguish themselves [with respect to any ontological³ questioning that is amoral or pre-moral in nature] as purely existential works. Moreover, Pinter's play in dealing mostly with the human spirit as is exhibited by men and women in Post-war western civilisation depict vigorously how a contemporary evaluation of an universal theme such as moral ethics, especially in terms of sexuality and the primal self can both define a culture at a point of time in history and liberate it beyond the limits of gender and social value.

It also expresses the [platonic] binary of form and matter with respect to social constructs and individuals respectively and how these constructs are the basic products and residues of human culture and not innate to the human spirit itself. Mikhail Bakhtin calls this the *carnavalesque*⁴ within the social structure whereby individuals behave in masked identities that are socially and culturally constructed throughout different tribes and races.

In Pinter's play, Ruth eventually triumphs over into regaining her materiality that she used to possess as a nude model, using her carnal virtues as the archetypal female seducer, yet violating social taboos that can be traced back to patriarchal origins. The play thus evokes a nihilistic response when taken in terms of social and personal relationships and reinforces the material values of sex, gender and the power relations that they carry out. Not only do the characters in the play exceed moral and ethical thresholds, apart from Lenny they fail to acknowledge in action, the very existence of a moral system or even the basis of any morality itself.

Max, Lenny, Sam, Joey all coexist as part of a psychologically dysfunctional familial unit and as Max, the patriarch of the family ends up compensating for the lack of a woman in the household, the physical absence of a female eradicates the possibility of the other characters having any socially healthy relationship with women in their lives as well, thus setting the stage for Ruth and her sexual extravagance to flower. Pinter thus questions the very basis behind the socio-moral stigma on incest and polygamous relationships.

Ruth in Pinter's play and the unnamed mother archetypally called She] in *Antichrist* are the only women characters in their respective scripts. In both the cases the female exhibits an incessant desire to transcend beyond her social identity- the idea of empowerment in Von Lars's film is spiritual, carnal, and sexual whereas Ruth in complete rejection of the spiritual uses her sexuality to empower herself financially and commercially.

When the dissertation that the female protagonist is working on in Von Triar's film is found in the woods, it is nothing but images of chopped and incomprehensible words leading her back to herself, the 'me', the top of her pyramid of fear, a narcissism so drastic that she ends up accusing her own son (only a child) of neglecting her - "Nick wasn't there for me either" (*Antichrist*)

Thus although the title of the film and the play initially reasserts the typical Christian binary of good and evil, and moral and immoral respectively, it imminently points to two worlds that are out of joint, two worlds devoid of faith, tradition, religion and even the basic displays of humanitarian ethics. It displays the disappearance of the Human in a man-centred society. The women in each case not only carry out moral sacrilege, they remain, till the very end, apathetic towards moral retribution, as Nik's mother proclaims herself to be 'absolutely evil' when in the woods of Eden. *Evil* is portrayed as the *Other* in nature, as Simone de Beauvoir comments on social structures generalising the woman as the mysterious 'Other', thus evading an autonomous definition. Either way, both the women, in their attempts to find themselves end up acquiring absolute control, power and transcendence (material prosperity in case of Ruth) in ventures that are pre-moral or morally subversive.

Persisting with the biblical allusions and the motif of Christian subversion in Lars Von Triar's film, this particular force of 'otherness' has been qualified in biblical narratives not so much as an individual calamity but more as an ideology that deny the religious prefigurations that civilisation and man himself is driven by. An 'absolute Other' that would, with the coming of time, declare a social apocalypse.

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming (Thessalonians 1455)

In spirit, the coming of the Antichrist is the coming of a function, completely dismissive of historical value and against the doctrines of Jesus Christ and the ethics of Christian Fundamentalism. Thus the women in both the discourses, Nik's mother as the Antichrist and Ruth's material consciousness of self-image, institutionalize their identities and travel beyond the structures of gender, moral inflicts and social considerations and into a space of both anti-patriarchal ethics and pre-moral gender values.

In either of the cases, whatever social success lies behind the depiction of the woman as a morally transcendent being, they become blurred by the failure that the women in the respective texts commit upon the people who love them and the eventual collapse that each woman suffer in their personal relationships- we have little or no clue about Ruth and Teddy's married life but if Teddy's behaviour towards his wife in Pinter's play is taken to be genuine, then it is Teddy and not Ruth who ends up truly acknowledging his status in the marriage and also accepting Ruth's desire to follow her own dreams. Teddy thus gives up his future with Ruth, leaving her in control of Max's household, yet not without a quiet sense of despair in his plea at the end of the play, revealing the disjunction that Ruth's ambitions have caused between the two.

The mother in *Antichrist* on the other hand, immersed in self-guilt, is unable to bear its burden and intentionally suppresses herself from being found out. The death however becomes a constant reminder of her previous actions and thus turns her narcissism into a fear of the self and its potential to kill. She lets her therapist husband to into treating her, yet the more he instigates her towards the centre of her own psyche, the more he finds out the chaos that underlies the mind of an alienated individual and the more she ends up accusing him of her derangement . She is in absolute knowledge of herself from even before the death of Nik, as she had found out during the 'Hope Project' that her self's inherent attachment to itself and detachment to everything else *is* her natural state. Unable to accept the nature of the truth she

had realised in Eden, she carries on in denial till before Nik's death, although crippling her child throughout out of self vindication.

And this is where the depiction of the man with respect to the central character of both the play and the film gains in importance. Whereas Teddy suffers but accepts the truth of his wife's emancipation out of his life, the husband in *Antichrist* ends up completely rejecting his role as one who has just lost a child and takes up the project of curing his wife. His wife assumes the role of one of his innumerable projects yet her acute self awareness of being investigated makes her completely lose the remainder of her faith in the Other (her husband), thus completing her self-psychosis.

What Pinter portrays in *The Homecoming* is the social apparatus of his contemporary times and its distortions as are cultivated by Max's family as a malady consuming a whole culture. It is true that Ruth feels oppressed living the life of a housewife in America with two children and Teddy, yet her flirtations with financial freeplay when she is back in England include a scenario whereby the conventions of mutual love, marriage, commitment and social relations are completely broken down. She elevates herself out of financial dependence yet falls into the commercial market where her identity will become nothing less than that of a sexual product to be bought, rented and sold. Teddy's role at the university as a doctorate in Philosophy also falls into question when taken in respect to its marketability and stature, yet he maintains a professional detachment when dealing with matters of the family and it is only when he is spurred on by Max when he tells him that he hasn't read any of his critical works that he finally bursts open into a monologue of utter anguish, functioning maybe as Pinter's own mouthpiece:

You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you.... It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things....To see, to be able to see! I'm the one who can see. . . how certain people can maintain... intellectual equilibrium. Intellectual equilibrium. You're just objects. You just . . . move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being . . .I won't be lost in it (Pinter 61-62)

Teddy is redundant throughout the action of the play and it is only when he is questioned about his doctoral work that he reacts against everyone else in the family, even Ruth. Teddy's reaction is not only against the precepts of culture and social values but also qualifies both as Judith Butler would put it, in being performative⁵ and purely existential in nature, distinct from one's own essence.

For Teddy it is indeed beyond the question of intelligence. Being a scholar and a man of perception he is conscious of the social, cultural, gender and moral obligations that an individual has to carry out if he or she has to be a part of the social construct but for Teddy it is not about the diligence or the lack of it in the carrying out of these performative duties. What makes an individual free and empowered is in his or her ability to be aware of the performatives and yet possess the profundity to simultaneously exist outside of them (to cultivate a double constitution), to be able to bear and choose the performatives according to one's free will without adhering oneself into becoming an integral part to any of those performatives in particular. Whether or not he practices what he preaches will remain behind the shadows but Teddy's ultimate question is of the spirit and its resilience of being changed

by the very duties that one has to carry out and subsequently is a part of. Teddy thus underlines the fact that it is our freedom of thought and will that is fundamental to choosing our performatives and our existence and not the other way around.

Yet we might become whoever we choose to become, but those choices themselves are constructed and limited by the history, society and physical space that we occupy thus making them futile in construction. And when Ruth calls him Eddie the last time she bids him goodbye, expressing the last few remnants of the relationship they had once shared, it is with this propaganda on the crisis of spiritual identity submerging a whole society that Teddy leaves her, his family and the stage, asking his wife with all his heart and hopes that she might not become a stranger. Not to him or even to her own self.

Each sex relates to madness in its own way. All desire is connected to madness. But apparently one desire has chosen to see itself as wisdom, moderation, truth, and has left the other to bear the burden of the madness (Irigaray 415)

Both She in *Antichrist* and Ruth in *The Homecoming* display abnormal personality traits that force the audience to reconsider the plot and theme in accordance to the conventional behavioural patterns of the post-enlightenment female of the Christian world, thus also revealing the acts of rebellion that the women perform in order to dismiss ethnocentric gender concerns, at least in psychological terms. 'She' clearly suffers from a variation of obsessive compulsive disorder and also exhibit acute traits of apathy, paranoia and schizophrenia typical to a patient of anxiety. The supervising doctor even explains to her husband of her grief patterns being atypical and lacking an object of grief in particular, but he fails to understand its implications and takes her back home for personal therapy. Alienated, 'She' feels separated from her husband, accuses him of never loving her or Nik and her final plunge into this paranormal hysteria takes place with her severing her own clitoris, thus pronouncing herself beyond all desire and evading what Sigmund Freud would have called, 'the pleasure principle'⁶ [For Freud clitoral stimulation is the seat of a woman's psychosexual pleasure and the need for its physical dissection is an appeal towards madness⁷]

Ruth on the other hand falls under the category of the psychotic, so pristine and resilient in her act of self deception and charm that she can't help but choose to celebrate it in the end, compromising her relationship with Teddy as a result. She is elegant, speculative, maintains technical prudence and can operate herself beyond the individual to hold power over Max, Joey, Sam and even Teddy to a certain extent. Teddy may have perhaps anticipated the situation even from before coming back to his home with Ruth but surely changes his mind in the second act when he becomes edgy and impatient, bent on taking Ruth back to America.

Ruth is uncompromising and under no illusions when she takes on the venture suggested by Max and Sam. She is persuasive, professional and urbane in her approach and agrees on the deal on a formal contract, showing neither guilt nor shame in exercising and promising to utilize her sexuality for financial independence and power. Whereas She uses sex directly as a weapon to hold power over He, allowing her to impose all of her guilt and melancholy upon her husband, Ruth's blatant manipulation of Max, Sam and Joey using herself as an object of desire doesn't only align towards her the power dynamics of the household but also allows her to do what she does best. Market and sell. The commercial and legal annotations are vigorous, cutting, strong and brilliantly handled, both by Pinter and Ruth.

Conclusion

The greatest symptom of existential anomaly that both women display throughout the course of their respective discourses is a kind of ‘thanatos’ or death drive that lies beneath their inherent lack of the instinct of self preservation. The innate desire to destroy oneself through the destruction of the Other. Whereas Pinter’s play develops this idea through the lens of socio-familial nihilism brought forth by Ruth’s actions, She in Lars von Triar’s *Antichrist* illustrates her sadomasochism through the actions of deforming her child, by her constant antagonism of her husband and in her overtly suicidal tendencies that eventually subverts her into a homicidal maniac at the end of the film.

The femme rationale, as these two texts explore is thus an image of the Woman at the axiom of her intellectual powers, yet a rationale that is separate from human connections, relationships and holds true only within the anarchic self, divorced from the influence of the insignificant others. These abnormal projections of the self thus supersede gender role and exalts the value of these texts beyond contemporary times and towards the processing of an universal idea and an ‘agendered truth’: towards the anti-natural, the satanic and the Other, as the Woman is, in nature and beyond it.

Notes and References

1. Concerned with the feminine. Female-centric.
2. Defamiliarization, also called ostranenie is a technique of representing familiar and known objects in a way that is alien, unfamiliar and unknown.
3. Dealing with the idea of *Being*.
4. A literary mode that celebrates subversion and chaos through humour and inversion, explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.
5. Another name given to what Sigmund Freud calls the ‘id’, or that element in the human psyche that seeks immediate gratification.
6. For psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the seat of female sexual pleasure [along with vaginal stimulation].

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