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Negotiating Identity: The Question of Deflating Masculinity in Harold Pinter's *A Night Out*

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Abstract

Masculinity studies channelised itself as an outgrowth of feminist studies not as a defensive outrage against the uprising of women but as an ally that demands an egalitarian approach, being inextricably interspersed in a complex web of relationships. Even though masculinity and femininity are considered to be inevitable properties of male and female bodies, these attributes are culturally specific and historically conditioned. Ever since the European Renaissance, the perfectionist attitude in the representation of the male body in sculptures has proliferated into the society in the formation of stereotypes of the male being aggressive and virile. This hegemonic masculinity that upholds true maleness compels men into confining roles, dampens their emotions, inhibits their relationships, distorts their identity and marginalizes their existence (Connell 45-56). Consequently, this paper aims to explore men's inevitable victimization in the hands of the oppressive superstructures through the character of Albert in Harold Pinter's *A Night Out* with an objective to showcase how the identity of a man is regressed into infantilism by the dominance of the mother. This study contends that Pinter's female portraits, like Meg in *The Birthday Party* or Mrs. Stokes in *A Night Out*, desire the son, not only to channelize their repressed libidinous drives but also to exert their power to control and dominate the male through garbed maternal feelings leading to the silencing of his expression.

Keywords: Identity; Marginalization; Masculinity; Motherliness; Power.

Introduction

"I dare do all that may become a man." (Shakespeare 1.7.46)

Any discussion on masculinity invariably traverses through the notions of

gender, sexuality, feminism and culture as they are inalienably interwoven in a complex web of relationships. This inter discursivity enables the study to be approached from a multidimensional and egalitarian perspective. While misogyny gave rise to feminist theories, the latter in turn led to the development of masculinity studies. Even though Aristotle viewed women as inferior to men in terms of reason, and masculinity to be equivalent to rationality, the feminist theories, as Gardiner observes in "Men, Masculinities & Feminist Theory", attempt to understand the causes, means and results of gendered inequality to uplift women's conditions sometimes by making men more similar to women and sometimes by making women more similar to men (Kimmel 35). This process of bridging the gulf between the supremacy of men and the inferiority of women entails a power struggle since masculinity is seen as, in the words of Michael Kimmel, "a system of power relations *between women and men*" (qtd. in Gardiner xi). It is in this context that the plays of Harold Pinter, a mid-twentieth century British playwright acquire socio-cultural significance since it is only by assessing how men and women conduct their gendered lives that the concepts of femininity and masculinity can be understood.

The aim of this paper is to delineate, through the feminist and psychoanalytic lens, how in the conflict between a man and a woman, it is not always the former who is dominant, that even a man suffers subordination in the hands of a woman and other men which not only strips off his masculinity, which is a socially constructed phenomenon, but also silences him into a non-entity. In Pinter's *A Night Out* (1959), we find that there is constant combat between Albert and Mrs. Stokes on gendered grounds and, in this strife, the male character is finally victimized and undergoes an emotional and psychological paralysis while the female figure emerges triumphant with considerable aplomb.

The notion of masculinity has always been associated with manly virtues such as will power, strength and courage. The French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* assaults the myth of masculine superiority and insists that men too are creatures of physical and sexual infirmity: "Indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility" (qtd. in Kimmel 37). It is this anxiety that drives men to disguise the insecurity by adopting a supposedly powerful identity of a man, of being violent and aggressive. While Lacan asserts that men, but not women, occupy a privileged relationship to social power symbolized by the phallus which men fear to lose (215-222), Luce Irigaray defines masculinity as "a condition of lack, vulnerability and weakness" (qtd. in Kim-

mel 38). Connell, however, believes that masculinity and femininity are "internalized sex roles, the products of social learning, or 'socialization'" (Connell 22). In this vein, George L. Mosse in *The Image of Man*, states that modern masculinity is influenced by "normative patterns of morality and behavior, that is to say typical and acceptable ways of behaving and acting within the social setting of the past centuries" (4). This gives rise to stereotypes which imply "giving to each man all the attributes of the group to which he was said to belong. All men were supposed to conform to an ideal masculinity" (6). That is, in order to become areal man, one needs to enact a set of socially sanctioned expectations which are associated with one's sex, failing which one not only undergoes de-sexualization but also entails losing one's identity and expression in society. These culturally interwoven ideas can be best explored through the character of Albert in *A Night Out.*

Discussion

Harold Pinter's *A Night Out* is an atypical play where the security of the room is not shown to be disrupted by the intrusion of the outsiders but by an inmate. It commences in a small house in the south of London where Albert, a young man of twenty-eight, resides with his widowed mother. From the very first scene of the play we witness the overpowering dominance of Mrs. Stokes upon her son, driving him to the periphery of intense solitude. Not only does she attempt to subjugate his volitions in the domestic sphere but also tries to regulate his choice of companions by doubting whether he is "leading a clean life" or "messing about with girls" (Pinter264). Speaking about the central emphasis of the play, Billington in his biography of Pinter rightly observes, "Pinter clearly taps into a familiar masculine fear: of the repressive mother who threatens the ego-identity of her son" (112).

This idea can also be traced in one of Pinter's early plays, *The Birthday Party* (1957). It begins with Meg asserting her dominance over her husband, Petey through irrelevant questions. She incessantly pesters him and desperately tries to drag him into a conversation. Though initially Petey, like Bert in *The Room*, attempts to resist her with a passive indifference, Meg ensures that her queries do not go unanswered. However, Meg fails to exert her power upon Petey, for he guards himself from being stifled by her dominating stance by being absent from the lodge frequently. In the absence of Petey, Meg's motherly sentiments are displaced and projected towards the only other male member in the house, the young lodger, Stanley Webber. Being deprived of emotional, sexual and social contact with

her husband, she is marooned in an uninhabited island like a shipwrecked sailor where she finds the only accompaniment in the exiled pianist. Naturally, when Stanley descends from his room, Meg's approach and attitude towards him appear to be a re-enactment of the initial episode with her husband. Moreover, Stanley seeks the motherly womb of Meg's lodge in his effort to resist maturation which further acclimatizes Meg's adoption of the persona of his surrogate mother. This play, therefore, offers two opposing representations of masculinity which can be best discerned in terms of Connell's definition,

> True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Either the body drives and directs action or the body sets limits to action. (45)

While Petey resists being subjugated by Meg by driving himself away actively, thereby protecting his masculinity from being scathed, Stanley, on the other hand, restricts himself to the lodge and, therefore, succumbs to the domination of Meg.

The unwieldy motherliness of Meg in *The Birthday Party* reaches a phantasmagoria of horrific dominance in the role of Mrs. Stokes in *A Night Out*. Like Meg, here too Mrs. Stokes attempts to envelope the life of her son, Albert. While Petey frequently deserted Meg in the hands of Stanley, here Mrs. Stokes is permanently abandoned in the company of Albert. She is a widowed woman whose existence is grounded on the only concern in her life, her son. She showers her maternal feelings in profusion that initially suffocate Albert and finally intimidate him into complete submission. It is through this unendurable mothering that she controls, overpowers and, thereby, enslaves him.

According to Freud, the female Oedipus complex involves the transference of cathexis from the original love object, the mother to a new love object, the father. When a girl discovers that her father possesses what she lacks, she not only feels attracted towards him but also identifies herself with the mother. The chapter, "Sigmund Freud's Classical Psychoanalytic Theory" in *Theories of Personality* mentions, "However, her love for the father and for other men as well is mixed with a feeling of envy because they possess something she lacks. … She imagines that she has lost something valuable while the boy is afraid he is going to lose it. To some extent, the lack of a penis is compensated for when a woman has a baby, especially if it is a boy baby" (Hall et al. 55). Thus, this son becomes the penis substitute

for the mother whom she wishes to possess and control. Consequently, the desire for the male is a disguised expression of the desire for power. In this regard, the feminist Shulamith Firestone's opinion in *The Dialectic of Sex* becomes noteworthy.

> I submit that the only way that the Oedipus Complex can make full sense is in terms of power. We must keep in mind that Freud observed this complex as common to every normal individual who grows up in the nuclear family of a patriarchal society … (47)

Therefore, Mrs. Stokes, being widowed by the husband, adopts a smothering role to overpower her son and restricts his individuality from developing through her motherliness.

The opening scene of the play shows how intensely Albert suffers from the smothering motherliness of Mrs. Stokes. He intends to go out to an office party but his plans are interrupted by the nagging insistence of his mother to fix the bulb in Grandma's room, to have supper or simply to accompany her in a game of cards. It enormously exasperates him but, like Edward in *A Slight Ache*, he too is fettered to a situation from which there is no escape no matter how ardently he yearns to. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Swain observes, "the physical performative aspect of masculinity is seen as the most acceptable and desirable way of being male" (qtd. in Kimmel 220).

Connell, too, asserts, "Masculinity does not exist as an ontological given but comes into existence as people act. That is, the social and material practices through which, and by which, boys' masculine identities are generally described" (223-24). Mrs. Stokes' repetitive attempts to control and hinder Albert's physical movements are blatant attacks on his masculinity. That Mrs. Stokes wants to assert her supremacy over Albert is evident in the very exposition of the play. When she appears on the stage after her calls are ignored by Albert, she feels enraged by the son's silence and hovers over him with an untiring relentlessness though Albert defends himself with reticence.

> MOTHER. Albert, I've been calling you. [*She watches him.*] What are you doing?
>
> ALBERT. Nothing.
>
> MOTHER. Didn't you hear me call you, Albert? I've been calling you from upstairs. (Pinter 261)

The repetition in the opening two lines of the mother indicates her unconscious willingness to assert her authority, to make herself be heard, to reduce the stature of the son to an immature child. On the other hand, Albert's deliberate silence implies his attempt to keep her to the fringe while she incessantly tries to carve a niche at the centre of his existence. She pursues in this endeavour by consciously disregarding Albert's demand of the tie. Despite repeated insistence, she cares not to give him what he wants. Later, she herself tries to dress him up, brushing the suit, setting the tie in proper order and putting the handkerchief in the breast pocket of his jacket. Here, she consciously refuses to acknowledge Albert's autonomy, a notion with which masculinity is traditionally associated. John Christman in "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy" characterizes autonomy as "the ability to shape our own lives … rather than being directed by external forces that manipulate or distort us" while Marina Oshana in *Personal Autonomy in Society* defines it as "control over one's circumstances … and a lack of severe constraint, coercion or subordination in which one would be subject to the dictates of others" (qtd. in Veltman 1). Albert is deprived of his autonomy in his mother's efforts to control his every movement. Her wish to mould Albert in the image of a socially approved figure of a man is evident when she says, "You've got to be properly dressed. Your father was always properly dressed" (Pinter269). It is in this sense that Mark Taylor-Batty in *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* notices that Albert is "admonished and absorbed by an infantilising maternal system he cannot escape" (59). It is with this garb of maternity that Mrs. Stokes arms herself to suppress the son.

What presents Mrs. Stokes as a domineering mother is her stifling possessiveness which Albert tries to extricate himself from but to no avail. Though her husband is dead, she believes that he still lives in her heart. She finds his reflection in Albert and tries to mould him after her husband's image. The lacuna that was created by the loss of her husband is fulfilled, at least partially if not fully, by her son. Naturally, she invests all her motherly attention, care and love upon Albert. Commenting on a widowed mother's distress due to the father's absence, Firestone observes,

> Every mother, even the most "well adjusted", is *expected* to make motherhood a central focus of her life. Often the child is her only substitute for all that she has been denied in the larger world, in Freud's terms, her "penis" substitute. How can we then demand that she not be "possessive," that she give up suddenly, without a struggle – to the world of "travel and adventure" – the very son who was meant to compensate her for her lifelong loss of this world? (57)

Mrs. Stokes' possessiveness, therefore, emerges from a deep sense of inadequacy and she obsessively attempts to hold Albert back to her. This is evident early in the play when she tries to have him all for herself, desperately attempting to dissuade him from leaving her all alone. In order to confine him to home, she adopts several wiles and cunning. She pretends to have forgotten Albert's invitation to Mr. King's party and tells him to lay the table for dinner. When she notices that he is dressed for the party, she purposely tries to involve him in some domestic work. Rejecting all his pleas to give him the tie, she turns a deaf ear to his questions and, on top of it, assigns him the task of fixing the bulb in the grandmother's room. The tie is an unmistakable phallic symbol in the Freudian sense and giving him the tie would imply giving him power. Therefore, she slyly denies having it. She even entices him with the lure of having cooked something special for him, "I didn't tell you what I made for you, did I? I made it specially. I made Shepherd's Pie tonight" (Pinter269). She employs all of these, only to bind her son to herself. However, when none of her efforts prove to be fruitful, she becomes more assertive and dominating. In an authoritative tone, she commands him, "You've got five minutes. Go down to the cellar, Albert, get a bulb and put it in Grandma's room, go on" (262). The assertiveness underlying this instruction indicates how forcefully she attempts to impose her wishes upon him. Ironically, despite her repeated insistence she fails to make him comply. It is this failure that instigates the Wicked Mother in her. When Albert ultimately finds the tie, she immediately lies about the tie not being pressed so that he changes his mind and decides to stay back at home though later she herself states having pressed it. This inevitably proves how she subordinates him and degenerates him into an object of possession, regarding which L. P. Gabbard observes, "Her mothering concern also disguises its function of keeping him under tight control … Most of all, she expects him to stay home; he is her possession" (93).

The most immediate concern of Mrs. Stokes is losing Albert to other girls. Mark Taylor-Batty points out, "The mother seems motivated by an emotional need to keep her son in an immature form, and therefore incorruptible by the opposite sex, who might take him from her" (55). It is this unconscious fear of losing the son that makes her suspect his supposed motive of "messing about with girls" (Pinter 264). This suspicion becomes more pronounced when she finds Albert in a distraught condition after he returns from the party well past midnight. She feels Albert has lied about going to Mr. King's invitation and doubts that he had been somewhere else.

> MOTHER. What's the matter, are you drunk? Where did you go, to one of those pubs in the West End? You'll get into serious trouble, my boy, if you frequent those places, I'm warning you. (Pinter286)

It is her obsessive consternation about her son that gives rise to such qualms of misgiving and mistrust in her mind. In this regard, Auriol Smith, who was in both Hampstead production of *The Room* and the radio version of *A Night Out,* says, "I felt she was a very insecure person. She seemed very vulnerable" (Billington 113). Out of this vulnerability, the more Mrs. Stokes tries to draw Albert close to her, the more despotic and intimidating she becomes.

Mrs. Stokes' maternal feelings become all the more oppressive when she employs devious means to disarm Albert. Failing to persuade him to decline the invitation, she appeals to his emotions to make him feel guilty of leaving the mother at home all alone. Though her husband is dead, she reminds her son not to upset the father or bring disgrace upon him.

> MOTHER. You promise?
>
> ALBERT. Promise what?
>
> MOTHER. That … that you won't upset your father.
>
> ALBERT. My father? How can I upset my father? You're always talking about upsetting people who are dead!
>
> MOTHER. Oh, Albert, you don't know how you hurt me, you don't know the hurtful way you've got, speaking of your poor father like that. (Pinter 264)

This emotional blackmail, in the course of the play, becomes more harrowing and Mrs. Stokes metamorphoses into "the caricatured stereotype of the nagging, stifling mother who plagues him" (Sakellaridou 52). In *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* Erich Neumann speaks of both the adorable and the abominable aspects of the mother figure, stating, "it is typical for the matriarchal sphere that the son is dominated by the Great Mother who holds him fast even in his masculine movement and activity" (48). Mrs. Stokes is that Great Mother for Albert who ties her son to her apron strings with her "passive-aggressive manipulation" (Taylor-Batty 55). She evokes his guilt by reminding how impeccably she has nourished him and that she has encountered insurmountable hardships in his up-

bringing but has never spoken about them to Albert. The very words, "I'm not asking for gratitude" delineate that she wants her efforts to be acknowledged, her sacrifices to be glorified by her son (Pinter 286). However, when nothing of that sort happens, she develops into "a devouring monster of egotism" attempting to subjugate Albert with her overbearing motherliness (Sakellaridou 53).

Jon Swain in his essay "Masculinities in Education" speaks of subordinated modes of masculinity which are "controlled, oppressed and subjugated, posited in contrast to hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel 221). He believes that males can be subordinated for the perception that they are deficient in certain culturally acclaimed traits, particularly with embodied forms of physicality and athleticism. "Sporting success (particularly in football) is a key signifier of successful masculinity" (Kimmel221-24). Albert is shown to have participated in a football game but because of his pathetic performance, his team loses the match. This gives the fuel to Gidney, the team captain and also Albert's colleague in the office to bully him. At Mr. King's party, he is not only embarrassed by Gidney but he also becomes the victim of a false sexual assault being accused of touching Eileen, one of the office girls, inappropriately ensued by a scuffle with Gidney. His mother's relentless complaints, his failure to perform in the game, his insult at the party – all amount to an accumulated rage which erupts with a volcanic cataclysm as he fights with Gidney, and reaches a pinnacle when he even threatens her mother with an alarm clock. It is his desperate attempt to get back his voice, to salvage his shattered identity and reclaim the lost land that makes him fume though without much success. Thus, here he adopts a hyper-masculine persona. In "Globalization and Its Mal(e)contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism", Kimmel regards the hyper-masculine as "violent rapacious beast incapable of self-control" while defining the hypo-masculine as "weak, helpless, effete, incapable of supporting a family" (420). Like Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, Albert arrogates an aggressive role. All his frustration against his own mother and his repulsion and distaste for the office girls converge into a single spell of violence upon the Girl, whom he meets later, reminiscent of Stanley's attack on Lulu. The savagery meted out to Gidney, the barbaric attempt to murder Mrs. Stokes, the sadistic cruelty upon the Girl and the final insults upon her – all stem from Albert's desire to fight back, to uphold his identity, his masculinity. Thus, his stepping out of the house can be interpreted as his denial of his subservience to his mother. However, it is always followed by his helpless return to the house. The world outside mercilessly reminds him of his failures, scratches his emotional wounds and lays them bare for his acknowledgement. It

is too stark a revelation for Albert to recognize and, like King Oedipus he seeks a voluntary blindness by disavowing the truth and returning to the darkness of his mother's house. Once he reaches home, he is again subdued by the all-devouring influence of the Terrible Mother.

The conclusion of the play brings Albert back to the arms of his mother. Though the second act ends with a stifled scream from Mrs. Stokes, implying her possible death and Albert's release from the shackles of her menacing motherliness, in the final episode she returns with a hypnotizing charm. Her presence becomes so venomous that she can be viewed as the Gorgon Medusa, sensing whose arrival Albert is petrified. The moment she calls him, "*His body freezes. His gaze comes down. His legs slowly come together*" (Pinter296). He is silenced and driven into perpetual infantilism, a hypo-masculine figure. Despite his attempt in the previous act to overpower his mother, he fails to be the Perseus. Like Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Albert is regressed into a catatonic reverie while Mrs. Stokes stands victorious. The Medusa has won.

Conclusion

Thus, the paper meanders through the various cultural dynamics by virtue of which the male is shown to be victimized by the female. It presents a counter-narrative to the feminist ideology which subverts the assumption that a woman is always overpowered, dominated, and subjugated by a man. While questions are raised on the masculinity of Albert, which he tries in vain to channelize, he is subtly hegemonised by his mother who disguises her power-lust with an overbearing motherliness. No matter how hard he attempts to negotiate a path to establish his identity and assert his individuality, his expression is ceased and he is compelled to conform to his mother's domination. He is reduced to the stature of a subaltern who cannot speak, nor can fight back.

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