

Love, Power, Paradox in Pinter's Play *the Lover*

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Abstract

The play *The Lover* by Harold Pinter depicts an ironic representation of love that is conventionally established as the desired goal in a conjugal relationship for bringing the marital equilibrium and social stability. The play is inclined not only to oppose the traditional dichotomy of love and sex in which one is respectable and the other illegitimate and therefore unacceptable, it also tries to dismantle the boundary between the civilized role-playing and the immediate gratification of savage desires. Rather both of them are part of a larger mechanism in which they are subjected to involve themselves in their fragmentized multiple roles to the endless process of struggle for power. The struggle may engender a gamut of paradox and contradiction which are consistent in understanding the profound irony of human existence in a contemporary world full of anxiety and instability.

Keywords: love, power, paradox, profound irony, human existence.

In the play *The Lover* Pinter's preoccupation with the theme of love in conjugal relationship first gets artistic treatment through a compatible dramaturgical structure to delineate the inherent complexities and differences in social conventions of a marriage that manifests itself as the struggle for identity and more obviously the struggle for power. The play in its theatrical exploration deviates from his earlier plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* in which generally a character from the past intrudes to the living room or household and subsequently terrorizes its inhabitants until they surrender themselves completely. Although in his earlier plays the treatment of relationship, family are more vague and ambiguous presented through a memory or fanciful reminiscences, it is the play *The Lover* that dramatizes quite explicitly the warring instincts of a married couple and their intrinsic desire for power over each other problematizing the traditional notion of love and marriage as an institution for social stability. So the question arises whether this play follows the tradition to depict iconoclastic ideas in relation to the existing social institutions like Ibsen and later propagated by his follower G. B. Shaw?

Pinter, an admirer of Joyce and Beckett and an adapter of Proust and Kafka is often associated with the tradition of existentialism and follower of the plays of Absurd. The great critic Martin Esslin has grouped him together in the genealogy of Absurd Drama as the most contemporary playwright in the genre after Beckett. Sometimes Pinter is considered as Beckett's spiritual son who expands the vision of absurdity especially in his early plays in which the abstract human condition in contemporary situations get materialized. In the plays of Pinter the generalised universal human situation instead of becoming more philosophical, is concretized and the inherent absurdities of human nature are perceived in his day to day social interactions with domestic rituals and conversational banalities. Pinter's deliberate choice of domestic banal surrounding as the background of his early plays with real human characters as social representatives makes a remarkable shift to traverse his plays beyond the Absurd.

The Lover tricks the audience to assume that there are three characters the middle class husband Richard, his wife Sarah and her lover who is discovered Richard himself playing a dual role as husband as well as her lover when the husband is away working at his office. The opening of the play, like his earlier plays, is presented through a setting of domestic

conversational dialogue between a couple in their detached house, but the gesture of domestic bliss is shattered and becomes contradictory by a calm acquiescence of the prevailing immoralism as the husband asks when he prepares to leave for work:

Richard (amiably): Is your lover coming today?

Sarah: Mmmn.

Richard: What Time?

Sarah: Three.

Richard: Will you be going out . . . or staying in?

Sarah: Oh . . . I think we'll stay in.

Richard: I thought you wanted to go to that exhibition.

Sarah: I did, yes . . . but I think I'd prefer to stay in with him today.

Richard: Mmm-hmm. Well, I must be off. (Plays Two: 149)

The dramatic tension is skilfully established between uncivilised passion and suppressing social convention. It artistically introduces the moment from which both Richard and Sarah undergoes an internal struggle though initially disguising as domestic chatter then through a series of ritualized games, memory and role-plays to trigger their marriage. It prepares the audience to experience an underlying gulf and other menacing forces lurking inside to take over their apparent marital equilibrium.

Although Richard's opening enquiry of her lover seems to have little effect after he returns home in the evening engaging himself in domestic banter with his wife agreeably on trivial matters like the condition of the traffic or the hollyhocks, his continual cross-examining thrives her to take a defensive position. Sarah appears content with the complex relationship she and Richard have established, but Richard becomes dissatisfied and his increasingly aggression reflects his suppressed desire to put himself always in the advantageous position in a patriarchal structure to exercise power and authority. Richard's following questions are indicative of his unexplored motives though apparently pretending his queries as mere outcome of 'objective curiosity' that masks a profound anxiety:

Richard: Does it ever occur to you that while you are spending the afternoon being unfaithful to me I'm sitting at desk going through balance sheets and graphs?

Sarah: What a funny question.

Richard: No, I'm curious. (Plays Two: 153)

After Sarah's cold reply that it makes "more piquant" he appears to be more confident when he comes to know that her husband is not completely forgotten when she is with her lover. But a few moments later she claims repeatedly, "But it's you I love" (154). It seems apparently that she intends to pacify the unrestrained curiosity of Richard but the repetition implies a demarcating line between husband and lover she is trying to draw ironically as a distinction between love and lust.

Richard's vision of women that he relishes in understanding the role of women is also very important to analyse his reactions and motives in relation to his behaviour in the roles of both – husband and lover. He carries with him the idea, like many other male characters in Pinter's plays, that women play a dual role, split between wife and whore, between respectable and illicit, between wifely and sexual, that gives him comfort and it simultaneously frustrates him and makes him jealous. And a few minutes later when Sarah informs him that she is aware of his mistress with whom he keeps an extramarital relationship for which initially she pretends to remain unaffected but then she cannot restrain herself from charging him "I'm honest with you, aren't I? Why can't you be honest with me?" (155). But without giving a reply to her accusation Richard plays a trick by analysing the difference between mistress and whore with his renewed hostility:

Richard: . . . I 'm well acquainted with a whore, but I haven't got a mistress. There's a world of difference.

Sarah: A whore?

Richard: Yes. Just a common or garden slut. Not worth talking about. Handy between trains, nothing more . . . You can't sensibly inquire whether a whore is witty. It's of no significance whether she is or she isn't. She is simply a whore, a functionary who either pleases or displeases (156).

By depersonalizing the woman Sarah thinks about, he is trying to assert his own strength of power over the woman he sees to prove his superiority in the battle of sexes for domination. His attempt to separate himself from the emotional bond with Sarah is more explicit when he pretends to be more emotionally detached with Sarah:

Sarah: I must say your attitude to women rather alarming.

Richard: Why? I wasn't looking for your double, was I? I wasn't looking for a woman I could respect, as you, whom I could admire and love, as I do you. Was I? All I wanted was . . . Someone who could express and engender lust with all lust's cunning. Nothing more. (157)

The crucial remark by Richard depicts his desire for dominance and also his failure to achieve it. It suggests on one hand his capability to indulge in sex without any kind of emotional involvement and at the same time it reveals his liability to explain to his wife whatever he has done it seeks her approval. The explanation including the phrase "express and engender" that he dominantly utters is subversively showing his lack of control – a sign of his weakness.

But Sarah's responses to his relentless inquiries about her lover are very consistent as she teasingly admires the virtues of her lover "He's very adaptable", "He's terribly sweet" and "his whole body emanates love" (160). Her comments about the lover may appear harsh as she makes a confession that with her lover she enjoys also an emotional attachment that Richard is unable to offer. When Richard denies any kind of jealousy Sarah concludes in complete reassurance "Because I think things are beautifully balanced Richard" (161) But the irony lies in the fact that however Sarah convinces herself that everything is balanced and in control, the desired harmony cannot be achieved through their continuous struggle for power that engenders inevitable tension and lack of fixity in their role-playing.

A moment later there is a knock on the door that raising expectations that it might be Sarah's lover, but the man turns out to be the milkman. This technique frequently observed in Pinter's drama, is deployed skilfully to manipulate the growing curiosity of the audience. The short interlude with the milkman provides a clue of Sarah's existence outside her marital life with Richard. Sarah complains that the delivery is very late that may interrupt her meeting with the lover but the milkman almost challenges her refusal to accept the cream "Don't you fancy any cream?" (163) In this his brief interval Pinter not only prepares the audience to

experience Sarah's meeting with her lover on stage, it also suggests that her battle for power is not only enclosed to her marital household, rather she has to struggle for power everywhere she deals with even outside her marriage.

The profound irony of the play becomes apparent when Richard comes in to Sarah's greeting as Max. Now it is understood why Richard was taking relishment at Sarah's complements about her lover earlier. But the question remains and revolves around Richard that if he is the lover Sarah has spoken of, why is he jealous? Such peculiarity on his part is unclarified but the following scene in which they participate in tapping a drum recalls the beating of the drum by Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. The "wild beats of their fingers tangling" symbolizes the primitive force that cannot be harmonized with the constraints of social regulations. It suggests the passionate side of human nature that contributes to Pinter's preoccupation to exemplify the marked contrast between a marital alliance devoid of instinctual fulfilment and an adulterous relationship enkindled by carnal desires. A minute later when Max mentions that he has a wife who is waiting for him just as she is waiting for her husband, she becomes relentless and harsh. When Max claims that she is trapped she protests "I'm a married woman. You can't treat me like this" (167). Thus the couple engages themselves within minutes in the game of sadomasochism, playing dominant and submissive to each other.

Their relationship may appear baffling and bizarre as they indulge in sexual fantasy but it is mutually convincing. Max is worried to know about her husband. He sympathizes her husband as "poor fellow" that implies his own condition he judges introspectively. Sarah informs that her husband doesn't mind of her adultery as he has known for years, but Max suddenly discloses "I'm beginning to mind" (168). Sarah comments "Are you serious?" It is quite confusing whether he speaks as Sarah's lover or her husband. But Sarah's concern to know whether it is directed with seriousness or told just for the sake of fun is the externalisation of her psychological fear ingrained in her subconscious about the inevitable consequences when her apparent domestic stability is to be destabilized permanently.

Max expresses his dissatisfaction with his wife that she would mind if she knew that he has got a full time mistress, a woman of grace, elegance, wit and imagination. It contradicts his earlier remarks as Sarah's husband about the woman he is engaged with an extramarital affair. The tension resides within Max himself. While Sarah tries to console him that "she doesn't

mind, she wouldn't mind – she's happy, she's happy" (170), she speaks her own mind. Sarah claims that it is her husband who understands him, but Richard deliberately develops a bond of male comradery with her husband in the game and tries to threaten her "We're both men. You're just a bloody women" (171). It implies that both Richard and Max are trying to belittle her by reducing her to an object of pleasure in whatever roles they choose. Both are maintaining to secure their dominant place in the struggle for power within the relationship. When Sarah blames Max that what he is doing, is just playing a game Max retorts that he has played his last game and to make her in his complete control he deliberately raises a new issue – the children. At this point the reference to children that Max asserts "My children. My wife's children . . . I've got to think of them" (171), is to inflict her failure in the role of wifely-maternal relationship. He ends of his afternoon's performance as a lover with utter dissatisfaction:

Max: You are bony. . . You're too bony.

Sarah: Me? Bony? Don't be ridiculous.

.....

Max: Every move I make, your bones stick into me. I am sick and tired of your bones.

.....

Sarah: But I am fat. Look at me. I'm plump anyway. You always told me I was plump.

Max: You were plump once. You are not plump anymore.

Sarah: Look at me.

Max: You're not plump enough . . . You know what I like. I like enormous women. Like bullock with udders. Vast great uddered bullocks.

Sarah: You mean cows.

Max: I don't mean cows. I mean voluminous great uddered feminine bullocks. Once, years ago, you vaguely resembled one. (172)

But Sarah cannot believe that he is trying to destroy the illusory world they woven, and she thinks it to be a 'lovely joke' while Max is purposeful when he says, "It's no joke" (173).

But the paradox of Max's disenchantment is soon realised as Richard returns that night and begins to criticize his own behaviour and his outlook towards his wife. When Sarah informs him of her disappointment with her lover he mocks himself "I thought the whole point of being a lover is that one didn't. I mean if I, for instance, were called upon to fulfil the function of a lover and felt disposed, shall we say, to accept the job, well, I'd as soon give it up as be found incapable of executing its proper and consistent obligation" (174). He appreciates Sarah for her wifely role "I have great pride in being with you. When we're out to dinner, or at the theatre . . . Great pride, to walk with you as my wife on my arm. To see you smile, laugh, walk, talk, bend, be still . . . And to know you are my wife. It's a source of profound satisfaction to me" (175). He even contradicts Max's taste and judgement "I'm fond of thin ladies" (176), but Sarah reacts "I thought the contrary". So the expository detail may be apparently contradictory and sometimes may seem paradoxical but it underlies beneath the existing unbridgeable gulf and the inner paradox of their relationship.

In the ongoing struggle for power both of them are playing a dual role , but Richard faces inevitable frustration to play the two distinct roles as husband and the lover while Sarah holds the capacity to always play for herself. He therefore envies his wife and declares "I came to a decision . . . That it has to stop . . . Your debauchery. Your life of depravity. Your path of illegitimate lust" (177). He orders "From today I forbid you to entertain your lover on these premises. This applies to any time of the day. Is that understood? (177). Sarah attempts to sustain her adulterous relationship complaining "I didn't take my lover ten years ago. Not quite. Not In the honeymoon." (178) But Richard becomes more obdurate and warns her that the entry of her lover is barred and if he ever finds the lover in his premises he will "kick his teeth out". And Sarah now teases him "What about your bloody whore?" (179). He claims that he has paid the whore off because she is too bony. When he pokes her about the "illicit afternoons" she will not allow him to be dominant over her, so she strongly resists "You stupid . . . ! Do you think he's the only one who comes! Do you think he's the only one I entertain? . . . I've other visitors, all the time. When neither of you know, neither of you. I give them strawberries in season. With cream. Strangers, total strangers . . . They come to see hollyhocks. And then they stay for tea. Always. Always." (181) the reference to cream recalls the scene with the milkman and the hollyhocks evokes Richard's questions at the very beginning of the play. While Richard tries to secure his authority and identity by arousing in her a variety of sexual

adventures, Sarah combats him with her own facts and narration to create an irrefutable fantasy that gives a vehicle to achieve an authority of her own.

As Sarah becomes aggressive he endorses her story and then tapping the drum he moves towards her to make her realize “You can’t get out, you are tapped” (183). She giggles and makes an attempt to get out of her confinement that she has gained in both of her roles: “what will my husband say? He expects me. He’s waiting. I can’t get out. I am trapped. You have no right to treat a married woman like this. Have you? Think, think, and think of what are you doing. (183), but the very next moment she tries to defend her husband “But my husband will understand. My husband does understand. Come here. Come down here. I’ll explain” (183). She declares that it is the “whispering time” and she will whisper to him. It is vague whether with whom she is talking – Max, Richard or another new person that she earlier claimed having visitors. She asks him: You look different. . . You usually wear something else, don’t you? Take off your jacket. Mmmnn? Would you like me to change? Would you like me to change my clothes? I’ll change for you, darling. Shall I? (184) When she voluntarily wishes to change her clothes Richard repeatedly entices her to change – to change her clothes and finally concludes the play by addressing her “You lovely whore”. It suggests that the game resumes again, it never ends.

Thus the play appears to be parallel to the works of Genet dealing with the levels of sexual fantasy in which the characters are engaged in a game of transgressive sexual behaviour that challenges the norms of social respectability. The play undermines the misogynistic patriarchal construction of conjugal relationship in which the woman deliberately plays the archetypal roles of both wife and whore, at her husband’s behest. The play also reminds us the illusory world a couple broods over in Edward Albee’s *who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. While in Albee’s play George and Martha though pretending to have a child to the world outside admits the truth privately, but Richard and Sarah maintain their role-playing even in privacy. They are performing only for themselves. Unlike Albee’s play the fanciful world is not ultimately cast aside to join in love and face the reality, rather the world of fantasy is exercised and maintained by both Sarah and Richard and the ending of the play remains ambiguous. It is unsettled to decide who is going to be the victorious in their ritualized game, though several interpretations have emerged the most of which trying to show Sarah as the winner who finally

traps her husband and seduces him to merge into his split personalities. Her needs prove stronger and dominate as the play ends.

But instead of searching who is dominant or submissive the play can be analysed epistemologically that there is an inherent power structure even at the micro level of the relationship that Richard and Sarah maintain, in which power functions always as shifting from one side to another. The all pervasive nature of power makes it almost vague and unverifiable to investigate the virtual reality of the action though it succeeds enough to arouse and manipulate the curiosity of the audience. The dramaturgical economy with its well suited dialogue shows that power is more discursive than coercive or physically challenging. Sometimes the speeches appear paradoxical and contrary to one another. But the employment of paradox is not somewhat intentional or forceful, rather it is an outcome of the contemporary situation in which two characters are involved in a game to harmonize their various compartmentalized role-playing, but in doing so both of them subordinate themselves to the rules of the game, asserting their unending struggle for power and identity. Sarah's assumption of power through manipulation of masculine desire in complex role-plays directly anticipates the inevitable pattern that Ruth follows to control all the male members of the family in *The Homecoming*. The play doesn't intend to offer any iconoclastic idea about family and marriage like Henry Ibsen or G. B. Shaw to scrutinize the evils of society and prescribe a revolutionary reform, instead the play serves as an existential metaphor full of complexities and the inescapable paradox of present human condition.

References

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