

Understanding Pinter's Female Characters

Life is a struggle for survival in Pinter's world. The quest of the characters is then for survival; what we have at the end of a play is a realignment of forces to ensure this possibility of survival. It is here that Pinter's women move from a subservient to a dominant role; often they reveal a decisiveness and a ruthlessness which aren't there in the early portrayals. They seem to play their roles with considerable aplomb of mother, wife, and whore. Often these roles are combined into one perplexing persona. As the characters gain more complexity the quest is not only for survival, but for a realization of their selves, which for Pinter seems to mean the realization of their libidinous selves. A close study of Pinter's plays reveal three types of women-subservient, emergent, and dominant. These terms do not have any political overtones. They are to be understood in terms of Pinter's microcosm, the world as he depicts it, a world in which inner realities take precedence over external details. The term "emergent" is used here in the sense of the unpredictable appearance of entirely new properties or traits at certain critical stages or levels in the course of action in a play. Thus Rose in *The Room*, and Meg in *The Birthday Party* are subservient; Flora in *A Slight Ache*, Stella in *The Collection* and Sarah in *The Lover* are emergent; and Ruth in *The Homecoming*, Anna and Kate in *Old Times* and Emma in *Betrayal* are dominant. This paper examines these women characters under these heads in the following passages.

I. Subservient Women

The dominant concern of Pinter's characters in his early plays is the need for survival at any cost in one's familiar territory-- a room or a house that is being constantly threatened by dark, external forces. His characters in these plays, as they are in his later works, are in the grip of an anxiety that inevitably determines their reactions to the world outside. Indeed, though the threat is both external and internal, the former seems to be more mysterious and destructive than the latter. It is in this situation, that the male characters dominate. The female characters face up to their deep sense of crises by choosing to play subservient roles. Though they choose to play such roles, the end result is a loss of security they crave for, and a loss of identity. As Ganz observes, "those who have withdrawn to the room enter into a state of inaction, of passivity, that to some degree denies other aspects of existence. As a result of fear, incapacity, or trauma, they have ceased to long for any heightened self-realization and have attempted to remove themselves from some vital part of life-family relations, competitive striving, sexuality-and to lead a safe, if limited existence within the confines of their shelter" (Ganz 193). The female characters of the plays under discussion here are Rose in *The Room* and Meg in *The Birthday Party*. In delineating these characters Pinter seems to have

been influenced by the all too familiar portraits of the women of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. In the nineteenth century the effect of marriage was such that all the wife's personal chattels became the absolute property of the husband, while the husband could dispose of the wife's leasehold property during his life and enjoyed for his own benefit her freehold estate during her life (Reiss, 33). The married woman, both physically and economically, was very much in the position of a chattel of her husband. This idea of woman as a chattel persisted still in the early twentieth century, and certainly in the early Pinter's plays. As a matter of fact, the Victorian image of a woman as the "angel in the house" passive, sexually innocent and dependent still haunted all the women into the early twentieth century and all they seemed to want is to find a husband for security and support for them, like their grandmothers believed "a bad husband is better than none" (Lewis, 77). Besides, Pinter's own Jewish upbringing that stressed the importance of men as against the women might have influenced him in delegating subordinate roles to his early women characters. Rose, an old woman in her sixties, is the central character of Pinter's first play, *The Room*. Rose is a human being inhabiting a secure and cozy but terribly limited known world, symbolized by her room, and dreading the vast, unknown, dark universe, symbolized by the basement of the house and the outside world. The room offers her protection though at the same time it restricts her activity. Rose and Bert share the room and are apparently married. Rose is completely devoted, completely absorbed in looking after her man. She seems to be very anxious to please Bert, to make herself as useful and agreeable to him as possible.

Bert is about fifty and Rose is about sixty. The difference in age is reflected in their personal relationship. Rose is a motherly wife. She fusses over Bert's food, wanting to be sure that he has a hot breakfast before he goes out into the cold. She is a talker. Bert is strangely silent. Rose's incessant talk discloses her anxiety. She fears the world outside her room, and she shows an obsessive concern with the dark basement and whoever inhabits it. It's clearly shown at the beginning of the play, the scene of Bert's breakfast.

ROSE: Go on, Bert. Have a bit more bread. I'll have some cocoa on when you come back. What about the rasher? Was it all right? She goes to the table and pours tea into the cup. No, it's not bad. Nice weak tea. Lovely weak tea. Here you are. Drink it down! (102-3)

When Bert is leaving, Rose becomes once more the fussy, overprotective mother:

ROSE: All right. Wait a minute. Where's your jersey?
She brings the jersey from the bed.
Here you are. Take your coat off. Get into it.
She helps him into his jersey.
Right. Where's your muffler?
She brings a muffler from the bed.

Here you are. Wrap it round. That's it. Don't go too fast, Bert, will you? I'll have some cocoa on when you get back í (110)

As Gabbard puts it, even Bert too must have hidden himself in this room seeking its security rather than the uncertainties of the outside world unless it is absolutely necessary for him to risk the exposure. Together they fend off all intruders. Rose, in this regard, is the weaker of the two; she seems almost to acquiesce in the face of pressure from outside visitors. Bert, however, resists these intruders with strength and violence. (Gabbard, 26) No matter what it is, Rose appears as a weak and subordinate character who cannot do anything to resist but only shrink back to her shell. Seeing Bert's violent killing of Riley she cannot cope with such a situation. All she could experience is her blindness. Her blindness seems to be the possible punishment she has for her sense of guilt.

The romantic and idealized mother image recurs in Pinter's plays. In *The Room*, in a short dialogue with Rose Mr. Kidd expresses his contempt for certain women round the corner (106) and resents the contaminating presence of any women in his house. This remark could put at stake Rose's own existence. The only women he can accept in his world are the chaste figure of a mother and a sister. In Mr Kidd's view women could be categorized into two groups, the respectable ones and the contemptible ones, the mother and the whore, setting up his categorization on strict moral principles. Rose is the one who accepts the masculine moral code and in consequence makes herself vulnerable to male threats and blackmail.

When Bert returns, interrupting his wife's scene with the Negro, he is dominating the stage in movement and words. He sings his triumph over his van, which he addresses as 'she', an obvious substitute for his wife:

BERT: Then I drove her back, hard. They go it very icy out.

ROSE: Yes.

BERT: But I drove her.

Pause.

I sped her.

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back.

I could see the road all rightí They shoved out of it.

I kept on the straight. There was no mixing it. Not

with her. She was good. She went with me. I get

hold of her. I go where I go.

(126)

It is obvious that sexual inadequacy breaks the harmony of their life together. Bert's outburst has sexual overtones and shows the way he deals with the problem. Rose fails in the role of wife finally. In the end it is Bert who presides over the action. First he dominates verbally, then physically. Rose in the meantime has lost her basic human faculties: liberty, thought, oral competence. Last of all she

loses her sight, her blindness perhaps being the punishment that she wished to have for her dubious past and her inability to stand by the blind Negro. Her image as a female is passive, subservient.

In *The Birthday Party*, Meg, like Rose, plays a subordinate role to her husband. The title suggests, the celebration of someone's birth, here Stanley's or rather that of his rebirth. Meg begins the party by coming downstairs "holding sticks and drum". She is dressed in the dress her father gave her. She persists in forcing each of the men to compliment her. In her toast to Stanley she cries out her lack of maternal fulfillment. Meg expresses strong disappointment and her own preference for a boy. Her wish ironically reflects the principle of the superiority of the male, which is a masculine value. It simply echoes the ideology of a patriarchal society, which Meg has unconsciously internalized. Or does her wish reveal the ambivalent need of a mother-mistress relationship with a son-lover? It could be either or both. Hence, we should not be surprised to see Meg in later scenes mother Stanley. On the birthday party, she babbles out her childhood memory of her father to McCann. She remembers her little pink room with all its musical boxes. There she was cared for and had no complaints. Yet she also admits her father was going to take her to Ireland, but went away by himself. The cause of Meg's problem becomes clear. She was rejected by her father and never able to develop emotionally beyond her oedipal days. This rejection was so painful that she learned to transform pain and unpleasantness into their opposites--pink rooms and protection. At the end of the play, all she can remember of the macabre party is that she was the belle of the ball. But she has to convince herself it is true: "Oh, it's true. I was. Pause. I know I was" (p.91) Meg has the wishes of a child, a woman, and a mother all rolled into one. "Her readiness to apply to herself Stanley's adjective, 'succulent' reveals her subconscious awareness of these repressed wishes" (Gabbard, 58).

MEG: Was it nice?

STANLEY: What?

MEG: The fried bread.

STANLEY: Succulent.

MEG: You shouldn't say that word.

STANLEY: What word?

MEG: That word you said.

STANLEY: What, succulent-?

MEG: Don't say it!

STANLEY: What's the matter with it?

MEG: You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.

STANLEY: Is that a fact?

MEG: Yes.

STANLEY: Well, I never knew that.

MEG: Well, it's true.

STANLEY: Who told you that?

MEG: Never you mind.

STANLEY: Well, if I can't say it to a married woman who can I say it to?

MEG: You're bad. (I, 27)

The word "succulent" in itself an inoffensive word innocently becomes a potential sign of abuse against women in Meg's repressed feminine consciousness. The slang associations of the word cover all her would-be roles. Succulent means juicy and rich. Suckling means an unweaned infant. Suck refers to the function of her mothering breast. Succor is the help or aid she gives to Stanley, the refugee. Ironically, Stanley first used the word to refer to the fried bread. Such is the way that life has passed Meg by. Reacting just like Rose, she becomes indignant at what she imagines to be the lack of respect for her marital status and she herself by flirting with him openly:

MEG: Stan?

STANLEY: What?

MEG (slyly): Am I really succulent/

STANLEY: Oh, you are. I'd rather have you than a cold in the nose any day.

MEG: You're just saying that.

STANLEY (violently): Look, why don't you get this place cleared up! It's a pigsty. And another thing, what about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs papering. I need a new room!

He recoils from her hand in disgust, stands and exits quickly by the door on the left (I, 29)

Meg deliberately taking up the word "succulent" which she had formerly rejected with horror, shows her erotic nature, which she had earlier tried to suppress. Stanley takes advantage of her weakness to make demands on her and assert his male power over her.

Meg at the end of the play seems to be empty-headed, ignorant and easily deceived, living in silly illusions, unable to suspect the sinister game that has been played out in her house. Whatever be our assessment of Meg's character, she doesn't seem to have any choice in the given situation, except to retreat into her illusions of being "the belle of the ball" and of having Stanley to share the "succulent" bread and the lovely afternoons with her. The portraits Pinter has painted of these women are not flattering. Meg and Rose are the familiar stereotypes in a male-dominated society. These women, as Sakellariidou points out "are marginal and secondary, never fully rounded personalities, always defined by their relation to men as mother-whore and never having any extra-domestic

activities or interests whatever.ö (Sakellaridou, 45) Both Rose and Meg are the subservient women, subservience being the price they pay for survival. The irony is that the price for survival for these characters is the loss of dignity and identity.

II. The Emergent Women

Unlike the female characters of Pinter's early plays, the women in this group move from subservient positions to emergent positions. These women like Flora in *A Slight Ache*, Stella in *The Collection* and Sarah in *The Lover* are not as passive and enslaved as the women discussed above. They belong to the middle class, and know how to adjust themselves in order to survive, or to enrich their lives. Even if they don't always win the game they play, they don't lose either. They stand in the midway between subservience and dominance holding out against external and internal threats. In this portrayal of these women, Pinter has gone beyond the narrow range of his early plays of subservient female characters, investing the women mentioned here with traits which are hitherto unsuspected in the patriarch familiar set up. We find them awakened to their emotional and sexual needs, and seek their gratification beyond the conventional male-dominated marital relationship.

A Slight Ache is in a sense the starting point for Pinter's changing feminine characterization. With this play the female characters start gaining a more central position in the dramatist's work. They begin to emerge as autonomous entities and to develop independently from the male characters' conception of them. Jacky Gillott, who interviewed Pinter in 1971, suggested that all his women were "extremely feminine in a rather cruel and taunting way" Pinter rejected this distorting generalization: "There are many finer distinctions between the female characters in all these plays than you seem to feel. I consider that to be so. They are not all the same or all wicked or all awful" (Lewis, 71). Pinter's reply indicates that, at that stage in his career, he was consciously aiming at individual and objective portrayals of women and that his earlier vision of them had undergone radical changes. Certainly it's impossible to draw a dividing line or state an exact date for a radical change in Pinter's characterization because such changes do not happen overnight. But from *A Slight Ache* (1958) to *The Collection* (1961) and *The Lover* (1962) Pinter presents his heroines in such a way as to fight the mutilation of their discourse and the conditioning of their behavior and to assess their individuality.

If breakfast between Edward and Flora, with which the play opens, reminds us of *The Room* or *The Birthday Party*, we notice too that the social status of the two characters is obviously different, and the room is extended to include the garden. Flora is a motherly wife but she is more sensual than Rose or even Meg. Edward is an insecure man like Stanley and he is talkative and irritable. At breakfast there is an undertone of tension between Edward and Flora. Edward's

irritability comes to light when a wasp stays onto the breakfast table. The question whether a wasp *stings* or *bites* leads to a bitter altercation between husband and wife. As Elin Diamond observes, Edward, like Pinter's other male protagonists, considers himself *naturally dominant*; but unlike them, his loss of dominance is played out comically in dialogues with the matchseller and Flora. Edward compensates with noise, self-aggrandizing attacks and ludicrous pose of condescension (Diamond, 31). As Flora discusses the honeysuckle, convolvulus, and japonica, Edward responds with a ludicrous comic petulance: *I don't see why I should be expected to distinguish between these plants. It's not my job* (p.170). It isn't that it is not his job only, but that he can't see the difference between one plant and the other. The garden doesn't mean anything to him except as his territory to be guarded against possible intruders. The tension between this apparently happy couple is exposed gradually. Edward's fear of the matchseller seems irrational from the outset. As Flora says, the man is old and harmless, but Edward finds him a great threat. He has been watching him daily from a window in the scullery. Then he insists on bringing him into the house to *get to the bottom of it* and *get rid of* the matchseller. Probably he invites the matchseller into the house so that he can deal with him as a master deals with a petty servant, or as a man deals with an annoying wasp.

EDWARD. Sit down, old man.

Sit yourself down, old chap.

Now, now, you mustn't *stand* about like that. Take a seat.

Sit down.

(pp.182-3)

Positioning the matchseller is Edward's means of controlling the situation, of literally putting the intruder in his place, but he fails in his first interview with the old tramp. When Edward's monologue has exhausted him, Flora comes in for her private session with the old man. She finds him attractive. He reminds her of a poacher who once raped her in the mud. As she warms up to his dirty, muddy presence, she becomes overjoyed at the prospect of keeping him, to bathe him and to put him to bed and pamper him. Here for the first time in a Pinter play a woman steps forth to talk extensively and candidly about her experiences and her needs as an individual. If in the earlier plays female sexuality is despised or ridiculed in young and old women alike, Flora's bold question *does it ever occur to you that sex is a very vital experience for other people* (p.192)? becomes an important step toward the complete liberation of Pinter's female characters. Flora's leading the matchseller into the garden has great symbolic significance. According to Freud *gardens are common symbols of the female genitals* (Gabbard, 73). Gardens are used this way fairly universally. For instance, such a usage of the garden as a symbol is seen in Chinese literature, too. The famous poet Tu Fu, compares the bride's chastity to the unswept path in the garden strewn with flowers and the invitation to the bed to the opening of the gate of the garden.

Though the garden is part of their territory, it is used to present Flora's unfulfilled sexual desires. Flora, the significance of the name cannot be missed, has been, it is evident, aching for the fruition of her life. She aches not only for a baby to cuddle but also for a man to fulfill her desire. She reveals this desire by projecting it onto the matchseller. She identifies him with her own forgotten sexual encounter with a poacher who once raped her in the mud.

The Collection is yet another of Pinter's plays dealing with middle-class people. There is another level of this play which is the conscious side of fantasy life. Life seems to have gone stale for all these characters. The estrangement between Stella and James is clear in their first scene together. She hesitantly inquires if he will be home that night. He gives no answer. Instead he reaches for an ashtray and regards it. Harry and Bill seem no better off. Harry has been to a party, but Bill has been left at home. Harry has come to treat Bill as a dirty plaything or a "slum slugö. So all of these people relieve their boredom with sex fantasies. Stella begins it with her story about Bill; Bill continues it with his story about Stella. James joins in by picturing Bill as an appealing and elegant collector of fine objects. What Pinter seems to illustrate through the James-Stella marriage is that any love relationship will make a person vulnerable to the pain of emotional betrayal, a pain that cannot be avoided or escaped from. The character who can accept this, and who can live with a certain amount of pain and disappointment in a relationship that is otherwise emotionally satisfying, is the strongest, the best equipped to form a successful marriage or love relationship. A character who cannot live with such disappointment must either retreat behind illusions or find himself unable to successfully maintain a marriageö (Morgan, 169). In this case Stella is successful no matter what the truth is. She has a better chance of gaining the upper hand in her marriage by keeping her husband unsure-he will no longer take her for granted and thus will provide the attention that she requires. At the end of the play her position has been strengthened in comparison to what it was when the drama opened. We are first exposed to Stella in the role of a wife unsure of a husband over who she has no control. He does not answer her questions. Not even sure that he will be there in that night, the ineffectual Stella can only slam out of the house in frustration. The situation is reversed when the final curtain falls, for now it is James who is unsure of her partner, asking her questions to which he receives no answer. The final scene is very important. Stella gains or regains power over James, and her knowledge of what happened between her and Bill enables her to control the situation, just as Bill's knowledge enabled him to control the situation in an earlier, parallel scene (Dukore, 65).

Like *The Collection*, *The Lover* deals with a relationship that has gone stale, but Richard and Sarah are making desperate efforts to keep it vital. Beneath the adult image of Sarah, there is latent in the dream, a little girl who compensated for the sexual restrictions placed on her life by indulging in fantasies (Gabbard, 161).

The little girl in Sarah clings to fantasy as the proper outlet for sexual feelings. It's implied in the play that it is she who first invented the game. When Richard reminds her of this, she at first denies it and then gives silent assent by looking at him, "with a slight smile" (p. 170). She has been very happy with the arrangement ever since. She tells Richard: "I think things are beautifully balanced" (p. 173). He has come to her any afternoon she has chosen and has played the role of Max, her lover. When he threatens to change the game, she reveals in her anger that her fantasy life has not stopped there. She has had private fantasies in the afternoons that Richard has not come:

Do you think he's the only one who comes! Do you? Do you think he's the only one entertain? Mmmmm? Don't be silly. I have other visitors, all the time, I receive all the time. Other afternoons, all the time. When neither of you know, neither of you. I give them strawberries in season. With cream. Strangers, total strangers. But not to me, not while they're here. They come to see the hollyhocks. And then they stay for tea. Always. Always. (p. 193)

It could be merely her lies which she uses to revenge him for his wish to stop the game. It does work because Richard begins their sex ritual again. Dukore points out that "The Lover" contrasts asexual marriage with highly sexual non-marriage. The triumph of the latter is the triumph of sex over convention and the woman's desire over the man's (Dukore, 67). Here in this play Sarah seems to be the first female character who openly expresses her disagreement with Richard's ideas about women: "I must say I find your attitude to women rather alarming" (p. 169). She despises Richard's purely sexual involvement with a whore when Richard describes his view of his wife as "an antique music box". Sarah replies, "I can't pretend the picture gives me great pleasure" (p. 170). On the one hand, Sarah has freedom to display her sexuality more openly than Stella; on the other hand, however, she is denied the right to a career that has played such an important role in Stella's life and she is forced back to the traditional role of housewife. Though Sarah is denied an outlet to the world, she asserts her ego in the limited space of personal relations within which she is confined and thus proves the strength of her personality and the vitality of her imagination.

III. The Dominant Women

This group of plays *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, and *Betrayal* seem apparently not as sequential pattern of Pinter's plays, but the woman as a dominant individual is similar in these three full-length plays which is my main concern here. These three plays prove that Pinter is not a misogynist as people think judging from his early plays. I think Pinter gradually builds up the image of mature and independent women through these plays.

The Homecoming is Pinter's third full-length play, which he wrote in 1964.

This play marks a turning point in the dramatist's characterization of women through Ruth's vital presence. The main action of *The Homecoming* begins when Teddy, a professor of philosophy, arrives home in England to introduce Ruth, his wife, to his father Max, his uncle Sam, and his brothers Lenny and Joey. Teddy and Ruth have been married for six years. The play ends shortly after Teddy leaves for America without his wife. Except for Teddy's uncle Sam, all the others including Teddy himself encourage Ruth to remain with the family in England and to earn her living, they propose, as a prostitute. But is Ruth going to be a prostitute at all? The play gives no clear answer. Though many critics have condemned Ruth as a licentious woman or even a nymphomaniac, as Martin Esslin points out, by assuming that at the end of the play she agrees to become a prostitute. There is no clear evidence that she has chosen to be a harlot (Esslin, 70). The most perceptive reading seems to be Pinter's own, and he adds: "At the end of the play she is in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street" (Hewes, 50).

Ruth has a strength and will to power that only Flora has approached until this play, but Flora's dominance is more casual because it faces so little resistance from Edward. Ruth is a match for any man, even Lenny. She challenges his threats to her authority and emerges the victor-the mistress of the family. Her defense is her ready wit-and her humor. Lenny unwittingly initiates the final round in this struggle for dominance when he proposes to her that "now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass." But he meets his match in Ruth, who understands what is at stake (I 49). To maintain self-respect and to gain Lenny's respect, she must avoid slipping into subservience, which in Pinter's work requires gaining dominance. (Prentice, 461) Ruth does so by topping each of Lenny's threat/proposals with a counterproposal/attack that finally calls his bluff: "If you take the glass I'll take you" (I 50). She also establishes her superiority by calling him "Leonard" which is the name by which his mother called him. Needing no pistol to threaten him, Ruth uses the two reductive roles for women, whore and mother, to beat Lenny at his own game of sexual politics. First offering to take him, apparently sexually, she throws him on the defensive in their mock battle in the glass of water episode. Then shifting from this implied passion, she takes to the role of mother: "have a sip from my glass. Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip" (I 50). Ruth wins her dominant position which makes Lenny shout after her as she goes upstairs: "What's that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" (I 51)

Every member of this family except Teddy has his own wish for Ruth playing the mother/Jessie/whore role. This is a play of wish fulfillment. Even Max, the old man, thinks Ruth is the woman who can replace his wife. He tells Ruth that she is the first woman they have had in the house since Jessie died. Any other women would have tarnished mother's image: "But you're Ruth! you're not only lovely and beautiful, but you're kin. You're kith. You belong here" (II 91).

It is not until the last moment that Max becomes fearful that he will not get his share: "I'm too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man" (II 96). Ruth also gets her wish. She sees in her return the possibility of the fulfillment of her instinctual needs. She doesn't have to bother any longer about helping Teddy prepare his lecture on arid philosophy. She doesn't have to tread any longer the barren sands of the American academe and play the role of the genteel professor's wife. Although the play's title suggests that the homecoming is ostensibly Teddy's, it is in reality Ruth's, Teddy, who finds himself a stranger in his family's world, must return to America while Ruth whose thirst for vitality, sexuality and violence, having been aroused, must seek its gratification in the passionate world of Teddy's family. (Ganz *Realms* 201)

Certainly Ruth might be condemned for abandoning her children. But that action, which seems unforgivable, cannot be separated from leaving Teddy. As Pinter assesses it: "If this had been a happy marriage, it wouldn't have happened. But she didn't want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell's she going to do?" (Hewes, 58) To Ruth, the dreary six years in sterile America in her assigned roles as an obedient wife and good mother, has not been a happy life. There, in a life as constricted as Nora's in *A Doll's House*, she has been Teddy's helpmate and the proper mother of three children. Teddy appeals to her to return to her dutiful life there by defining her according to his need: "You can help me with my lectures when we get back" (II 71). John Lahr thinks that in Max's household, Ruth is needed, and this prospect of total attention and concern is what draws her to them. As the final tableau implies, she will be the center-piece of daily life, not just a decoration. In their need for her, she finds her lost freedom (Lahr, 24).

Though it is generally agreed that Ruth will stay on and accept the family's proposal, the textual evidence is that Ruth may neither remain nor agree to their proposal. She deliberately skirts any commitment by conducting negotiations in strictly conditional verbs, using the conditional tense throughout.

I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom. (II 92)

You would have to regard your original outlay simply as a capital investment. (II 93)

All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract. (II 93)

Ruth only conditionally concludes, "Well, it might prove a workable arrangement" (II 93), and when Lenny asks if she wants "to shake on it now or later," she avoids finalizing the agreement: "Oh, we'll leave it till later" (II 94). Things are still not certain. But the message here is that no matter what she will be, they should be under her own will and her own decision. The fact that the male characters conceive of a woman as a whore ironically accentuates their own deep sense of inadequacy. Thus Ruth, no matter what role she is made to assume, is placed in a

position of dominance at the center of power, establishing her command and reigning in full control of the situation at the end of the play.

As the curtain rises on *Old Times*, all three characters of the play are on stage, placed at separate positions so that their figures form a triangle. Deeley and his wife, Kate, in whose converted farmhouse the play takes place, are awaiting the arrival of Kate's old friend Anna, whom Kate has not seen for twenty years. The relationship between Kate and her husband, Deeley, seems tranquil enough as they discuss the impending visit of Anna. Anna, however, does not "arrive" but is consistently visible in "dim light at the window." When Anna moves into the scene, she paints a picture of a happy, busy city life the two girls led together, which contrasts with the quiet country life Kate and Deeley lead. Once Anna, Kate, and Deeley start to delve into the past, they do so by relating elaborate anecdotes about it. In the course of hearing these stories, we soon detect, through obvious parallels, that all the three characters are reminiscing about the same incidents. We also recognize, however, that there are notable discrepancies and contradictions between the various accounts. Each character describes these incidents from his/her own viewpoint, unconsciously distorting the past to satisfy his/her own needs. It is soon evident that in this encounter as "Anna begins to take on an independent existence she rapidly emerges as a menacing intruder who seriously threatens the marriage instead of enlivening it. Using a variety of weapons, Anna seeks to separate Kate from Deeley, who is forced to fight back" (Hughes, 470). This action develops into a duel of wits between Deeley and Anna: each seems to be using his memories and reminiscences to put the other at a disadvantage. When Deeley recalls how he first met Kate in some small "fleapit" of a cinema during the performance of *Odd Man Out*, Anna soon afterwards describes a Sunday afternoon, when she and Kate went to the cinema and saw *Odd Man Out*. One of the versions could be false, or neither of them is true. But Anna makes it clear that

There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place. (I 27-28)

When she begins a reminiscence of her own, a memory that cannot be taken away from her, she recalls finding a man weeping in the room she had shared with Kate. Rejected by Anna, he went away, later returning to lie across Kate's lap in the darkness. Here Anna demonstrates her power over the past by altering the story in midstream: her modified version emphasizes the man's deliberate choice in turning first to her. This reminiscence is awkward for Deeley. If he is to combat Anna he must make it part of his own past and "remember" it differently, but he can hardly do so without claiming to have been the weeping man. Deeley would not like to do so. He returns to his own memories of courtship with Kate. There is no further reference to Anna's story until the end of the play. In this round of playing, Anna gets the upperhand by stating "There are things I

remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place (I 27-28). The statement shows her strong will. Later in the play both Deeley and Anna try to establish a grip on Kate in a musical tug-of-war for Kate's love, but they do this in different ways. Anna attempts to seduce Kate by expressing her passion for her. Deeley tries to defeat Anna's purpose by showing her once again that Kate is strongly bound to him in marriage. The autonomy of the two women characters in *Old Times* and the complexity of their individual personalities suggest Pinter's master of the female psyche and his success at conceiving real living women and not male fantasies of them. It is a play that two women dominate throughout. At the end of the play, Kate is in command. The play concludes in silence. Anna returns to lie on one of the divans, while Deeley and Kate act out her reminiscence of the weeping man. When Deeley returns to the chair which he occupied at the beginning of the play, his slump expresses his defeat. Kate already dominates the stage from her exalted position on the divan, and Anna lies still as the dead. Although neither Kate nor Ruth proclaims her happiness, it finds expression in their attitude and action. Both Kate and Ruth achieve dominance in the end and are surrounded by others who seek their strength.

In *Betrayal* it leads to adultery. Edward in *A Slight Ache*, like Robert in *Betrayal*, finds himself in the farcical position of all cuckolded husbands-on the wrong side of the bedroom door (Diamond, 201). *Betrayal* is a realistic story of a case of adultery among the London literary establishment: Jerry, a literary agent, has had an affair with the wife of his best friend Robert, who is a publisher. In the opening scene, in a pub in 1977, Emma has asked her ex-lover to come and talk to her. Her marriage after fifteen years is finished.

EMMA: You know what I found out last night? He's betrayed me for years. He's had other women for years.

JERRY: No? Good Lord.

Pause

But we betrayed him for years.

EMMA: And he betrayed me for years. (i, 171)

But Jerry is much more upset at Robert's knowledge of his (Jerry's) disloyalty than about Emma's difficult situation. It's clearly shown in his subsequent encounter with Robert in Scene two:

JERRY: The evening. Just now. Wondering whether to phone you. I had to phone you. And then you were with the kids I'd go mad. I'm very grateful to you for coming.

i

I don't know why she told you. I don't know how she could tell you

The fact is I can't understand why she thought it necessary after all these years to tell you so

suddenlyí last nightí
Without consulting me. Without even warning me.
After all, you and meí (ii 180-1)

It is clear that Jerry feels a strong attachment to Robert. It is when thinking of him that he reveals his sensitivity. From this point, Emma seems to be a victim of these two men. But fortunately, she is a woman who is adaptable. Emma does everything with genuine devotion and no hard words of complaint is heard against her. There is a short exchange of words clearly reflecting Emma's motherly feelings. Jerry tells her that he saw Charlotte one day in the street:

EMMA: What did she look like?

JERRY: You.

EMMA: No, what did you think of her, really?

JERRY: I thought she was lovely.

EMMA: Yes. She's veryí She's smashing. She's thirteen. (I 165)

Jerry sees Charlotte as the image of Emma, as an extension of the mother's personality. His conception of the woman is stereotyped. Emma, on the other hand, as a mature woman, perceives Charlotte in personal terms and her concern and pride are for her daughter's individual growth. Emma's professional commitments are also given due attention. Here is a choice of great consequence and it proves fatal to her love affair. Jerry certainly expects her to sacrifice her job for his sake but Emma has already changed by giving priority to work and placing love in a second place:

JERRY: Well, things have changed. You've been so busy, your job and everything.

EMMA: Well, I know. But I mean? I like it. I want to do it.

JERRY: No, it's great. It's marvelous for you. But you're not ó

EMMA: If you're running a gallery you've got to run it, you've got to be there.

JERRY: But you are not free in the afternoons. Are you?

EMMA: No.

JERRY: So how can we meet?

EMMA: But look at the times you're out of the country. You're never here.

JERRY: But when I am here you're not free in the afternoons. So we can never. (iii 193)

There is no doubt that, as Jerry remarked, 'things have changed.' The idle woman of the past, whose role was to look after the happiness of the family or the gratification of the lover, has now turned into a busy, purposeful, professional woman with independent needs. The woman is seen in constant movement, breaking empty relationships and taking up others, in a continuous quest of meaning. Neither Robert nor Jerry take the initiative to terminate their respective relationships with Emma. When forced to break up with her they retreat into their

old friendship, while happy to keep up other stale and hollow social forms and relationships so long as they can dress them with their own convenient illusion. (Sakellariadou, 187) Looking back into her life we can trace her steady movement from a stereotyped concept of herself as a wife, mother and mistress towards that of a self-defined, independent career woman. The Emma of the past did not have a job and her domestic function was stressed not only in her marital life and within her family circle but also in the love-nest she shared with Jerry. When she realizes that this is just an illusion she turns to extra-domestic activities to find fulfillment. Emma is the only one of the three characters who is bold and honest enough to confront the hollowness and falsity of her marriage and her lover affair and step out of them both. Emma, undoubtedly, is one of the most memorable female characters in modern drama after Nora.

IV. Conclusion

Each of Pinter's female characters has an image that is a fusion of various images – mother-wife-daughter of Rose (*The Room*), mother-wife-mistress of Meg (*The Birthday Party*), mother-wife-mistress of Flora (*A Slight Ache*), wife-mistress of Stella (*The Collection*) and of Sarah (*The Lover*), mother-wife-mistress of Ruth (*The Homecoming*), wife-lesbian of Kate (*Old Times*) and mother-wife-mistress of Emma (*Betrayal*). These images are overlapping irrespective of the positions these characters assume in their struggle for survival and self-realization. The dominant image is that of mother-wife-mistress, the female character preferring a heterosexual relationship to a homosexual one. However in *Old Times* a lesbian relationship is implied, whereas Emma from wife-mother through mistress goes in for the freedom of being left alone in *Betrayal*.

A study of the images of women in Pinter's plays are restricted by two factors: the difficulty in deciphering the motivations of the characters, and the stratagems they adopt which do not necessarily bring out their essential traits and predilections. However, it is possible to arrive at some tentative conclusions regarding these portrayals if we understand the nature of the dramatic conflict in Pinter's plays. In an interview with Kenneth Tynan, Pinter observes that in his plays he deals with characters who stood at essential turning points in their lives. 'I am dealing with these characters at the extreme edge of their living' (Tynan, Interview) The characters therefore are in the grip of an extreme anxiety the nature of which they fail to comprehend. The grim question they face every moment of their life is how to cope with their deep sense of loneliness, inadequacy and fragmentation, and how to survive in a world that seems to threaten their very existence. In this struggle for survival especially physical, the men seem to dominate in the early plays; the women playing a subordinate role. In the later plays the concern is not merely for survival, but survival with a possibility of self-realization, which from the point of view of these characters seems to be the realization of their libidinous selves.

Sex plays a dominant role in their struggle for survival. It is to be noted that each of these characters is deviant in one way or the other. Perhaps the term *deviant* is a misnomer. *Deviance* implies a significant departure from the norms of a social group. Pinter's characters are free from the trammels of any norms; they are beyond the pale of the conventional society, and morality. They are by and large amoral. Sex, therefore, is amoral. Consequently, sex doesn't generate any sense of guilt in anyone. It is a weapon women characters use most skillfully without any accompanying sense of guilt. While these characters have their sexual preferences, they do reveal a flexibility in their approaches to sexual relationship bearing in mind the larger role of sex in the stratagems of survival and self-gratification. So if they could they take on their male counterparts freely. In choosing to play a subservient role, Rose, though she may still continue to live within the four walls of the room, has lost her vision and her identity. Meg too in *The Birthday Party* is plagued by a sense of sexual inadequacy. It is evident that being childless, she is frustrated and yearns for maternal fulfillment. She tries to compensate for her sense of sexual inadequacy and sterility by playing the mother-wife-mistress seeking in Stanley a surrogate son-lover. If Rose and Meg have to play a subservient role because of their sense of sexual inadequacy, in the later plays under discussion women emerge the stronger by using sex as weapon. Flora in *A Slight Ache* isn't intimidated by Edward's petulance and aggressiveness at the beginning. Being conscious of her vital need to be alive physically and emotionally, she successfully plays the role of wife-mother-mistress. In *The Collection* Stella gets control over the domestic situation not necessarily by having an adulterous relationship with Bill, but by disturbing her husband's sense of masculine superiority by making him aware of the possibility of his wife having extra-marital sex. Her husband cannot take her for granted any longer. She is triumphant in drawing her husband's attention to her and to their marriage. In *The Lover* again it is Sarah who persuades Richard to continue the game of whore-lover by making it clear to him that she couldn't any longer expect to play the conventional role of the passive wife waiting for her husband's return home after the day's work. If Flora, Stella and Sarah are the emergent women, Ruth, Kate and Emma are clearly dominant. Though the homecoming is ostensibly Teddy's, it is Ruth who eventually chooses to stay back, while Teddy prepares to go back to America to his children and his books. Whether she sets herself up as a prostitute or not, the choice will be hers. In *Old Times* we have a love triangle, but the intruder is the other woman with a difference. She is Anna who seems to have a lesbian liaison with Kate. In the battle that ensues, it is Deeley who turns out to be the maudlin loser, the women succeed in dislodging him from his exalted position, and at the end of the play it is Kate who dominates from her divan while Anna lies still and Deeley slumps into his chair. In *Betrayal* the one who emerges as the dominant character is Emma, who through matrimony and extra-marital liaison has realized that she could go beyond them. Though there is no indication

in the play that she would never get herself engaged with any men, she emerges as one who has the freedom to be herself beyond conventional or clandestine relationships.

To be alone, given the existential anxiety, is to be lonely. In spite of the realism of some of his plays, Pinter remains close to the Theatre of the Absurd. It is to his credit that through a fusion of the techniques of the avant-garde theatre and the clichés of the conventional theatre he has presented through his female characters the anxiety, the loneliness, and the vitality of the twentieth century women. In their struggle lies the possibility of their liberation; in their choices lie the limits of freedom. Pinter's irony seems to mediate between these two imperatives. In this ironic mediation lies that grey territory between illusive hope and abject despair that Pinter's women show the determination to guard against both internal and external threats.

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