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## Idea of Home and the Problematics of Identity in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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### **Abstract:**

This study makes a close analysis of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* and shows how the play explicates the concept of home as a political construct and how this concept brings about the complex problematics of identity as far as the protagonist of the play, Ruth is concerned. Ruth's constant power struggles has been minutely studied in this article by giving special emphasis on her active participation and her strategies in the power games that ultimately lead her to construct a 'home' of her own--- an autonomous space for her own self. Ruth first appears in the play as a woman with little identity of her own, but after she meets her husband Teddy's English family, she finds a fair chance to win a home to her identity that she has always craved for. So, she tempts the family members into playing power games with her and defeat them herself with mightier strategies and establishes herself as the authoritative voice in the family thereby, earning a home for herself to assert her self-identity. This article will focus on this process of her "homecoming" to self-identity and decipher her complex power games as part of her winning strategies.

**Keywords: Home, identity, power games, self-assertion, strategies, authoritative.**

Harold Pinter's award-winning play *The Homecoming*, first staged on 3 June 1965 at the Aldwych Theatre, directed by Peter Hall, established him at once among the leading celebrity playwrights of his day. At the same time, the play shocked the audience with its "enigmatic parable" by its description of unexpected and uncanny turns, its presentation of the casual relationships of the major characters among themselves, its amoral attitude to sex and particularly its climax that deals with the absurd transformation of the female protagonist Ruth into a professional whore. Despite all these, the play remains as one of the favourites for the Pinter lovers for its vivid treatment of the issue of homecoming. In fact, in Pinter's *The Homecoming*, the issue of home and thereby, homecoming is interestingly complicated with the problematics of identity and demands multiple layers of interpretation. In fact, the whole play establishes this issue rather ironically and metaphorically in the usual Pinteresque manner. In the beginning of the play it becomes apparent that the "homecoming" in the title is for Teddy and his wife, Ruth, as he comes home to his English residence after they returned from their vacation in Italy. But as the play progresses and ends, the implication gradually changes to the shock of the audience and the readers: Ultimately it turns out to be Ruth whose homecoming has actually

been referred to, not Teddy's, as Ruth comes home to her former self and acquires a room for her self-assertion--a space for a self-identity of her own at the end of the play.

Indeed, the question of home is very important in the context of Pinter's play. Home is essentially a shelter, security, identity, a protection where one can be physically and emotionally safe. It is not necessarily a house, nor merely an address. When we say, "feeling at home", it evokes a sense of familiarity. Home is where we can be ourselves and where we are not scared of ourselves getting exposed. Most importantly, a home is where we are powerful. At the end of Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Ruth refuses to go back to Teddy's American residence and decides to stay in the English household at her free will.

Ruth has never found a "home" as per her expectation in her married life with Teddy in America. She has been just a wife of a Philosophy professor and a mother of three children. Before she married Teddy and left for America, she had been a professional model, not for fashion but "for the body" and she once posed nude by a lake. Indeed, it is a profession much looked down upon in the 1960s. So, after she and Teddy fell in love with each other, Ruth found an opportunity to improve her social image and identity. In fact, each of them becomes the exit for the other. Ruth finds Teddy as a ticket to a better life. But Teddy is a professor, an established man, respected in society. And what's about Ruth? Although after her marriage with Teddy, Ruth's wifeness and motherhood are the two points of her life now, her own identity is conditioned by Teddy's. She now suffers from an existential despair. She finds in Teddy's American life a family, where she finds security and material prosperity, but not an identity of her own that she always craved for before her marriage. Teddy is not like Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, there is no domination here. But Ruth has to lead an identity-less monotonous life like Mrs. Thurlow in H.E. Bates' *The Ox*, though the latter was happy with her life unlike Ruth. Ruth knows at one time she will be no longer needed in Teddy's family, as he has his own life and the children have their own, and the children would respect their socially established father; She would have no space here. So, Ruth is deeply dissatisfied, as she has no "home" of her own at Teddy's American family and it explains her decision not to stay here as far as the issue of home, of identity and power, is concerned.

But in Teddy's English household Ruth finds a fair chance to construct a "home" for herself. Here she finds four men in utter need of a woman. There is nothing sexual about it. From Teddy's point of view, his father Max is uncouth, foul-mouthed. His uncle and brothers are also like him, not well-educated and uncultured. They are not interested in Teddy's scholarly life like Ruth who is not also interested in philosophy of her husband's genius. So, for Teddy, Ruth is also like his English family having the same mind. It becomes clearer very soon that Teddy is also no longer satisfied with his English family, while Ruth is one who feels at home here unlike him.

But the question is how Ruth would construct her "home" in her husband's English family. She does so through a game-playing with her excellent skills of a brilliant power manipulation.

The moment she is introduced with the family by her husband Ruth begins to manipulate everyone with whatever weapon she has. Ruth enters the household and first meets Jenny and the game-playing starts on both sides. Lenny after he meets Ruth tries to dominate her with his fabricated violent stories where women have been victimized brutally. But Ruth, in turn, defends herself skillfully each time and maintains a self-respect and power by topping each of Lenny's threats/proposals with a counter attack or proposal ambivalently that finally calls his bluff: "If you take the glass...I'll take you." Ruth knows very well what she is doing. And this wins her gradually what she wants that in turn baffles Lenny and, who can do nothing but shout as she goes upstairs, "What's that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?"

As Ruth meets other family members the question of game-playing gets more powerful and complicated. With Teddy's mother Jessie is dead, the family is in need of a woman figure in the house badly. Seeing Ruth for the first time Max bursts into anger and begins to shout: "I've never had a whore under this roof before, ever since your mother died." But moments after when all the family members meet Ruth properly they start a game with her to get her as the replacement for Jessie: "And you...Ruth...you're not only lovely and beautiful, but you're kin. You're kith. You belong here." Joey, a boxer, is young, innocent, almost like a child and he needs a mother. Lenny, a pimp, needs her with whom he can communicate and whom he can use in his profession. Max too, needs a partner as he is getting old and almost broken. Sam is a chauffeur, his identity is fluid. All of them need a woman figure in the household. This is a household at the moment of crisis, as here Lenny is not fully powerful and Max is not fully powerless. Thus, this tussle between them is equal. And when there is a tussle between two people, then the third person has the fair chance to intrude. The whole situation thus, in turn, help Ruth to enter it and exert her dominance.

Ruth immediately realizes what the game is. She understands instantly how the opposite players want to play with her to get her at their use. But at once she takes the control of the game. She at once accepts Lenny's invitation to dance, to kiss, and then to roll on the couch with Joey that concludes in an upstairs bedroom two hours later where, however, they "didn't go the whole hog." All her actions are now part of her game-playing. Except for Sam, all of Teddy's family encourage Ruth to remain with the household in England and to earn her keep, they propose, as a prostitute. Ruth agrees to their proposal, "Yes, it sounds a very attractive idea." But nothing she says or does, commits her to her agreement. In fact, the play, however, establishes what Pinter himself affirms: "She does not become a harlot." Ruth knows, she does not mean what the family members actually understand. In fact, no one in the household understands her. If there was a substance in the propositions, she would have become a tool in their hands, and not a powerful figure. Teddy does not ask Ruth to come back too many times, because he, being a social elite, cannot accept a woman who consents to a proposition of being a whore. But for Ruth, her agreement to the proposition is the climax of her game-playing; She deliberately skirts commitments by conducting negotiations in strictly conditional verbs, using conditional tense throughout concluding: "Well, it might prove a workable agreement," 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.” Ruth here uses language as a weapon. She consciously avoids being committed. Thus Ruth’s agreement to be a prostitute is just a pretence. She agrees to do something—an entirely political promise. The whole issue is one of game-playing and here, the game is much more apparent as the people who are playing are not skilled enough to defy the game played by Ruth with dexterity. And Pinter confirms, “At the end of the play, she [Ruth] 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.”

Ruth, thus, successfully constructs a home of her own and asserts her identity and authority, defeating her opponent players in their own power games. At the end of play Ruth is seen sitting on the chair strong and relaxed, authoritative and commanding while the defeated players in the game seem collapsed before her. Sam lies on the floor. Teddy exits. Joey kneels before Ruth and Max miserably crawls up to her pleading that he is not an old man and begging for a kiss. Ruth casually strokes Joey’s hair and Lenny stands motionless and here the play ends. Ruth thus wins in constructing a home for her own identity. So, her homecoming indicates her return to a state of being and in this process of constructing her being she is free to decide what she like to to, she is even without any hesitation to discard her role as a wife to her husband and as a mother to her children. She now can do whatever she wants with complete freedom of self. Like Diana in *The Tea Part*, Flora in *A Slight Ache*, Sally in *Night School*, Ellen in *Silence*, Kate in *Old Times*, Emma in *Betrayal* and all of Pinter’s women whom men cannot dominate, Ruth, once she understands what the game is, silently waits for the best moment to defend herself, plays her game and finally takes control and achieves a home for herself--- an identity, power and dominance. So, in Pinter’s play, the homecoming is for Ruth who finally comes home to her identity and authority that she has always desired. And Pinter is successful here to establish her into her own home quite politically and strategically through multiple power games.

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