

## THE ARCHETYPAL IMAGE OF WOMEN IN IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE* AND PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING*

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### ABSTRACT

On the canvas of literary creation, characters are portrayed in myriad colours along with the nuances of tints and shades. Either in real life or literary imagination always the aspect of 'gender' is playing a significant role justifying the words of Sigmund Freud that 'anatomy is destiny.' The characteristics of the archetypal image of woman are: weakness, powerlessness, inferiority, otherness, irrationality, passivity, insignificance, worthlessness, dependence, etc. This is a societal image created by society dominated by men. The relationship between man and woman is a hierarchal one. It is a superiority/inferiority relationship. Keeping these views in mind this paper attempts to draw an interesting comparison between Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Pinter's *The Homecoming*. The society introduced in the two texts is a capitalist society, shaped by competition and individualism.

**KEYWORDS:** Archetypal, Gender, Image, Power, Society, Transformation

### INTRODUCTION

On the canvas of literary creation, characters are portrayed in myriad colours along with the nuances of tints and shades. Either in real life or literary imagination the aspect of 'gender' is always playing a significant role justifying the words of Sigmund Freud that 'anatomy is destiny.' In this context this paper compares the portrayal of the archetypal image of woman in the works of two literary artists, Henrik Ibsen and Harold Pinter.

An archetypal image is an image which is fixed, repeated, universal, absolute, unchangeable, general, etc. The characteristics of the archetypal image of woman are: weakness, powerlessness, inferiority, otherness, irrationality, passivity, insignificance, worthlessness, dependence, etc. This is a societal image created by society dominated by men. In other words, this archetypal image of woman is produced by man and is imposed upon woman. Women, historically, have accepted this societal condition of woman—her archetypal image. The archetypal image of woman in society is either good or bad: roles such as wife/mother/daughter/lover/housekeeper/servant (the virgin) with all obedience are defined as good. On contrary if she is not compliant she is bad and is often addressed as the Madonna, a seductress, whore etc.

The relationship between man and woman is a hierarchal one. It is a superiority/inferiority relationship. Man is superior to woman and he is thus, the dominant, the egoistical, the self, the powerful, the ruler, the essential, the rational and the absolute. Woman, on the other hand, is the inferior, the other, the dominated, the enslaved, the misused, the secondary, the inessential, the irrational and the accidental. Keeping these views in mind it is quite interesting to draw a comparison between Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Pinter's *The Homecoming*. The society introduced in the two texts is a capitalist society, shaped by competition and individualism. In such materialistic society, the market laws and regulations

have the upper hand and materialistic interests and gains are the main objectives. This society is just a simulacrum of a jungle where everything is commodified and no moral sense exists. People come to lose everything human about them and become dehumanized and turn into beasts or objects. This environment of struggle over materialistic objects generates power relationships in social life. These values, ideas, or relationships are the same when it comes to domestic lives. People in the family are more or less the same like people outside the family because they are the product of the same society, reflecting the same values, behaving in a typical way. This is the spirit of the familial relationships. This society is then, a patriarchal one, where men are in power and also capitalist society where people fight for power and dominance.

Both the texts, *A Doll's House* and *The Homecoming*, introduce the same type of value system. The society is patriarchal where men are the rulers, powerful, superior and dominant. For example, Krogstad, a worker in the bank, in *A Doll's House*, feels threatened when Helmer decided to fire him. So he blackmails Nora, Helmer's wife, to protect himself and his children and to sustain his job. He is justified to do this by his society where men hold power and human values turn into commodities. Pinter's *The Homecoming* also depicts the same society but it is the familial society. The household is similar to a jungle where power rules. The father-son-and-brother relationships are deteriorated; they all turn into beasts and strangers. They compete aggressively and reflect their competitive society where one is for himself. This introduces themes of self-centrism, egoism and selfishness.

Women do not fit in this society, mainly because they do not have a legitimate position in the public world which is a world of money and production, the market-world. They are completely excluded from this public arena and they are forced to stay at home. This is where they fit, because they are specially made for this place, mainly due to their reproductive ability. The society does not recognize or accept their productive ability. They cannot go out and produce because of their anatomy which is their prison. They are entrapped in the prison of gender, male power and sexuality.

If we look at the relationship between Ruth and Teddy in *The Homecoming* on one hand, and the relationship between Nora and Helmer in *A Doll's House* on the other, it is just a superiority/inferiority relationship. Nora and Ruth are looked upon by their husbands as inferiors. Teddy asks Ruth to come back with him and his children. Nora is looked at as a servant or an object, too. When she wants to desert her house, her husband reminds her of her responsibility towards taking care of children and duty to serve her husband. But her duties towards herself are never mentioned or thought of. That is why she refuses to stay and decides that now it is the time for her to fulfill her duty towards herself. She realizes that her first sacred duty is self-education and self-realization. This requires her revision and redefinition of her self-image. One's self-image/subjectivity is culturally constructed. It is in language, says Jacques Lacan, that we come to be conscious of ourselves and subject/object positions. Radical and materialistic feminists argue that our struggle with our culture implies a struggle with our selves and subjectivities. In this sense, one's self-image can be deconstructed, redefined and reconstructed.

Nora, for example, feels that she is a stranger in her husband's house. She then seeks to change her self-image through education. Hence, she decides to leave the house to go into the society (macrocosm). For this to happen, Nora needs to have what the feminists call "critical social consciousness," which is her weapon in her struggle for self-actualization and independence. The society Nora goes into is similar to her husband's house; it has similar people, values, practices and attitudes, mainly because it is a patriarchal society. Thus, home is just the microcosm of the society. If the society is ruled by materialistic values, the house will be the same. If the society gives power to men then at home those in power are also men. If the society believes that man is stronger than woman, invariably in the household women remain

weaker. The husband or the father is more powerful and stronger than the wife or mother, he is positive and he is passive; he is productive, she is reproductive; he is rational, she is irrational; he is the self, she is the other. This has been perfectly described by Simone De Beauvoir in the Introduction to her book *The Second Sex*:

A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong ....He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of the woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. (xxi-xxii).

Man thinks of the woman's body as an aberration. It is different from a man's body. This is what basically differentiates the archetypal image of man and woman. Gender and power are the central themes relating to the archetypal image of woman in male discourses. In such case is power gendered? Before answering this question, it is important to define gender. Gender is culturally bound; i.e. men and women are given different roles, concepts, rights, duties and images according to their biological differences (sex). People are also given different social roles such as husband/wife, father/mother, ruler/ruled, producer/consumer, rational/irrational, strong/weak, superior/inferior, self/other, subject/object etc.

Sexual differences are biological but they become gender distinctions due to cultural differences. Culture is patriarchal it gives men power and a social arena to dwell and confines women to a private arena, home. Thus, because the culture is patriarchal, the society is patriarchal. No wonder such society considers that women have no right to go out in the public to be productive and creative. Woman can only have a place in this world and it is man who gives her the place. Thus, it can be safely said that power is given according to gender. A man means powerful, superior and intelligent whereas woman means inferior, weak, follower, stupid. This is the archetypal image of woman that we find in *A Doll's House*. Nora is seen by her husband as an object, a skylark that is stupid, weak, irrational and a spendthrift because she has only a body with no brains. He does not respect her as a human being. She is a mere doll-wife.

Unlike Nora, Ruth in Pinter's *The Homecoming* holds power and controls the whole male household at the end of the play. But actually, she only confirms to the society of males. She accepts the rules of the male society, which are a sexist society and where women are objectified and othered. This is the irony in Pinter's play. By maintaining the archetypal image of the female in society Pinter seems to be a sexist and chauvinist.

What are the gains of the women in both plays? Nora decides to leave home and to go outside into the society. She achieves nothing. Here we can say that Nora's initiation depicts women's first step in their struggle to redefine their image and position in the society. On the other hand Ruth in *Home Coming* depicts a more developed stage of woman's image in society - the New Woman, who knows what she is doing. Nora does not know what she is doing and is not clear about her husband. Ruth understands the people in the household and knows them very well. When she first meets Lenny, he tells her of his stories with women to show her his power and strength. At every given opportunity he tries to intimidate her and control her. This is the gender power game or the strife of wills, his will and her will. Ruth, however, was not intimidated. On the contrary, it was Lenny who was confused and later on controlled by her. This is because she is a woman of experience and consciousness. She knows what she wants and what she is doing and that is why she wins. But if we look at the end of the play, it is not a complete control or domination by Ruth. When the other men are enjoying Ruth's company, Lenny stands aloof, keeping a distance because he is just observing the situation. He is measuring up Ruth's power because he is still thinking of resorting to power.

Nora is the prototype, the beginning, the origin; she is the archetypal image and when she walks outside, she gets experience, she becomes distorted, she acquires the materialistic values of the society, and becomes what the society wants her to become, the Madonna, the body that is sold for money and she becomes distorted and immoral. But according to Pinter, the whole society is like this; they are all selling themselves. "A woman," says Ibsen "cannot be herself in the society, which is an exclusively masculine society." Pinter seems to subscribe to this view; he also sees women as split characters, who are either good objectified and othered wives or unworthy whores. These two contradictory roles are brought together in Ruth's characterization. She was the obedient, self-sacrificing, husband-serving woman in America, and now she is the self-selling, male-gratifying whore. The split woman is not the whole, free, independent and self-respecting female that feminist or women writers depict in their resistive gynocentric discourses. Thus, in Pinter's drama women have what is called "an identity crisis," they are split; they are two halves; they have a double identity; they are still seen as either soul (Mary, the Virgin) or body (Madonna, the fallen female). Simply because, as the sociologist Christopher Lasch puts it, one's home, one's private life, is seen as an extension of the wider bourgeois society. Formerly, home was supposed to be a haven in a heartless capitalist world. Unfortunately, the home and family life have become a simulacrum/a copy, an extension of the wider dehumanizing sexist, classist, and racist society. Home is no longer the emotional refuge in a cold competitive gendered society. It has become a world from which reciprocity of respect, love, care, pity, tenderness and sharing have been banished. Its inhabitants are the end-product of this heartless capitalist society. Both Ibsen's and Pinter's dramas focus on and probe the meaning of home as their characters leave home, return home and create home. Both Nora and Ruth discover that their doll houses have been nothing but, in Nora's words, "a playpen" for doll-wives.

*The Homecoming* has a punning title and an ironical ending. Pinter uses comic irony to deconstruct the violent gender hierarchy. But the irony is that, he overthrows one hierarchy by creating another. Hence, we tend to say that in *The Homecoming* he ends up by reproducing what Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence." Man as the origin, the centre, the absolute power is replaced by the woman as the centre, the origin, the source of power.

Thus, Pinter's *The Homecoming*, gains much of its dramatic significance, both thematically and ironically, when it is read or seen with the Ibsenite tradition. But why did both authors choose to set their dramas at home? Ibsen's critique of gendered power of the stereotypical image of woman is placed within a framework of false social values (or rather male values), patriarchal confining home life, and hypocrisy. Pinter's critique maintains this framework, but throws out the moral traditional component of bourgeois/middle-class values. Also, Pinter's play has an advantage that Ibsen's play does not have—that is the presence or, in Harold Bloom's language, the influence of Ibsen's dramas/tradition. It can even be said that Pinter's drama is a transformation, a displacement (and a repetition) of Ibsen's drama. Both dramas look at the stereotypical image of the female in the bourgeois society, household, the use and misuse of power and the dehumanizing effect of this sexist world.

Hence, both Nora and Ruth rebel and say no to all forms of oppression, otherness and powerlessness. They insist, each in her own way, on having power or being empowered. Home, for them, is a prison; they are imprisoned in this male institution with its male power structure. Hence, they decide to break open its masculinist bars/taboo/traditions. They go out into the wider society. But do they ever go back home? Significantly, homecomings hardly work out in both dramas. A woman is an intruder in man's home world; she is, as Nora tells us, a complete stranger/role-player. So, what is it to be done? What can she do to be accepted as an insider, an equal family member? Pinter's answer is: conformity. She has to

acquire the same values of the male society; she has to fit into the mould carved for her- either a good mother or a subversive whore.

According to the leading feminist thinkers, one's subjectivity, one's self, what he/she is, his/her whole being, is culturally constructed or shaped. The key question to be raised here is: what happens when dramatic conflict in a family drama centers around sex/gender, the uses/abuses of (male) power, sexuality, and subjectivity. What happens when sex and gender become key concepts and tools in a society whose value system has been structurally transformed?

Women in drama have a stereotypical image, an image which has been naturalized and fixed: sexual/biological characterization. Ibsen's characterization of Nora is admired by feminists. Nora is the prototype for today's female characterization in women's discourses. Pinter's contribution to this tradition is that he has removed the moral meanings of a woman's sexual/gender identity, as this immediately gives her a freedom and power that the traditional value-system had denied her. Certain critics argue that Pinter has thrown away this history-old category of the fallen woman (the whore). However, he kept the conventional dichotomy of woman as body and soul in its hierarchal form. The two female characters in *The Homecoming*, Jessie and Ruth are received as either the dutiful, good mother and wife or the sex object. Ruth makes a bargain (before our eyes) to become a whore—in the name of power and independence.

Ruth desires power, but what she desires is an exclusively male property. If she wants to attain it, she has to fit into the female-as-the-sex-object mould. Unlike Nora, Ruth is not imprisoned by social codes or the traditional moral values. She uses the stereotypical image of women (as a whore) for female empowerment, for the socialization of power. Ruth uses the two reductive gender roles of woman as mother/wife and whore, to beat Lenny at his own game of sexual power and domination. She manages to assert her sexual power openly. However, she collusively helps to perpetuate the male stereotypical image of her fellow woman: the female body as a commodity, as a sex object.

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