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Struggle of Power between Male-female characters in Pinter's Selected Plays

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Abstract

Needless to say that every human being would like, instinctively, to get power as much as possible in a society where he/she lives. The issue of power is an inescapable phenomenon of Pinter's characters in his plays if any. Pinter's earliest undertakings of the political were in the way he examined power relations between characters of his works whether male or female one. From where and how Power is originated and obtained, is basically Pinter's most fundamental subject. Talking about the challenges about power, it is obvious that fight inescapably becomes sexual and political between people. The present study, most currently, expects to reveal the power between characters of Pinter's *The Room*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Birthday Party* and to examine the power between the sexes; the personal domestic politics of male-female relationships that seemed consistent with the issues of the day.

Key Words: Power, Politics, Characters, Pinter, Gender

Introduction:

Pinter's earliest undertakings of the political were in the way he examined power relations between individuals. Power, where it originates from and how it is obtained, is principally Pinter's most noticeable subject. When this struggle of power is done between characters of different gender, the fight inescapably becomes sexual and political simultaneously (Sævarsdóttir 5). In his plays of the early 1960s, Pinter seems to be "concerned with the battle for power between the sexes; the personal domestic politics of male-female relationships that seemed consistent with the issues of the day" (Baldwin 9).In these early plays we are confronted with "female characters who battle with men for the possession of power, who threaten to break out of the domestic order from which the men derive their own sense of patriarchal authority." (ibid)

Pinter's gender politics is a broadly debated subject and for good reason since he is both controversial and confusing in his gender politics as in other aspects of his work. Looking through his body of works, Sævarsdóttir points out two apparent frequent themes regarding gender politics:"the woman as the alien other and the idolization of male bonding" (5).From the beginning of his career as a man of letter (conspicuously in his early-composed novel *The Dwarfs*), the theme of the duality of the woman appeared (ibid). Such dual representation typically contains one role of the woman being or referring to that of the prostitute, such as the character of Virginia in *The Dwarfs* or that of Rose in *The Room* respectively. Sakellaridou has this kind of

representation in mind when she says that the female character of *The Dwarfs* "became the prototype for many of Pinter's later heroines" (84). The other persistent female representation is that of the domineering mother figure like Meg in *The Birthday Party* and Albert's mother in *A Night Out*. This kind of representation is generally less sympathetic and more unfamiliar than the prostitute, "even in the earlier plays when the whore lacks the dignity and sophistication of later plays (Sævarsdóttir 5).

In Pinter's plays of the early 1960s, the duality of the women is further investigated, and all the dramas composed from 1960-64 deal with this fragmented female character. According to Billington, it is wrong to believe that this is the sole kind of female character fashioned by Pinter in this period; in fact, this theme is "one of the unifying themes of his 1960s plays and part of a continuing obsession with the politics of sex" (234). This "politics of sex" is the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement or the riots of the radical Left. Though Pinter is reluctant to inter link the movement with his plays, some like Baldwin argue that the power play in these earlier works is essentially "political." (Baldwin 10)

In exploring Pinter's politics of gender, one of the most important issues that should be taken into account is the way men view women in his plays. In her work *Pinter's Female Portraits*, Elizabeth Sakellaridou maintains that there is a noticeable predisposition in Pinter's male characters to "see the woman as terrifying or undesirable, a being they must exorcise or expel from their community" (18).This type of characterization is obvious in the current struggle of men and women in his plays and the persistent verbal attacks in search of power and victory over the other. Though the women participate in them, the need for this power struggle springs mainly from men and the conflict is usually instigated by them (Sævarsdóttir 6). Although their female equals take part in these battles, they seem to have no preliminary need for power and do not seem to feel lack of it. They are, in fact, the mystery that the men try to unveil (ibid).

Female characters in Pinter's plays have been labeled as "iconic and intriguing; dark, threatening and enigmatic, sexual and alluring, the male characters at once desire them and detest them" (Baldwin 9). The denunciation of women's sexual dimension by the male characters demonstrates the complex outlook that men hold towards women in Pinter's plays: "they are attracted to women, yet fearful of them; contemptuous, yet submissive" (Baldwin 10). The indication that the womanhood is "dangerous" is one that is explored throughout his plays of the early 1960s; a conception created through language, an eminently patriarchal construct. Language "becomes as much an instrument of power as sex in the battle for gender domination in the plays of this period" (ibid).

As was pointed out, this can be taken as related to the historical atmosphere of the era. A wide spread rise of feminism was paramount in the 1960s around the world, resulting in what is generally hailed as the second wave of feminism ("women's movement"). Women's rights and their social standing came to be a topical issue of

the era, and the general atmosphere was ideologically against the conventional personality of the 50s housewife, and as a result outlooks towards women were undergoing drastic change (Nicholson 1-2). The notion of a noticeably acknowledged role of the woman within the home was shattered and novel roles were being employed. Due to the fact that the rise of feminism came into fashion, the diversity of the feminine role seems to be an expected subject for a contemporary dramatist to explore. Or as Linda Nicholson states in *The Second Wave* “Something happened in the 1960s in ways of thinking about gender that continues to shape public and private life” (1).The 60s and 70s also witnessed changes in British legislation regarding the social standing of women from being caring to permissive (Storry and Childs 121).Hence such laws as the Divorce Reform Act, Equal Pay and the Sex Discrimination Act were all passed in this era (Storry and Childs 131). As part of these trends, Pinter’s female characters of the 60s experience, both literally and symbolically, “often relates closely to the male characters attempts to harmonize their ideal woman” (Sævarsdóttir 7).

Like Pinter’s gender preoccupation, contemporary culture of the 1960s was rather steeped in the feminist atmosphere of its era and evolved copious, valid questions on the issue of equal rights. Socio-political work, intended to instigate a discussion or to urge a new way of looking at things typically comes across as shocking. But what sounded shocking in the 1960s hardly keeps the intensity of that shock almost half a century later. So, the question that might arise is that how it is possible that Pinter’s nearly fifty year old plays about gender power plays and females’ roles, still keep spectators disconcerted and uncomfortable and even more often stunned and irritated. Sævarsdóttir finds the answer in “the moral and ethical ambiguity with which he explores these themes” (8). Throughout his dramatic career, Pinter depicts characters who are often implicitly or explicitly involved in socially unacceptable activities. The social threat of domestic violence, criminal conduct, verbal abuse and promiscuity are the themes that he explores without the pre-existent moral touchstone of his era. After seeing something ethically wrong and tremendously uncomfortable, the spectators are never provided with the pleasure of disapproval and chastisement of the characters involved (Raby 126).

The issues in Plays:

Such typical Pinteresque gender politics is evident in *The Room*. Pinter opens the play with descriptions of a wife in a typical scene in which she is seen playing her domestic serving role. Another important description is that of their age; Bert is introduced to be about fifty and Rose about sixty And their difference in age is echoed in their personal relationship in which Rose acts as “a motherly wife”. Throughout, Rose is concerned with her husband’s nutrition and clothing and tries to be sure if he is well-fed and well-equipped before he leaves. All these solicitudes bring about her talkativeness while Bert remains a quiet listener. Rose’s talkativeness is in fact an indication of her feminine anxiety, an anxiety which seems to be misused by other characters in their power dealings in the

play. This talkativeness is also deemed as a need for Rose to assert her role by Sævarsdóttir:

> Women's function in the men's lives and their part within the patriarchy is what needs to be asserted and even though their roles are not necessarily clearer by the end of the play, it is clear that the women are empowered to assign their own roles, whatever those roles may be. Their personal strength and confidence will insure them their independence (6).

This assertion of Rose's role is evident in both Pinter's stage directions and Rose's endeavors in catering for her husband. However, as Prentice points out, Rose's conditions are essentially dictated and from the beginning she finds herself without choices (52). According to Prentice, this is most evident in the closing of the play when Riley is to visit her:"if she does not admit Riley into her room, Riley may, as Mr. Kidd threatens, come of his own accord when Bert is home" (ibid). Consequently, Rose's efforts to evade the worst situation ironically cause exactly the worst, again giving the final action the inevitable force of fate. Rose gets the room that she persistently desires. But quite ironically, "that room which she defends as a kingdom is quite subtly revealed as a prison, in part, of her own making" (Prentice 52). In other words, Rose remains in her cozy room but at the cost of being destined to lose her sight. In the end, the spectator is faced with a nebulous ending for her, something existing as Pinter's gender politics. As Sakellaridou maintains, "the fate of the woman throughout Pinter's long dramatic career, from *The Room* to *Betrayal*, remains that of the castaway." (18)

In addition to Bert, Rose's destiny is also tied with other characters in the play. One of the characters who enter into power struggle with Rose and who misuses her feminine anxiety is Mr. Kidd, the landlord. Throughout their dialogues, Mr. Kidd answers Rose's questions and comments whenever he wishes. While in his psychoanalytic approach Gabbard calls Kidd "a vague old man who neither hears well nor remembers well," (24) I argue that he sometimes pretends that he does not hear in order to correct Rose. In a scene when Rose asks who was knocking at door, he uses his famous exclamation "Eh?" in order to make her aware of the importance of the other male character, Bert Hudd, the time when Rose disregards him:

> MR. KIDD. I knocked.
> ROSE. I heard you.
> MR. KIDD. Eh?
> ROSE. We heard you.

It seems Rose have internalized the patriarchy of the room (Sakellaridou 26) and we see that Rose quickly corrects herself. In another scene, the time when Mr. Kidd explains his seeming duty of watching the pipes to Bert, it is Rose that continues the conversation:

> MR. KIDD. Hallo, Mr. Hudd, how are you, all right? I've been looking at the pipes.
> ROSE. Are they all right?
> MR. KIDD. Eh?
> ROSE. Sit down, Mr. Kidd.

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> MR. KIDD. No, that's all right. I just popped in, like, to see how things were going. Well, it's cosy in here, isn't it?
> ROSE. Oh, thank you, Mr. Kidd.

By using the question-like exclamation, "Eh?," Mr. Kidd reminds her of the inappropriateness of her question and again she quickly grows aware and changes the course of dialogue. Then Mr. Kidd's question about the coziness of the room seems to be a weapon for him to make her silent. Such weapon in their power relations seems to be rooted in the feminine anxiety that Gabbard points out (24).

Regarding gender politics, other critics are concerned with the marital power plays in *The Room*. Among them, Sakellaridou detects a twofold theme running through the play (20). One of the themes deals with the human condition in the universe – which is Rose's predicament – and the other similar theme deals with the reinstatement of the husband's rights in his own home – which is Bert's predicament. According to Sakellaridou, this thematic duality sets up the central complexity of this early work (20). The trouble lies in reconciling with two dissimilar problems and coping with two dissimilar protagonists, Rose and Bert, in a constant power game. Eventually Rose loses power to the cruel Bert, as a result changing from a protagonist into a subordinate character. In other words Rose plays a dual role in the play, first as a self-sufficient character involved in an existential pursuit and second as a dependent wife (and formerly a daughter). As an autonomous character, Rose goes beyond the boundaries of her womanly nature dictated on her by the outside and subsequently she declares her own concerns, desires and fears. As a woman reliant on her husband she is open to male authority that will resolve her destiny. This dual presentation of the woman has repeatedly been Pinter's gender politics in most of his succeeding plays (Sakellaridou 20).

In addition to the feminine dual presentation, the question of feminine sympathy is of great importance. In *The Room*, Rose finds no similar voice but in that of Mrs. Sands. In *The Pinter Ethic*, Prentice points to a scene where Mrs. Sands confirms Rose's solicitude by saying "It's murder out." Prentice continues to assert that when Rose gets sympathy in this way, she "casually invites Mrs. Sands in 'to have a warm'" (49). This predilection for shared desire for security can also be seen as concomitant with Pinter's contemporary feminist movements.

While *The Room* depicts a female protagonist's anxiety and her power struggles with other male characters, *The Caretaker* is solely male-oriented. This issue is highlighted by J. W. Lambert when he notes:

> "The brooding presence of the feminine principle has been a mainspring in Pinter's work from *The Room* onwards, though with a notable exception in *The Caretaker*. Here its absence seems to leave the piece, for all its insights and brilliance without a true center."

Lambert's statement is in fact an indication of the importance of the issue of gender in Pinter's power politics. This is also shown in the number of the presence of female

characters in his plays. Among the 29 plays and 15 dramatic sketches authored by Pinter, only six of them are all-male plays (Sakellaridou 120). Though *The Caretaker* is among those all-male works, women appear in the play as figures in memory or fantasy. In one of the scenes in which such figure appears Aston and Davies refer to women (prostitutes) in order to enhance their social face in their power struggle:

> ASTON. You know, I was sitting in a café the other day. I happened to be sitting at the same table as this woman. Well, we started to ... we started to pick up a bit of a conversation. I don't know ... about her holiday, it was where she'd been. She'd been down to the south coast. I can't remember where though. Anyway, we were just sitting there, having this bit of a conversation ... then suddenly she put her hand over to mine ... and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?
> DAVIES. Get out of it.
> *Pause.*
> ASTON. Yes. To come out with it just like that, in the middle of this conversation. Struck me as a bit odd.
> DAVIES. They've said the same thing to me.
> ASTON. Have they?
> DAVIES. Women? There's many a time they've come up to me and asked me more or less the same question.

As this excerpt indicates, in their power struggle to enhance their social face, Aston and Davis refer to women as objects for serving them. The fact that such patriarchy is evidently internalized in two men representative of two different social classes can demonstrate Pinter's belief in pervasiveness of the issue of patriarchy.

Davies's hatred of women in this scene comes again to the surface in his repulsive reference to his wife. Aston talks about his wife with disgust, solidifying Sakellaridou's contention that "the overall impression in *The Caretaker*is a diffuse hate for women" (129).In another scene, feminine figure is represented equivocally. Such figure, which is that Mick's and Aston's mother, is one of the oldest themes in Pinter's gender politics (Sakellaridou 129). In *The Caretaker*, Mick's and Aston's mother is portrayed differently. Mick is seemingly respectful of her and does not allow Davies to mention her name while Aston refers to her as a disloyal person because she sent her to shock treatment at the mental hospital. Bearing in mind "the tendency of many Pinter characters so far to fictionalize and romanticize the mother figure," (ibid) it can be seen that Mick is doing the same:

> MICK: That's my mother's bed.
> DAVIES: Well she wasn't in it last night!
> MICK (moving to him): Now don't get perky, son, don't get perky. Keep your hands off my old mum.
> DAVIES: I ain't ... I haven't ...
> MICK: Don't get out of your depth, friend, don't start taking liberties with my old mother, let's have a bit of respect.
> MICK: Well, stop telling me all these fibs.
> DAVIES: Now listen to me, I never seen you before, have I?

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MICK: Never seen my mother before either, I suppose?
Pause.
I think I'm coming to the conclusion that you're an old rogue. You're nothing but an old scoundrel.

A close inspection of Mick's reference to his mother suggests that Mick is not in fact preoccupied with his mother's respectability but rather with exerting power over Davis. On the other, Aston's depiction of their mother is unreliable. Though he is portrayed as a charitable and kind man, as Pinter contends, "it isn't necessary to conclude that everything Aston says about his experiences in the mental hospital is true" (qtd. in Innes 340), since he is suffering from a mental lapse. Thus, it can be argued that, in line with Pinter's dramatic politics, the true depiction of their mother remains a mystery.

One of Pinter's conspicuous gender politics is the issue of midlife anxiety (Jageer 48). The question of identity has been a frequent concern for Pinter in many of his early plays. Among his dramatic politics is the confusing of his audience through the application of names. In his early plays, many of his characters have got two names, signifying the likelihood of multiple identity while also investigating the authority of the most common way of setting a person's identity, that of applying names. According to Jageer, the actual identity of Pinter's double named characters is in most cases lost (53). In *The Room*, Rose is named Sal. In *The Birthday Party*, Meg is also called Mrs. Boles and Goldberg is known as Nat and McCann declares that he has been called Simey by his mother and wife, and his father calls him Benny. This also is true of Stanley who introduces himself as Joe Soap. All these show that "this preoccupation with names is indicative of Pinter's interest in the question of identity, which is a vital element in existentialist writings" (Jageer 54).

Seen from a psychological perspective, identity crisis appears mostly noticeably in "mid-life crisis" (Capps 96). According to Levinson, "various discussions of 'mid-life crisis' refers to times of great difficulty in 'the middle years,' which may cover any part of the span from 35 to 65," (qtd. in Capps 96) but he then goes on to say that he prefers to reserve this term for a crisis that occurs in the early forties, a period that corresponds to what he calls the "mid-life transition" (ibid). Applying this theory to Pinter's works, Jageer asserts that the main characters in many of Pinter's plays are "middle-aged and they express their crises sometimes verbally and sometimes non-verbally" (57). Therefore, it can be said that midlife crisis is a part of gender politics in these early works whose embodiment in the female characters' anxiety is an important factor in their dealings with other male characters.

Jageer points to fact that a large number of Pinter's characters are middle-aged, people who display the psychic complications caused by stress and frustration in their midlife (57). Rose and Bert of *The Room* and Petey and Meg of *The Birthday Party* are all either in their midlife or in a transition from it. According to Duke and Nowicki, "people suffering from their forties transition crisis report a number of fears, especially those regarding their loss of youth and the threatening ageing process"

(484).Also, Yalom asks therapists to take into consideration the rule that in treating patients afflicted with midlife crisis, the origin is "death anxiety" (qtd. in Sherman 56). This "death anxiety" is associated with the image of basement and the concomitant fear of characters in Pinter's plays (Gabbard 69).

In the very first play *The Room* we can see that Rose's power play with other characters is mostly due to her fear of losing the cozy room. Jageer finds the root of this fear in "psychological undercurrents of midlife crisis" (57). In the character description Rose is presented as a woman of sixty. In fact, she is in the transition stage from a middle-age woman to an old one and in this transition her signs of midlife crisis are evident. Jageer maintains that "She has menopausal frustration on the one hand, and sexual frustration on the other" (57). Both she and her husband appear to be inept and she seems to know that she cannot rely on her husband any longer and as a result her anxiety might emerge. Perhaps it is due to this anxiety that Rose has a duality of character acting as both a wife and a mother, what Gabbard calls "a motherly wife" (23).

This midlife crisis and the concomitant anxiety seem to be the cause of loss of trust in Pinter's gender politics (Jageer 58). In *The Room* Rose persistently feels no longer confident that she is secure in her room with her husband in it. Also Bert's trust of her wife is lost when he sees her with the Negro. This lack of trust seems to be the cause of their power exertion: Rose does her best to care for Bert and Bert does her best to subdue the Negro.

Adopting a different look, Sakellaridou points to the way Rose's past is the cause of her anxiety and is a determinant in her dealings with other male characters (26), a past that is suggested, not directly stated. In fact, it is Pinter's dramatic politics to reject "well-made play" that "provides too much information about the background and motivation of each character" (Esslin 1961, 273). Sakellaridou points to Rose's second encounter with Mr. Kidd which results in her encounter with the blind Negro and mentions that in this process Rose "shows neurotic signs of guilt connected with the question of her impeccable morality" (26). When asked by Mr. Kidd to meet the unfamiliar male visitor (the blind Negro) in her husband's absence, Rose goes irate: "Do you expect me to see someone I don't know? With my husband not here too?" Rose's complaint is ludicrous because there is no reason why a simple meeting with a man should inevitably indicate sexual encounter, as Rose appears to be afraid of. According to Sakellaridou:

> The projection of a forbidden erotic element into the situation is a pure fabrication of Rose's mind and it probably reflects a neurotic state of a sexually repressed woman. Rose has in all probability magnified in her guilty mind the seriousness of Mr. Kidd's suggestion and nearly gets hysterical in the defense of her reputation: "Mr. Kidd, do you think I go around knowing men in one district after another? What do you think I am?" (26)

Sakellaridou proceeds to detect the clues in *The Room* by which it can be concluded that

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Rose was formerly a prostitute, but now is trying to lead an honest life (26). Whether Rose was really a prostitute or an imagined one is of no significance in Pinter's dramatic world, in which reality and fantasy are in continual interaction. The importance lies in the fact that she is labeled as a whore, like so many of other Pinter female characters. This recurrent portrayal of Pinter's heroines can be taken as another aspect of Pinter's gender politics in which his male characters "see women as split; split between wife and whore, between respectable and illicit, between maternal and sexual, and they find it impossible to accommodate both within one woman" (Baldwin 11).

Parallel depiction of Rose can also be seen in Meg of *The Birthday Party*. Similar to Rose, she talks to someone who does not reply; but, thicker-skinned than Rose, she ignores the response when it is given (Diamond 50). Like Rose, Meg is afflicted with an anxiety which is rooted in her menopause (Jageer 58). The ensuing frustration of this anxiety shows itself in her desire to be young again and this desire manifests itself in her ambivalent attitude towards Stanley. To him she acts as his mother and a whore at once (ibid).Her obsession of her ageing becomes more apparent towards the close of the play. When McCann and Goldberg have taken Stanley away, she starts looking for him. But her endeavor is not out of her solicitude for Stanley and his disappearance; in fact it is due to her role in "the birthday party," in which she was supposed to be "the belle of the ball."

Pinter's depiction of Meg is that of an unwise woman whose foolishness is out of genuine affection (Diamond 59). This characteristic of Meg is an important factor in her communications with other characters. In a scene, this affection is manipulated by Goldberg when he tries to make her complicit with his sport: "Now-who's going to propose the toast? Mrs. Boles, it can only be you." Diamond believes that Goldberg's first step of controlling Stanley is through playing with this characteristic of Meg (54):

> GOLDBERG: Ah, Mrs. Boles?
> MEG: Yes?
>
> GOLDBERG: We spoke to your husband last night. Perhaps he mentioned us? We heard that you kindly let rooms for gentlemen. So I brought my friend along with me. We were after a nice place, you understand. So we came to you. I'm Mr. Goldberg and this is Mr. McCann.
>
> As these lines show, Goldberg's first "so" emphasizes the chivalrous character of Mr. McCann, and the second, the noble character of Meg's establishment.

Another female character in the play, a young girl known as Lulu, is dealt with as disapprovingly as Meg. Rather than causing some kind of balance as a second female existence in the play, Lulu accomplishes just the opposite. According to Sakellaridou:

> Like Mrs. Sands in *The Room* she undermines further the woman's precarious position in the world of the play. She is the stereotype of the young, provocative, empty-headed female, a sex object with no

> personality and no sense of responsibility. She willingly lends herself to Goldberg and then poses as the innocent victim of male lasciviousness and bestiality. (42)

Sakellaridou proceeds to state critic's merciless descriptions of her: "A passing tart," "a nubile bundle of fluff called Lulu," and even a "nymphomaniac" are just some of the harsh titles applied to her. Steven Gale sees her as "a young version of Meg." Indeed, "Lulu is Meg's double in silliness and sluttishness" (ibid). Her role in the play next to the older woman increases, if anything, the denigrated image of the feminine.

Lulu's determining anxiety in her power dealings with male characters is different from that of Meg and Rose. Jageer classifies her anxiety as "moral anxiety", an anxiety which is shared by Stanley in their dealings (62). As stated by Sigmund Freud, moral anxiety is the emotion that people undergo when they act in a way which is regarded as erroneous by religion or some social ethical code. Moral anxiety is viewed as a sort of punishment anxiety, because the man who does something which his principles or ethics finds wrong, worries punishment for that deed (Roeckelein 194). In Pinter it is predominantly evident, when the characters have to take an important decision (Jageer 61).Thus it is evident that the indirect allusion to the rape is a sign of Lulu's moral anxiety. This sort of anxiety can also be found in Stanley when Lulu draws near to him with sexual advances:

> LULU. We must as well stay here.
> STANLEY. No, it is no good here.
> LULU. Well, Where else is there?
> STANLEY. Now here.
> LULU. Well that is a charming proposal. (He gets up.) Do you have to wear those glasses?
> STANLEY. Yes.
> LULU. So you are not coming for a walk?
> STANLEY. I can't at the moment.
> LULU. You are a bit of a wash-out, aren't you?

Lulu is encountered with a rejection on behalf of Stanley because he is distressed by his moral anxiety. Interestingly, in another scene, when Lulu finds that Goldberg has seduced her, she exclaims, "That's what you did. You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she has been married at least three times." In spite of her philandering with Stanley, her reaction is an indication of her moral anxiety.

Hence, according to the discussion, it is obvious that power here and there, was and is the almost all involved issue among the genders of all nations and the characters of Pinter's plays are not exceptions of the fact.

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