Abjection in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*: An Exploration of Power, Identity, and the Breakdown of Boundaries

Dr Meenakshi Dey

Associate Professor of English, School of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Haldia Institute of Technology, Haldia, West Bengal, India

Abstract— *Harold Pinter's The Homecoming is an insightful exploration of power, identity, familial relationships, and the disconcerting aspects of the human psyche threatened with harsh, unyielding truths. A major theme running through the play is the idea of abjection, a term developed by philosopher Julia Kristeva to characterise the human response to something inherently disturbing or disgusting, something that breaks down barriers and upends the status quo. In Pinter's play, this theme emerges through violence, emotional coercion, and the dehumanising treatment of people, all of which contest society standards. This paper will analyse how power conflicts, fragmented identities, and the uncertain roles of women, along with the blurring of borders, accentuate the disorienting impact of abjection. Pinter destabilises the characters' lives and undermines the audience's sense of stability, compelling both to confront alarming realities about human nature and social order. The convergence of these themes reveals the perplexing psychological truths that arise when the familiar is disrupted by irrepressible forces, resulting in discomfort for both characters and the audience.*

Keywords— *abjection, power, identity, violence, gender*

Introduction

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* unfolds in a confined, uneasy domestic space where power, desire, and family loyalties collide in a battle for supremacy. The play's tense encounters break down the polite facades, revealing moments that blur the lines between intimacy and threat, inclusion and exclusion. These disturbing shifts challenge the boundaries that hold relationships and identities in place. Through Ruth's mysterious presence and the men's instable alliances, Pinter reveals how quickly order can crumble when faced with something that is at once familiar and unsettlingly foreign. The paper looks at how breaking down established boundaries becomes central to the play's interrogation of power and identity.

Understanding Abjection: Key Theories and Concepts

The term *abject* comes from the Latin *abjectus*, meaning "cast off" or "rejected." It refers to what is degraded, excluded, or pushed outside the boundaries of social acceptance. Abjection marks the disturbing space where what is familiar becomes alien, evoking both discomfort and rejection. Modern scholarship, engages with abjection across disciplines ranging from sociology and organizational studies to art and psychotherapy, revealing its many forms and its links to structural oppression and power dynamics.

In organizational studies, abjection is closely related to the exploitation, suppression, and muzzling of employees within the workplace. Organizations often establish certain rules, policies, and rituals to assimilate individuals into a homogeneous entity, thereby identifying and casting out dissenters or nonconformists. These processes can manifest in subtle yet powerful ways, such as racial, gender, or age discrimination, or in more overt actions like low salaries, long working hours, sexual harassment, and lack of career advancement opportunities. Abjection, in this context, becomes a mechanism through

which the hierarchy of power is maintained, and those who do not fit the desired mould are pushed to the periphery. It becomes a psychosocial mechanism that reinforces exclusion under the guise of professionalism.

Abjection is also a significant theme in art, particularly in the concept of abject art. Abject art explores themes that transgress and challenge traditional views of cleanliness, propriety, and beauty, particularly in relation to the body and bodily functions. This form of art may evoke feelings of disgust or anxiety in viewers at first, as it often references bodily fluids, excrement, decay, or mutilation. However, these feelings are typically replaced by curiosity as viewers realize that the art is not real, but constructed. Abject artists like Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, and Cindy Sherman use their works to portray the body in all its impure and disturbing forms. In doing so, they allow audiences to engage with the abject in a controlled environment, exploring these uncomfortable aspects of life without directly confronting them.

In the field of psychotherapy, the concept of abjection has proven useful in understanding certain psychological conditions, such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other body-related phobias. People suffering from BDD, for example, become so fixated on a perceived flaw in their body that they begin to abject that part of themselves, seeing it as repulsive or even hateful. They may resort to drastic measures like self-mutilation in an attempt to rid themselves of this perceived flaw. This act of abjecting the body mirrors the broader societal processes of marginalization and rejection.

Georges Bataille, in his seminal work *Abjection and Miserable Forms*, first conceptualized abjection as a social theory. Bataille argued that abjection is a force that excludes certain groups from the moral and social order, branding them as 'moral outcasts' or 'waste populations.' (*More & Less 2*19). His theory was formed in response to the rise of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany and the atrocities of the Holocaust. Bataille viewed abjection as a means of establishing boundaries between those who are accepted within society and those who are deemed outside it. This idea was later expanded by Sylvere Lotringer, who associated abjection with fascism, arguing that it served to marginalize certain segments of society, such as the working class, ethnic minorities, and other 'undesirables' (*Les Misérables* 1999).

The concept of abjection is often linked to disgust, as outlined by William Miller in his *Anatomy of Disgust*, where he posits that disgust and contempt serve to sustain the low ranking of those deemed unworthy or 'filthy' (xiv). W.A. Cohen also examines the concept of filth, asserting

that people or objects are considered filthy when they are seen as 'unassailably other,' either because of their physical attributes or because their behaviors or ideas are seen as immoral or obscene (x). Abjection is, therefore, a process of exclusion that serves to reinforce the boundaries of what is considered normal or acceptable in society.

Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, explores the cultivation of hatred as a by-product of abjection. According to Fanon, hatred is not innate but is developed through social and political processes that aim to establish distinctions between 'us' and 'them' (37). This process is especially evident in racial, ethnic, and gendered discrimination, where certain groups are excluded from the social body and branded as inferior. Fanon's analysis of hate reveals how it is tied to the maintenance of social order, where marginalized groups are systematically pushed to the margins and subjected to violence and control. This concept is further explored by scholars such as Lauren Berlant, who describes how abject populations are often portrayed as threats to the common good, requiring rigorous governance and monitoring to maintain societal peace (Berlant 175).

Judith Butler, in her work *Bodies That Matter*, builds on these ideas, arguing that abjection is not just an individual psychological process but also a collective one. She asserts that the subject's identity is constructed through the exclusion of the abject, with the subject's boundaries constantly being reinforced through the abjection of the 'other.' The abject, in this sense, is a constitutive outside, necessary for the formation of the subject (3). Butler's theory aligns with Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic interpretation of abjection (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1980), particularly in relation to the separation between the self and the other. Kristeva's theory is rooted in the idea that abjection is a primal act of rejection, starting with the infant's separation from the mother (*Powers* 13). This act of rejection is a necessary step in the formation of the individual's identity, as it helps establish the boundaries between self and other.

Kristeva's understanding of abjection is deeply rooted in bodily experiences such as waste, excrement, and bodily fluids, which she argues challenge the boundaries of identity and order. Drawing on Mary Douglas' work on the concept of 'dirt' as matter out of place (*Purity And Danger* 154), Kristeva contends that abjection occurs when something violates the boundaries between the clean and the unclean, the acceptable and the unacceptable. Abjection, therefore, represents a threat to the integrity of the self and society, as it destabilizes the established order.

Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection is grounded in the infant's psychological development, particularly in the stages of the chora and the symbolic

realm. During the chora stage, the infant exists in a state of pre-linguistic chaos, dependent on the mother for survival. As the infant begins to recognize the distinction between self and other, it enters the stage of abjection, where the maternal figure is both a source of comfort and a threat to autonomy. This leads to a complex process of separation, where the child must reject the mother to establish its own identity (*Powers* 13). Kristeva argues that this process of abjection continues throughout life, influencing how individuals and societies define themselves by what they reject and marginalize.

Theories of abjection highlight how psychological, social, and cultural factors are deeply interconnected, influencing one another in a continual process of exclusion and differentiation. Abjection begins at the individual level, in the psyche, but extends to larger societal structures, where certain groups are consistently marginalized, rejected, and excluded. The process of abjecting the 'other' is central to the construction of identities and boundaries, whether on a personal, social, or political level. In literature, such as Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, abjection emerges as a theme that challenges established norms and boundaries, exposing the violence and disruption inherent in both personal and collective experiences of rejection. Through these various lenses, we see how abjection is not just an individual psychological phenomenon but a pervasive force that shapes identities, societies, and the way we relate to the world around us.

Power Struggles and the Abject

At the heart of *The Homecoming* is a disturbing power dynamic within the family unit, particularly the interactions between the men of the household—Max, his sons Lenny, Joey, and Teddy—and the sudden arrival of Ruth, Teddy's wife. These power struggles are not just a matter of physical dominance but also psychological manipulation and the exertion of control. Pinter's characters often display a detachment from traditional notions of morality, making their relationships feel abject in nature. Their words are often loaded with latent violence, and their actions reflect a consistent disregard for empathy.

Max, the patriarch, is a demeaning and verbally abusive figure, while his sons each seek to assert their authority in different ways. Lenny, for instance, uses his position as a supposed man of intellect to manipulate others, while Joey's physicality becomes a tool of self-assertion. Their behaviours exemplify a breakdown of traditional familial roles and a displacement of the usual social hierarchies. When Ruth enters the scene, her presence unsettles the established power structure. The men's immediate response to her is one of possessiveness, objectification, and manipulation, reflecting the abject treatment of women and their role as both the object and subject of power.

The disturbing relationships in the play foreground a recurring theme of psychological and physical violence, suggesting that the home, traditionally a sanctuary, becomes a site of abjection—where power and human relationships break down and defy any form of order or moral clarity.

The Abjection of Identity

Pinter's characters exhibit a profound loss of personal and social identity, a key marker of abjection. The way they exist in a liminal state—caught between the past and the present, the self and the other—reveals a deep existential dislocation. Each of the characters in *The Homecoming* is unable or unwilling to fully define themselves, resulting in an almost nightmarish fluidity of identities. This instability mirrors Kristeva's notion of the abject as that which refuses categorization and becomes something that lies outside of the symbolic order.

For example, Teddy, the "successful" son who returns to the family home, is portrayed as both an outsider and an insider. His attempts to assert his identity as a university professor, married man, and individual distanced from his family are undermined by the raw, often cruel reality of the homecoming. His identity is constantly questioned by his family, who view him as someone who has abandoned them, and by Ruth, whose presence creates a further sense of tension and disruption. His relationship with Ruth, in which he is passive and almost absent, reflects his inability to confront his own position in the family and society.

Similarly, Max's insistence on asserting his patriarchal authority and his psychological instability reveal an identity that is fragmentary and unreliable. His role as the head of the family seems to be more a product of his own delusions than an actual position of power. This clash between self-perception and reality suggests an identity crisis that borders on the abject, where one's sense of self is in constant flux and impossible to solidify.

The Role of Women: Ruth as the Abject Other

Ruth's introduction into the play serves as a crucial moment of abjection, particularly in her interactions with the male characters. From the outset, Ruth is portrayed as an enigmatic and contradictory figure, an object of both desire and disdain. Her position in the family is ambiguous—though she is married to Teddy, she immediately becomes a source of attraction for the men in the household, who begin to view her as an object of possession. Ruth's manipulation of the men, particularly when she begins to assert her dominance over them, reveals her own agency, but also exposes her as part of the play's abject landscape.

Ruth embodies a complex combination of submission and dominance, appearing both fragile and powerful. Her transformation throughout the play mirrors the abjection of the female body in its most visceral form. She is not simply a passive victim of male gaze and control but becomes complicit in her own objectification. This complicates her role, as she engages in a sexualized power play that disturbs the men, and by extension, the audience's expectations of women in family roles. Ruth's shift from submissive wife to dominant force within the family unit upends traditional notions of gender and identity, blurring the boundaries between victim and victimizer.

By adopting a posture of both rejection and acceptance of her position, Ruth challenges the symbolic order of the family and society. Her refusal to conform to any established identity—wife, mother, object of desire— pushes her into the realm of the abject. Ruth, much like the space in which the characters exist, exists in a space that is both outside and within the familial structure, further intensifying the disintegration of traditional identity.

The Breakdown of Boundaries and the Abject Space

The setting of *The Homecoming* contributes significantly to the feeling of abjection. The play takes place in a claustrophobic, urban home in North London. The physical space of the home itself is rendered uncomfortable, with sparse furnishings, dim lighting, and an overall sense of decay. It serves as a reflection of the broken relationships within it. The lack of privacy, the absence of meaningful communication, and the constant presence of the family members create an environment where the boundaries between the individual and the collective, the self and the other, are constantly blurred. This dissolution of boundaries is a hallmark of abjection, as Kristeva posits that the abject exists in spaces where the "clean and proper" distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not become indistinct.

The home, once a place of sanctuary and stability, becomes a locus for psychological and physical chaos. The family members treat each other with indifference and cruelty, their interactions a series of manipulative power plays that underscore the disintegration of familial ties. The abject space of the home represents not just physical confinement but the emotional and psychological entrapment of the characters in a perpetual cycle of violence and retribution. The walls of the home offer no protection; they instead intensify the feeling of entrapment and disintegration.

CONCLUSION

In *The Homecoming*, Harold Pinter uses the concept of abjection to explore the complexities of power, identity, and human relationships within the family unit. The play's characters engage in brutal and often disorienting struggles for dominance, and their lack of clear identity and moral clarity creates a space in which the boundaries between self and other, victim and perpetrator, are continually blurred. Ruth's role as both subject and object of manipulation underscores the abjection of the female body and the instability of gender roles, while the claustrophobic, decaying setting further amplifies the breakdown of boundaries.

Ultimately, *The Homecoming* is a powerful meditation on the fragility of identity, the cruelty inherent in human relationships, and the unsettling forces of abjection that challenge the viewer's understanding of societal norms. Pinter's work reveals the ways in which power, manipulation, and the disintegration of identity lead to a collapse of order, creating a space where the abject becomes an unavoidable force.

REFERENCES

[1] Bataille, G. "Abjection and Miserable Forms." *More & Less 2*. Trans. Yvonne Shafir. Ed. Sylvere Lotringer. CA: Semiotext(e). 1993. Print.

[2] Berlant, L. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Duke UP, 1997.

[3] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993. Print.

[4] Cohen, W.A. "Introduction: Locating Filth", in W. Cohen and R. Johnson (eds), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and, Modern Life*, U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.

[5] Douglas, Mary. *Purity And Danger: An Analysis Of Concepts Of Pollution And Taboo*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. Print.

[6] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C.L. Markmann. Pluto, 2008. Print.

[7] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Léon S. Roudiez. Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

[8] Lotringer, S. "Les Miserables." *More and Less*. Eds. S. Lotringer & C. Kraus. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1999. Print.

[9] Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Print.

[10] Pinter, Harold. *The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber. 1999. Print.