

## LANGUAGE AND THE SHAPING OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE LOVER*

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**Abstract:** Dramatic languages have played an instrumental role in the construction of the twentieth century English women's identity. Playwrights have deployed languages that help create, define, redefine and conceal female characters' identities in their plays. Therefore, drawing on Luce Irigaray's feminist concepts of "Mimicry", this study examines Harold Pinter's *The Lover*. It argues that Pinter's *The Lover* depicts language as an inherently masculine means of expression which shapes and reflects the stereotypes against women. The paper first analyses male characters' discursive practice as the embodiment of the power dynamics and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Then, it sheds light on the way in which female characters have succeeded in challenging the dominant male's societal constructs and find agency and empowerment in their own self-expression.

**Key words:** gender, roles, identity, language, mimicry, power dynamics, stereotypes.

**Résumé :** Les langages dramatiques ont joué un rôle déterminant dans la construction de l'identité des femmes anglaises du vingtième siècle. Les dramaturges ont créé des langages qui aident à définir, redéfinir et dissimuler les identités des personnages féminins dans leurs pièces. Par conséquent, en s'appuyant sur le concept féministe de "mimétisme" de Luce Irigaray, cette étude examine *The Lover* d'Harold Pinter. Elle soutient que *The Lover* de Pinter dépeint le langage comme un moyen d'expression intrinsèquement masculin qui façonne et reflète les stéréotypes à l'encontre des femmes. L'article analyse d'abord la pratique discursive des personnages masculins comme l'incarnation de la dynamique du pouvoir et le renforcement des rôles traditionnels de genre. Il met ensuite en lumière la manière dont les personnages féminins ont réussi à remettre en question les constructions sociétales masculines dominantes et à trouver leur force et leur autonomie dans leur propre expression.

**Mots clés:** Dynamique du pouvoir, Identité, Langage, Mimétisme, Rôles genres, Stéréotypes.

## Introduction

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler argues that language not only reflects societal norms but also actively contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Language through its norms and structures shapes the way women are perceived and how they perceive themselves (J. Butler, 2004, p. 44-45). Also, in her vast critique of language systems, Luce Irigaray argues that systems of parole, discourse and logic rather than being universal and neutral are set up and maintained to serve male interests (Y. Russel, 2014, p.1). *The Lover* by Harold Pinter delves into these discourses. In the play, language serves as a tool for exploring and constructing women's identities, particularly in the context of power dynamics within marital relationships. Indeed, the play revolves around a married couple, Sarah and Richard, who engage in elaborate role-playing games, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. Through these games, they adopt various identities and discourses that challenge and redefine their understanding of each other and themselves. Richard, the male protagonist's manipulation of language gaslights Sarah and undermines her sense of self. Thus, the patriarchal construction of the female figure is observable through the using of derogatory words such as "whore" "little wifey" "mistress" by Richard to identify Sarah. In *The Lover*, Harold Pinter uses language as "a weapon with which each character tries to impose his/her rules on the other" (Almansi & Henderson, 1983, p. 61).

In a speech at National Student Drama Festival in 1962 in Bristol, Pinter himself states that the language used by his characters carries a strong and hidden meaning:

Language is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. Between my lack of biographical data about my characters and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which it is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said. (www.theguardian.com)

This quote reveals that the linguistic exchange between Sarah and Richard does not just reflect societal restrictions, misogyny and power dynamics as discussed by many Pinter critics. It also invites audiences to critically examine the ways in which language can be used to perpetuate and reinforce traditional gender roles and societal expectations of women.

Sarah accepts to combine the conventional roles of wife and whore which her husband had assigned to her. Thus, she developed a linguistic prowess which allows her to assert her dominance and establish her authority.

Scholar Mark Taylor- Batty in his article “Operating on Life, not in it: Gender and Relationships in Harold Pinter’s Plays” discussed the male/female relationship in *The Lover* and how this relationship enlightens the fact that woman can subvert the masculine gender representations and discourses which construct them:

Notably, Richard is the first of Pinter’s male dramatic characters to express some awareness and appreciation of female agency; the first, character that is, to demonstrate some consciousness of the discourses shaping gender roles and representation...More importantly, in the role of Sarah, Pinter wrote his first lead female role that could express sexual agency and reject the simplistic dichotomy between domesticity and sexuality that women characters in his earlier plays either adopt or contend with unsuccessfully (p. 345).

From this assertion, it is obvious that Richard did not succeed in undermining Sarah’s confidence and agency. The language she uses to respond to Richard, disrupts the conventional expectations of femininity. She explores different facets of her identity which is seen as a metaphor for the broader search for female identity beyond the domestic sphere.

Based on Luce Irigaray’s feminist concepts of “Mimicry” this study intends to show how Pinter’s *The Lover* depicts language as an inherently masculine means of expression which shapes, reflects and perpetuates the stereotypes against women. The paper first analyses male characters’ discursive practice as the embodiment of the power dynamics and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Then, it sheds light on the way in which female characters have succeeded in challenging the dominant male’s societal constructs and find agency and empowerment in their own self-expression.

### **1. Language and the Construction of Woman Identity**

*The Lover* features a married couple who engage in elaborate role-playing, with each partner taking on the persona of the other’s lover. This setup immediately invites a consideration of how language and role-play relate gender constructs. The wife, Sarah, particularly embodies Irigaray’s mimicry by performing both the roles of the ‘wife’ and ‘the lover’, which can be seen as a mimicry of societal expectations of what a woman should be in both a respectable and sexual sense. She apparently represents what Marc Silverstein calls “the patriarchal construction of classic female figure”. The stage direction at the beginning of the play indicates that she is in the household, performing the traditional wifely role. Her husband Richard enters and kisses her “on the cheek”, a gesture synonym of conventional domestic bliss.

*SARAH is emptying and dusting ashtrays in the living-room. It is morning. She wears a crisp demure dress.*

*RICHARD comes into the bedroom from bathroom, off left, collects his briefcase from hall cupboard, goes to SARAH and kisses her on the cheek. (H. Pinter, 1996, p. 141)*

But when Richard asks his wife Sarah with an amusing tone: “*is your lover coming today?*” (p. 151), it is immediately obvious that this married couple is not a conventional one. In *Pinter the Playwright*, Martin Esslin analyses Pinter’s dramatic writing style in these terms:

The ambivalence of our social selves, the coexistence in all of us of primeval, amoral, instinct-dominated sensual being on one hand, and the tamed, regulated social conformist on the other, is one of the dominant themes of Pinter’s writing... (E. Martin, 1992, p. 140)

*The Lover* is a play which corresponds to such analysis because Richard and Sarah possess instincts which underlie their struggle for identity. It also suggests that some of these instincts within men differ from those within women, and that the social convention of marriage cannot control such instincts, which manifest themselves in struggle for power. The play depicts an ironic representation of love that is conventionally established as the desired goal in a conjugal relationship for bringing the marital equilibrium and social stability. It is inclined not only to oppose the traditional dichotomy of love and sex in which one is respectable and the other illegitimate and therefore unacceptable. It also tries to dismantle the boundary between the civilized role-playing and the immediate gratification of savage desires. Thus, Sarah and Richard are part of a larger mechanism in which they are subjected to involve themselves in their fragmented multiple roles to the endless process of struggle for power (M. Dutta, 2014, p. 223-232)

Sarah is a housewife lacking a professional career but within her home she embodies the double role of housewife and mistress. Her affair with her husband Richard, re-branded ‘Max’ under the pretence that he is a different man, is achieved through the changing of clothing which comes to represent the various identities of Richard. Thus, we have Richard the husband and Max the lover, and Sarah the wife and Sarah the “whore.” Richard is differentiated from Max by wearing a “suede jacket and no tie,” as opposed to a “sober suit”. Similarly, Sarah demarcates between herself with Richard and herself with Max by changing from a “crisp, demure dress,” with “low-heeled shoes” to a “very tight, low-cut black dress” with “high-heeled shoes,” (p. 62); the wry implication being that men in suits don’t have

affairs and women in low-heeled shoes aren't whores. As such, the metaphor of clothing is far more pervasive since it shapes and shifts identity. On the occasion that Sarah forgets to change her shoes to the appropriate pair for her role, Richard corrects her since these clothes do not fit the identity required for her role as a "whore". Sarah and Richard who change their identity through their role-playing game justify Judith Butler analysis on gender identity. Indeed, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and later in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), philosopher Judith Butler argues that identity is not a biological phenomenon but is produced through "discourses." Identity is thus "performative" in that "it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (J. Butler, 1990, p. 185). As a consequence, identity is constructed and defined by the cultural context in which one lives, a context which fixes the individual's social identity depending on predefined sociohistorical criteria. Sarah's role as a wife and her role as a whore embody, both, the different stereotypes men have imposed upon women in the patriarchal system.

Max is careful to address Sarah as a whore since he "hasn't got a mistress," but rather is "well-acquainted with a whore" (p. 63). This is not simply semantics but rather crucial to the forging of Sarah's identity for the purpose of the role which Richard desires. Richard's control of Sarah's clothing is therefore indicative of his control of the facets of her identity as a woman (N. Garner, 2012, p 2). Luce Irigaray gives us telling arguments when she argues that "woman doesn't exist. She adopts the disguise that is told to put on her. She acts out the role that is imposed on her." (L. Irigaray, 1985, p. 150)

Max's decision to identify Sarah as a "whore," and not as a mistress testifies both to the tawdriness of the role-play and his desire to use her as a commodity. However, the shift is not psychological, but ontological, since the label "whore" changes Sarah's essential identity (N. Garner, 2012, p 3). In *Women on the Market*, an excerpt from *This Sex which is not one*, Luce Irigaray explains the commodification of women by men using Levi Strauss theory of the incest taboo and Karl Marx analysis of the Capitalist system. She suggests that our own culture is based upon the exchange of women, since the passage into the order, both, social and symbolic "is assured by the fact that men or groups of men circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo" (L. Irigaray, 1985, p. 170). In this way, men, by assuming the work force, establish themselves as subjects, and make women objects-gifts, as Lévi Strauss saw in his study about the kinship system subjected to circulation. She points out that patriarchal societies have something in common with

capitalism that is “the submission of ‘nature’ as use value and exchange value. There is, thus, a fetishist character that naturalises the subordination of women because of the need to control the sexuality of women to reproduce this system of domination and difference” (L.Irigaray, 1985, p. 171). In that way, woman appears as an abstraction and her real price comes from “that of being a product of man’s labor” (L.Irigaray, 1985, p. 171). This is the real value of women on the market; “as commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value”. (L.Irigaray, 1985, p. 172)

In the play, the terms of the affair are stated by Richard using legalistic, official jargon, in order to clarify the “function of a lover,” which is for him to “express and engender lust with all lust’s cunning,” as the “proper and consistent obligation of the “job” (p. 66). As such, both Sarah’s role and her identity that is consistent with this occupation is contracted and controlled.

The lovers’ language shifts according to the roles they are playing. When Sarah is the wife, her language is formal and somewhat detached; as the mistress, it becomes more seductive and free. This shift not only marks a change in identity but also illustrates how language can be manipulated to suit different personae.

## **2. Language and the Subversion of Patriarchal Norms**

The fluidity with which Sarah and her husband Richard switch between their roles as husband, wife, and lovers destabilises fixed gender identities and challenges the patriarchal norms that define what is acceptable behaviour for men and women in marital relationship. This is reflective of Irigaray’s argument that mimicry can be a strategy to destabilise the ‘phallogocentric’ discourse that often limits female roles to binary oppositions. Indeed, Irigaray’s idea of mimicry involves women mimicking or imitating the roles and language imposed on them by patriarchal society, but doing so in a way that highlights the constructed nature of these roles and subverts them from within.

Like Luce Irigaray with her concept of mimicry, Judith Butler, with her concept of gender trouble calls on individuals to “trouble” the long-standing, stifling definitions of identities which trap them into specific categories. This is what Sarah did. She rejects the postulate of stable self. Indeed, she is content with the complex relationship she and Richard have established, but Richard invariably becomes dissatisfied, and his increasingly aggression reflects his suppressed desire to put himself always in the advantageous position in a

patriarchal structure to exercise power and authority (M. Dutta, 2014, p 223-232). Richard's following questions are indicative of his unexplored motives though apparently pretending his queries as mere outcome of 'objective curiosity' that masks a profound anxiety:

Richard: Does it ever occur to you that while you are spending the afternoon being unfaithful to me I'm sitting at desk going through balance sheets and graphs?

Sarah: What a funny question.

Richard: No, I'm curious. (153)

After Sarah's cold reply that it makes "more piquant" Richard appears to be more confident when he comes to know that her husband is not completely forgotten when she is with her lover. But a few moments later she claims repeatedly, "But it's you I love" (p. 154). It seems apparently that she intends to pacify the unrestrained curiosity of Richard but the repetition implies a demarcating line between husband and lover she is trying to draw ironically as a distinction between love and lust (M. Dutta, 2014, p 223-232).

As scholar Mithun Dutta mentioned in his article "Love, Power and Paradox in Pinter's play *The Lover*," Richard's vision of women's role, his reactions and motives in relation to his behaviour in the roles of both, husband and lover are very important to analyse. Indeed, he carries with him the idea, like many other male characters in Pinter's plays, that women play a dual role, split between wife and whore, between respectable and illicit, between wifely and sexual, that gives him comfort and simultaneously frustrates him and makes him jealous. And a few minutes later when Sarah informs him that she is aware of his mistress with whom he keeps an extramarital relationship for which initially she pretends to remain unaffected but then she cannot restrain herself from charging him "I'm honest with you, aren't I? Why can't you be honest with me?" (p. 155). But without giving a reply to her accusation Richard plays a trick by analysing the difference between mistress and whore with his renewed hostility:

Richard: . . . I'm well acquainted with a whore, but I haven't got a mistress. There's a world of difference.

Sarah: A whore?

Richard: Yes. Just a common or garden slut. Not worth talking about. Handy between trains, nothing more . . . You can't sensibly inquire whether a whore is witty. It's of no significance whether she is or she isn't. She is simply a whore, a functionary who either pleases or displeases (p. 156).

By treating the woman as an object, Richard is trying to assert his own power over the woman he sees and also to prove his superiority in the battle of sexes for domination. His



effort to distance himself from the emotional connection with Sarah is more explicit when he pretends to be more emotionally detached with her:

*Sarah:* I must say your attitude to women rather alarming.

Richard: Why? I wasn't looking for your double, was I? I wasn't looking for a woman I could respect, as you, whom I could admire and love, as I do you. Was I? All I wanted was . . . Someone who could express and engender lust with all lust's cunning. Nothing more. (p. 157)

This crucial remark by Richard depicts his desire for dominance and also his failure to achieve it. It reveals on the one hand his ability to engage in sex without any emotional attachment and at the same time it unveils his obligation to explain to his wife whatever he has done it seeks her approval. The explanation including the phrase "express and engender" that he dominantly utters is subversively showing his lack of control, a sign of his weakness (M. Dutta, 2014, pp 223-232).

However, Sarah's responses to his relentless inquiries about her lover are very consistent as she teasingly admires the virtues of her lover "He's very adaptable", "He's terribly sweet" and "his whole body emanates love" (p. 160). Her comments about the lover may appear harsh as she makes a confession that with her lover she enjoys also an emotional attachment that Richard is unable to offer. When Richard denies any kind of jealousy Sarah concludes in complete reassurance "Because I think things are beautifully balanced Richard" (p. 161). Here, there is an irony which lies in the fact that Sarah convinces herself that everything is balanced and in control, however the desired harmony cannot be achieved through their continuous struggle for power that engenders inevitable tension and lack of fixity in their role-playing (M. Dutta, 2014, pp 223-232).

In the ongoing struggle for power both of them are playing a dual role, but Richard faces inevitable frustration to play the two distinct roles as the husband and the lover while Sarah holds the capacity to always play for herself. He therefore envies his wife and declares "I came to a decision... That it has to stop... Your debauchery. Your life of depravity. Your path of illegitimate lust" (p. 177). He orders "From today I forbid you to entertain your lover on these premises. This applies to any time of the day. Is that understood? (p. 177). Sarah attempts to sustain her adulterous relationship complaining "I didn't take my lover ten years ago. Not quite. Not in the honeymoon." (p. 178) But Richard becomes more obdurate and warns her that the entry of her lover is barred and if he ever finds the lover in his premises he will "kick his teeth out". And Sarah now teases him "What about your bloody whore?" (p.



179). He claims that he has paid the whore off because she is too bony. When he pokes her about the “illicit afternoons” she will not allow him to be dominant over her, so she strongly resists “You stupid...! Do you think he’s the only one who comes! Do you think he’s the only one I entertain?... I’ve other visitors, all the time. When neither of you know, neither of you. I give them strawberries in season. With cream. Strangers, total strangers . . . They come to see hollyhocks. And then they stay for tea. Always. Always” (p. 181).

The reference to cream recalls the scene with the milkman and the hollyhocks evokes Richard’s questions at the very beginning of the play. While Richard tries to secure his authority and identity by arousing in her a variety of sexual adventures, Sarah combats him with her own facts and narration to create an irrefutable fantasy that gives a vehicle to achieve an authority of her own.

As Sarah becomes aggressive, he endorses her story and then tapping the drum he moves towards her to make her realize “You can’t get out, you are tapped” (p. 183). She giggles and makes an attempt to get out of her confinement that she has gained in both of her roles: “what will my husband say? He expects me. He’s waiting. I can’t get out. I am trapped. You have no right to treat a married woman like this. Have you? Think, think, and think of what are you doing (p. 183). But the very next moment she tries to defend her husband “But my husband will understand. My husband does understand. Come here. Come down here. I’ll explain” (p. 183). She declares that it is the “whispering time” and she will whisper to him. It is vague whether with whom she is talking – Max, Richard or another new person that she earlier claimed having visitors. She asks him: You look different...You usually wear something else, don’t you? Take off your jacket. Mmmnn? Would you like me to change? Would you like me to change my clothes? I’ll change for you, darling. Shall I? (p. 184) When she voluntarily wishes to change her clothes Richard repeatedly entices her to change – to change her clothes and finally concludes the play by addressing her “You lovely whore.” It suggests that the game resumes again, it never ends.

Thus, the end of the play shows Sarah as the winner of the role-playing game. She finally traps her husband and seduces him to merge into his split personalities. Her needs prove stronger and dominate as the play ends. By undermining the misogynistic patriarchal construction of conjugal relationship in which the woman deliberately plays the archetypal roles of both wife and whore, at her husband’s behest, Sarah’s attitude parallels the concept of subversive mimicry proposed by Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is not One*. She puts that

“One must assume the feminine role deliberately to invert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin toward it. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse” (L.Irigaray, 1985, p. 68). Irigaray refused to consider power as anything but a male obsession, something women are against. Women should resist hierarchy and orthodoxy and recognize a multiplicity of strategies. The female strategy *par excellence* is to appropriate the role given to her by the male and to make the role her own. This appropriation is what she meant by mimicry. To mimic as a writer is to mimic the male fears of the uncontrollable fluidity that is the female. Irigaray attempted to theorize female specificity as a radical difference, which could be a serious threat to the hegemony male sex.

Sarah’s assumption of power through manipulation of masculine desire in complex role-plays, allows her to conceal or to control all emotion. Her ability to play easily and separately the roles Richard imposed upon her allowed her to ‘trouble’ the social conventions women faced in marriage. She may be a housewife and she may even be bored, but she is not victim of her surroundings and is fully capable of adjusting her situation to fit her needs. Through her dialogue and role-play, she manipulates linguistic structures to carve out a space for her own identity and desires within the confines of a patriarchal marriage.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study has been to show language as a tool in the hand of men to objectify women. It has been shown that Richard’s language often objectifies Sarah, reducing her to mere physical attributes or objects of desire. Such objectification perpetuates the notion that women exist primarily for the gratification of men and reinforces harmful stereotypes about femininity. Through the intricate interplay of roles, language, and power dynamics, *The Lover* offers a nuanced examination of how societal expectations shape and constrain gender identities within the private sphere of marriage. Sarah’s embodiment of Irigaray’s mimicry serves as a subversive force, challenging traditional gender norms by both conforming to and undermining them simultaneously.

By engaging role-play and manipulating language, Sarah and her husband expose the constructed nature of gender roles and the performative aspects of identity within patriarchal structures. This subversion of norms not only highlights the fluidity and complexity of

gendered experiences but also empowers Sarah to assert agency and desire within her marital relationship.

Through the lens of Luce Irigaray's mimicry, *The Lover* invites us to reconsider the ways in which language shapes our understanding of gender and to recognise the potential for resistance and transformation within linguistic and social structures. By embracing mimicry as a strategy of empowerment, the play challenge us to imagine new possibilities for women's agency and self-expression, both on stage and in the world beyond.

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