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## THE “WOMAN QUESTION” AND WESTERN NEO-IMPERIALISM IN HAROLD PINTER’S *THE NEW WORLD ORDER*

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***Abstract:** Pinter’s short dramatic piece questions the women’s rights discourse that USA-led Western hegemonic powers rely heavily upon when justifying their incursions into the territories of the Global South. The play blasts this posture apart by pointing to the patriarchal paradigm and gendered hierarchies that inform the structuration of Western capitalist societies and which neo-imperial Western powers in their search for bigger profits and new markets inevitably transplant into annexed territories under their direct or indirect control.*

***Key words:** neo-imperialism, Harold Pinter, postcolonial feminism, women workers, The New World Order, the woman question.*

### Introduction

In Pinter’s socially engaged oeuvre, *The New World Order* stands out as a play that has been given scant attention. This may be due to the shortness of the dramatic text and its tight-knit dialogue whose precisely

delivered points also require a systematic understanding of the much broader socio-economic context that the title of the play itself alludes to. In this respect, it is significant that *The New World Order* was first staged in 1991 as an introductory piece to *Death and the Maiden* (Billington 2007:558) by the Chilean activist Ariel Dorfman, which deals with a woman searching for her former torturer in post-Pinochet Chile. Pinter's sketch, however, focuses on the Pinochet military regime itself, installed and supported by the US (Livingstone 2009:55). Typically for Pinter, this political play functions as a critique of Western neo-imperial policies accompanied by structural violence, which the West mystifies as a way of exporting democracy and human rights to the territories under its direct or indirect sphere of influence (Chomsky 2003).

It is therefore not a coincidence that the play's single act takes place in a torture chamber dominated by two interrogators with English names. The two torturers constantly boast that the blindfolded prisoner "hasn't got any idea at all about any one of the number of things that we ["are about to do"] to him" (Pinter 2005:271, 272). One of the torturers declares the victim to be "some kind of peasant – or a lecturer in theology" (273), while the other provides a corrective by merging the two labels into a single one. He reveals the victim's true political identity by proclaiming him "a lecturer in peasant theology" (273). In the neo-colonial context, *theology* refers to the gospel of social justice spread by those who have been dispossessed and impoverished by privatisation schemes designed to benefit the new-old imperial centres and pushed through by the IMF and World Bank in co-operation with local elites. The *peasant* in "peasant theology" thus invokes and makes visible the otherwise spectral existence of the dispossessed Latin American subsistence farmers, and by extension the rest of the ordinary

citizens (Burcar 2012:31). They have been affected by NAFTA and further impoverished either through the destruction of social welfare and locally oriented industry, or, as is the case with local subsistence farmers, by being turned off their land so that vast areas could be made available at rock-bottom prices to export-oriented agribusinesses or extraction industries, controlled by or at least affiliated to American corporations (Veltmeyer 2005:295-302). It is this kind of resistance movement that the two torturers refer to derisively as “peasant theology”. They openly boast that the torturing of local activists makes them “feel so pure” (Pinter 2005: 277), for they believe it is their sacred duty to suppress the dangerous gospel of social justice in order to, as they proudly proclaim, “keep the world clean for [the spread of Western] democracy” (277). Far from being just an enclosed box, the torture room is also a symbolic stand-in for any country or area of strategic interest to US-led Western neo-imperial forces, while, when taken literally, it takes us back to Latin America and specifically to Chile, which served as a blueprint for the implementation of neoliberal policies after the US-sponsored coup in the early 1970s.

In mainstream Western drama, little attention has been paid to the way devastating neo-colonial processes of globalisation affect women, especially women in the Global South. Pinter’s *The NWO* breaks out of this mould in the section of the play that for a brief moment also references women. At first sight, this reference appears to be a mere aside or a diversion from the torturers’ focus on the male victim. Yet, if one follows the undertones of the Pinteresque exchange between the two torturers closely, one is eerily reminded of systemic violence visited upon men and women alike in what is the latest phase of American-led Western market expansionism. The play shatters the invisibility surrounding the exploitation

of and gendered discrimination against women in the Global South visited upon them by the agents of Western occupying powers. In doing so, it puts the narrowly conceived Western discourse of women's rights as human rights under question, exposing this export-item of Western democracies as a cliché, behind which lurk much more ominous agendas actively pursued and implemented by Western corporate interests.

**Undoing the Neo-colonial Discourse of Women's Rights:  
"Women have no [political] inclinations"**

To justify their exploitation and systemic mistreatment of neo-colonial subjects, Western imperial powers continuously usurp human rights discourse to produce official narratives about themselves as harbingers of progress and defenders of women's rights. In this way, they put themselves in a position of fabricated superiority while depicting everybody else as an aberration from this norm (Brittain 2008:73). Today racialised othering no longer relies on imploded and discredited scientific racism. In the Western imaginary, the destiny of other peoples is no longer interpreted as determined by their genes but instead by the supposedly all-encompassing and restrictive traditions and habits of their culture. The focus, in other words, has shifted from a biological racism to a cultural one in which the "dominant theme is [no longer the myth of] biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences" (Balibar 1991:21). Former biological constructs of difference and otherness have now morphed into those of cultural stereotypes (21-22), with members of other societies being universally constructed as helpless prisoners of their supposedly tradition-bound and all-determining culture. By contrast, the Western subject is construed as free from the restrictions and constraints of their own culture:

s/he is constructed as somebody who simply chooses what to think and how to behave, and by this analogy as someone whom their own restrictive culture supposedly neither defines nor regulates. In this way, as pointed out by Brown, the very “powers that produce and reproduce subject’s relations and practices, beliefs and rationalities” in the West are disavowed and removed from view (2006:22), while the term ‘culture’ emerges as a selective and pejorative racialised marker, defining only non-western peoples (Bannerji 2000:78).

The construction of the Western subject as an autonomous and self-made individual is also instrumental in promoting the misconception that patriarchy, its norms and gender subordination are inherent only to other cultures (Burcar 2013:119). This leads to the construction of a homogenised image of all non-western women as victims and prisoners of their oppressive patriarchal cultures, and to the construction of the myth of Western women as “secular, liberated and having control over their own lives” (Mohanty 1988:81; Burcar 2013:119). This is a widely circulated rhetoric which also plays a pivotal role in portraying contemporary liberal empires as the seat of modernity and progress and as a benevolent source of power regarding the treatment of women. Pinter’s play undermines this self-projected image of Western occupying powers as defenders of human rights and champions of women’s emancipation. In the following menacing exchange between the two torturers but directed against the blindfolded victim the mask of imperial benevolence towards women starts to slip:

DES: “Let’s put it this way. He has *little* idea of what we might do to him, of what in fact we are about to do to him.”

LIONEL: “Or his wife. Don’t forget his wife. He has little idea of what we are about to do to his wife.” (Pinter 2005:272-273).

The point of this exchange is to alert the audience to the real situation women and men experience under direct or indirect Western-led military or economic occupation. In this way, the play helps to implode the Western myth of benevolent neo-imperialism, which is itself based on the perpetuation of gendered hierarchies, despite its claims to the contrary. As noted by postcolonial feminist critics, the representation of women in the Global South as victims in need of rescue from their local patriarchal cultures or even states by supposedly benevolent Western hegemonic powers is always “deployed politically”: first, its main purpose is to divert attention from the US’s financial and military destabilisation agendas pursued in the countries of the Global South, which in fact also give rise to or exacerbate oppressive conditions for local women,<sup>1</sup> and secondly, to obscure and elide the patriarchal histories and asymmetrical power relations affecting women in the Western states themselves (Chowdhury 2009:52-53; Chew 2008:82-83). The construct of a free western woman rests on the ascription of patriarchal cultural constraints exclusively onto the “Other” racialised woman, which in turn serves to mask the existence of patriarchy and processes of gender subordination in Western capitalist states (Volpp 2001:1207). These are then the very same patriarchal patterns of gendered subordination that Western imperial forces also end up exporting to the countries under their direct/indirect economic and military rule.

Pinter’s play does not fall short of these insights. The rest of the exchange between the two torturers encapsulates their attitudes toward women, making visible the actual mind-set and mechanisms of gendered

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<sup>1</sup> The case in point is Iraq and Afghanistan, where women's rights and their overall situation rapidly deteriorated immediately upon the American intervention. For a more detailed analysis, see for example *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism* (ed. Riley *et. al.*, 2008).

othering that inform the way women are positioned and treated in the West. In the infamous exchange, the two torturers put their cards on the table when one of them proclaims the blindfolded prisoner to be “a lecturer in ... peasant theology” and the other wonders about the identity of “his wife”, with the first one then replying adamantly: “Women don’t have theological inclinations” (273). If in the eyes of the Western torturers the man is considered dangerous precisely because of his political engagement, the woman is dismissed as inherently apolitical, that is, as incapable of being engaged in political thinking or action at all. She is presumed to be and automatically fixed as a vacuous entity, as somebody not endowed with enough reason to be able to conduct a meaningful analysis of their own, and as such as somebody incapable of holding any kind of political stance at all. The implication is that the woman does not belong to the public sphere. This tallies with the Western construct of citizenship and the gendered public-private divide of Western capitalist societies in which “the historically established dominance of men in the public sphere and the restriction of women’s identity, roles and prime social influence to the private sphere are fundamental to the construction of gendered identities and the perpetuation of unequal power relations” (Youngs 2005:47). This kind of social positioning has proceeded on the basis of constructs of masculinity and femininity, which constitute the very essence of the patriarchal paradigm, and on the basis of which woman is construed as a lack and negativity to be assigned a secondary status and banished to the private sphere (Lister 1997:68-71). The dialogue between the two torturers in which the reference to women at first sight seems to function merely as an aside or a slip of the tongue thus carries much deeper connotations, revealing what the West wants to conceal but which resurfaces as its constitutive *unheimlich* time

and time again. This is the fact that the West itself is deeply mired in a patriarchal paradigm of its own.

In the West, this patriarchal paradigm exists in synergy with the capitalist system. It was the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century that reinvented and consolidated patriarchy to its own advantage by “putting in place new patriarchal structures and ideologies” (Mies 1998:ix). To this day, these include the institution of the patriarchal nuclear family, the breadwinner model and the doctrine of two separate spheres, the so-called private and public domains. The relegation of women to the private sphere and their different forms and degrees of compulsory domestication in the West today are directly related to the individualisation and privatisation of the costs of social reproduction. Since the emergence of capitalist patriarchy, this system has continuously “constructed women’s labor through ideologies of femininity as [...] supplementary, pliant and patient” (Pettman 2003:159) and as devalorised semi-skilled or unskilled work that can automatically be paid less on the one hand, and on the other as centred primarily around unpaid and institutionally mostly unsupported reproductive work to be conducted mainly in the isolation of one’s home. By downloading these key expenses onto individual households, and primarily onto women in the form of their assigned free labour, capital owners shed the huge financial costs otherwise associated with the reproduction and maintenance of their current and future labour force, which in turn increases their share of appropriated wealth. This in turn translates not only into unpaid or semi-paid maternity leave for women workers, which means that new mothers are financially dependent on their partners or parents, but also into a patchy, limited or non-existent public childcare infrastructure. As a result, women in the West (unlike their former counterparts in the once-



socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc) have been forced to either exit the labour market for good or re-enter it after the birth of a child under conditions of feminine flexibilisation. That is why since WWII the breadwinner model in the West has been updated to the so-called one-and-a-half model, with women being re-admitted into the labour market as a reserve labour force to be concentrated in part-time or temporary jobs that offer little or no social benefits, pay increases or career advancement. As a result, women in Western capitalist patriarchies are constructed as merely secondary earners (regardless of their marital status or their actual earning needs) and as disposable workers, which makes them economically and emotionally dependent on their partners.

**Off-shoring and assembly-line work: “Don’t forget his wife. He has little idea of what we’re about to do to his wife”**

Western-based corporations apply this very same pattern of capitalist-patriarchal super-exploitation and deliberate devaluation of women’s work in the countries of the Global South, to which they outsource costly labour-intensive production. The threat uttered by one of the torturers and directed against the imprisoned local activist serves as a reminder of this situation: “Don’t forget his wife. He has little idea of what we are about to do to his wife” (2005:273). In a masterful Pinteresque stroke of minimal but concisely structured dialogue, this menacing statement also betrays the true nature of Western-led occupation and its aims. What the imperial masters will do to women in neo-colonised peripheries is directly related to the systemic recruitment of young women as a cheapened, unprotected and disposable labour force to be placed behind the conveyor belts of export

factories, owned or indirectly controlled by American-based corporations or their affiliated subcontractors.

Most of these export-oriented industrial firms are so-called *maquiladoras*. At these foreign-owned or -controlled facilities, women workers are constructed both as “temporary and ancillary workers for distant markets” (Wichterich 2002:20) and as “bearers of inferior labour” (Young, quoted in Hussain and Dutta 2014:25). Their work is deliberately deskilled and devalued so that they can be paid even less than “starvation wages” (Wichterich 2002:2). Western managers and corporate CEOs treat women workers as an endlessly available “natural resource” (1) to be extracted from the peripheral countries and to be made as much use of in as short a period as possible before being swiftly disposed of. In these Western-controlled and labour-intensive export factories women are recruited at the age of 17 or below and usually dismissed before the age of 30 (Nyre 2013:219). Women constitute between 70-90% of the export-factory workforce (Peterson 2003:75) and carry out most labour-intensive parts of the production process yet they receive wages which are at least “20-30% lower than that of their male counterparts” (Hussain and Dutta 2014:26). The argument used by Western CEOs is that women are only secondary earners with supposedly no specific needs of their own and people who according to this twisted logic do not need to be remunerated for their work to the extent that men are. The sinister threat uttered by the two torturers “[h]e has little idea of what we’re about to do to his wife” is thus also a reminder of the working and living conditions to be imposed on women workers and their overall treatment by the incoming new masters.

The torturing ordeal that the two English-named torturers clearly evoke is part and parcel of a well-orchestrated design that women in the

Global South inevitably come to face under the encroachment of Western corporate interests. In a tightly controlled environment of export factories, women workers face uninterrupted six- or seven-day working weeks and are required to put in an average of at least 12 hours per day, in most cases without periodic toilet breaks. The meagre wages are deliberately set below the minimum living wage threshold, which acts as a calculated incentive for workers to opt to work extra hours, on the face of it from their own volition (Nyre 2013). However, in most cases overtime is compulsory, depending on incoming orders, and not necessarily paid at all, or only half-paid. Very few social benefits (such as work-related injury and disability benefits, paid holiday or sick leave, or a pension scheme) are attached (Hussain and Dutta 2014:225). The end result is women's structurally entrenched poverty and a high dropout rate due to burnout and rapidly developing health problems. As noted by field activists, women workers "suffer from eye complaints, headaches and a general debility as dust in the air and chemicals in the materials severely damage their health. Bladder problems result from too few toilets, and from the rule that the workers should not 'disappear' [to toilets] too often" (Wichterich 2002:8). As a result of overwork and utter exhaustion, women are spent before they reach their prime. Corporate entities have it calculated that their women workers in Asia can "no longer be 'effectively used' [due to their impaired "capacity to coordinate their eyes and hands"] after just five years" of an intense, slave-like working regime, while women workers in "Central America last an average of seven years in the maquila factories ... and bear twice as many underweight children and three times as many with deformities" (Wichterich 2002:27). Women are also subjected to regular pregnancy tests (or at least upon their first recruitment), in some places they have to produce sanitary napkins on a

monthly basis at their supervisor's demand to prove their menstrual cycle has not been interrupted by pregnancy, and sometimes they are also obliged to report on their partnership status and birth control methods (21). If a woman becomes pregnant, she is very likely to be fired before her first child is born. In this way factory owners avoid providing paid maternity leave for women in regions and states where such a right is formally guaranteed, and in areas where no such provisions exist, they still fire the mother-to-be in order to avoid paying full or semi-coverage for periods of sick leave involving child care.

When one of the torturers in the play threatens the blindfolded victim and boasts in front of the other one that the victim "has little idea of what we're about to do to his wife", this statement reverberates with multiple and ominous undertones that both encompass and at the same time extend beyond those of sexual harassment. Pinter's carefully structured dialogue serves as an explosive reminder of, if not an eye-opener to, women's systemic structural exploitation in the South by Western corporations (their CEOs, directors and shop floor managers) or their henchmen, a situation among whose many elements sexual harassment is but one aspect of a bigger picture. It warns the audience that the fate of local women will be determined by capitalist industrial patriarchy imported from the West and imposed upon them under the misleading banner of women's liberation, which in fact stands for their modern-day enslavement.

**Nimble fingers and Trade Unions: "[women have no] aspirations"**

Western-based corporations naturalise and gloss over their systemic exploitation and calculated devaluation of women workers in the Global

South by falling back on gender stereotypes. In this regard, another exchange of views between the two torturers on the “woman question” is revealing. In response to the first torturer’s adamant declaration that “women don’t have theological [political] inclinations”, the other one seems to hesitantly offer some opposition only to capitulate to the idea that women, in addition to having no political inclinations, also harbour no “theological aspirations” (Pinter 2005:272). As we have shown, theological in this context stands for political and by extension for what is socially just. That is why the shift in this Pinteresque dialogue from the discussion of women’s *political inclinations* to their *aspirations* is of major significance. It moves the discourse to another related conceptual plane concerning the positioning of women in Western capitalist patriarchies. If an imagined lack of political inclinations ascribed to women by the two English torturers and the masculine-centred society they represent implies a lack of rational and active mind projected onto women, the lack of political aspirations ascribed to them implies a lack of vision and personal drive for a better world, thereby also connoting a lack of determination and willingness to fight for the improvement of one’s situation. In short, the imputed lack of political aspirations implies a docile and complacent individual with hardly any interest in putting up a fight against the systemic injustices of this world.

This too is a patriarchal mantra put into circulation by multinational corporations and their CEOs/PR agencies operating in the Global South. Corporations rely heavily on Western constructs of femininity, which they perpetuate and entrench to justify and naturalise their exploitation of women workers. In this vein, they claim that women are by their feminine nature nimble-fingered and dextrous, diligent and patient, complacent and docile workers who readily accept low wages and who constitute trouble-free

employees with no aspirations or pretensions towards trade union organising (Husain and Dutta 2014:25). In the eyes of Western CEOs, all of these characteristics are supposedly only different facets of an inborn passive and placid feminine nature that makes women not only easily controllable but also “ideally suited” for monotonous, arduous and underpaid work on the assembly lines in export-oriented plants (Mills 2005:117).

Yet women’s submissiveness and docility, as labour activists and analysts point out, are not their inherent personal traits. The docility and complacency that women are required to exhibit on shop floors do “not mean that women [willingly] accept the miserable working conditions” and starvation wages (Wichterich 2002:26). Rather than being a reflection of an innate passivity supposedly inherent to women, as touted by Western CEOs, these behavioural characteristics derive from structural coercion and intimidation. Women’s docility and perseverance stem from the vulnerable and precarious position assigned to them in the labour market and are due to the tactics used by their employers to keep women workers under control. As a result of being assigned the status of a secondary earner (even though most of these women have at least one dependant person to support, such as a child or parents and siblings back in the countryside), women are given a much smaller income than men, which in turn makes them more dependent and less mobile than their male colleagues. It is impossible for them to leave their employer and go in search of a slightly better, even though still exploitative working environment, because they have no savings to tide them over during their search for a new job and because the employers deliberately keep them chained to them through the system of deferred monthly payments or accommodation debts (Hossain *et al.* 2013:204). In addition, by constructing and treating women workers as a reserve pool

despite the fact that they actually constitute core workforce, employers can keep women workers employed on temporary or part-time contracts, making it easier for them to fire them overnight and without severance pay. This only increases women's greater insecurity, which is much more pervasive than the kind men workers face. As pointed out by women themselves, they know very well that with nowhere else to go a woman worker in the assembly-line industry of export-oriented countries has "no way but to be docile and submissive, because if I make any protest, I will certainly lose my job – and starve!" (203).

Women's imagined lack of aspirations and self-assertiveness, as advanced by the two torturers in *The NWO*, are deliberate constructs that help to avert the gaze from the perpetrator to the victim, as though the predicament she faces is entirely of her own making with her imaginary feminine nature to blame for it. The real inability of women (and men alike) to organise is not a matter of their lack of aspirations and the result of their (assigned) feminine nature but the result of carefully deployed measures and changing tactics undertaken on the part of corporate interests. All of this leads to the setting-up of structural barriers that are almost impossible to overcome. A widely accepted belief that women are naturally accepting, placid and timid workers, incapable of organising let alone conducting a successful strike, is the result of heavily gendered PR propaganda campaigns. The point of these campaigns is both to naturalise systematic exploitation of women workers in the Global South and to prevent the rest of us from directly engaging with these women themselves. That would require the women of the Global South to be pulled out of obscurity and given a voice, which in turn would help to reveal a different and bitter kind

of truth that the masculine-centred Western corporate world does not want us to see, let alone reflect upon.

The climax of the exchange between the two torturers on the woman issue could therefore not be more revealing of this situation. When one of the two torturers does not immediately uphold the other's idea that women have no political aspirations, he mentions discussing the "woman issue" with his mother. But the actual content of that conversation with his mother and the conclusions reached are in reality shown to be of no importance to the two torturers. When asked what his mother said, the reply given by the torturer is not forthcoming and turns out to be just as dismissive as the attitude already displayed by his accomplice in crime. The second torturer cannot in the end remember anything his mother had to say and he does not really care, because to the two of them – just as to the broader structural forces they symbolically represent – what women have to say must remain unimportant. The second torturer suppresses any reference to this conversation with his mother and its content by replying "I can't remember", immediately turning his attention instead to "the man in the chair" (274). The point is precisely to dismiss and remain ignorant of what real women have to say on the issue of so-called feminine characteristics, the nature of their super-exploitation and the structural barriers put in their way. Through a carefully structured Pinteresque dialogue, *The NWO* reminds us of the intricate connections between Western imperialism and the capitalist patriarchy it exports elsewhere. By making these connections visible, it bestows a voice on those whom US-led Western economic imperialism, while couching its programme in the rhetoric of women's rights discourse, wants to keep in a state of perpetual voicelessness as its ultimate, and most exploited, feminine Other.



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