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Modern Relevance of Gothic Fiction Focussing on *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Monk*

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to do comparative study of the politics in gothic fiction and modern society. After reading the novels of Horace Walpole, Gregory Lewis and Marry Shelley, it is clear that lot of things are common in these novels and modern life. I will compare both imaginative situations of 18th and 19th century in gothic fiction and realistic situations of 20th and 21st century and explore female situation, gender politics and religious and political tones and whether gothic fiction was a prediction for future? Women, particularly in family and as individuals in public, have suffered immense pain through the ages. Family, political and religious heads have denied them the right to live life smoothly. In fact, their anguish has been sometimes clearly reflected and sometimes brutally suppressed in gothic fiction. Reading it through a political angle and comparing it with the modern scenario can help to understand the suppression of individuals, savagery and the brutality of oppressors and the ways to heal the wounds. Both the aspects, positive and negative, will be considered which will lead to better understanding of the issue. The emphasis on the politics of gothic fiction and modern society is for the simple reason that subtle layers of exploitation can be revealed only through a meticulous comparative investigation.

Introduction

Gothic writers used various stock characters to make it popular fiction. The young, beautiful, virginal and virtuous maiden depicts these virtues by fainting and crying whenever her delicate sensibilities are challenged. The heroine usually starts out with a mysterious past and it is later revealed that she is the daughter of an aristocratic or noble family. Matilda in *The Castle of Otranto* is ready to leave Theodore, the love of her life, for her cousin's sake. Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest* states with her pious character that the virginal maiden character is above inspection because her personality is flawless. Another category amongst female is the foolish women who are represented as the obedient, weak and submissive wives of their tyrant husband. For example, Hippolita in *The Castle of Otranto*. Weak women are portrayed as completely submissive, and in Hippolita's case, even support polygamy at the expense of her own marriage. The villains are involved in attempts of rape, blackmail and tyranny. The ecclesiastical members are shown weak and usually evil.

Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto*, Ambrosio in *The Monk*, Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* and Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were the epitomes of treachery, lust, terror and revenge. If you take relief by thinking that these were imaginary villains, then you need to rethink. We have modern draculas like serial killer of children Surender Koli (Nithari Case

2005-06), incestuous Fritzel (Austrian, 2008-09) and terror spreading real life dictators like - Hitler, Osama-Bin-Laden, Gaddafi etc.

I have taken two texts of pioneer writers of Gothic Fiction - Horace Walpole and Gregory Lewis. The focus of my research is on the following novels: The Castle of Otranto and The Monk.

Gender Politics

The novels of Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis, for the students of Gothic, depict a strong textual and critical introduction to the issue of politics and sex that show situation of the female and politics involved in the exploitation of a female character in the 18th-century Gothic. This gender politics is clearly visible in The Castle of Otranto and The Monk. Women were considered inferior and discriminated for being female. Manfred in The Castle of Otranto and Ambrosio in The Monk use women as tools of power. In The Castle of Otranto, females like Hippolita, wife of Manfred, Matilda, daughter of Manfred are subjugated. Females were not even allowed to express their sorrow.

In The Castle of Otranto, after the accidental death of Manfred's son, Isabella tries to:

lessen the weight of sorrow which she saw Matilda strove to suppress. (7)

Like modern patriarchal society, where father before marriage and husband after marriage dominate women, Isabella in the novel felt Manfred:

had imprinted her mind with terror.(7)

Hippolita's submission is crystal clear when after the death of her son, she is worried about her tyrant husband. In the novel:

Princess Hippolita to herself, who amidst the transports of her own sorrow frequently demanded news of her lord, would have dismissed her attendants to watch over him, and at last enjoined Matilda to leave her, and visit and comfort her father. (9)

In the novel, The Monk, Viola, disciple of Ambrosio is victimized at the hands of the politically potent male, a trend which has continued till date. This suffering was more at family level where women were treated as a commodity in a barter system.

In a patriarchal society mothers are blamed for child's misdeeds but when a child brings laurels to family, it is the father who takes pride. Mother is not given credit then. This is sexual discrimination at another level which is not brought to light. Why to blame mother every time for the child's mistake? Father is equally responsible. Again, it reiterates the fact that women are discriminated.

Male child preference

Manfred, in The Castle of Otranto, is so obsessed with male child to promote his dynasty that he tries to marry a girl half of his age after the death of his only male son. Unfortunately, after many centuries, it is still in vogue and devastating the social system. The stats of male female ratio in different states of India clearly speak of female foeticide stigma. The suppressed and anguished women were left with no choice than to submit their will to the will of tyrant husband or father then and now. Abrams notes the Gender discrimination in Gothic novel's by women:

Critics have recently drawn attention to the many women writers of Gothic fiction, and have explained features of the mode as the result of the suppression of female sexuality, or else as a challenge to the gender hierarchy and values of a male-dominated culture. (118).

Politics of family secrets

The secrets of family curses in gothic fiction and their use to frighten people and rule over them may be farfetched reality in those times but not in modern times. The superstitious and supernatural elements blend with religious tones to propagate what the politically powerful persons want. Even governments and political parties spread conspiracy theories to confuse and psychologically terrorise less aware public. Modern day tantric babas, tarot card readers and hypocrite spiritual gurus exploit rich and poor by predicting their future and take hefty amounts to conceal their secrets. This is visible in *The Castle of Otranto*, a book written in 1764, in which antagonist Manfred uses family curse to convince his family for his misdeeds:

an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced that the castle and lordship of Otranto “should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it.” (5)

Power and politics

The Monk presents a study of the struggle of the landlords, monastery heads and Dukes of Gothic fiction who try to keep power in their hands. It explores how and up to what extent a human can degrade himself/herself to retain power and follow the pleasure principal. The id of Ambrosio, otherwise controlled by ego and superego, is unleashed in the novel. He is considered as a pious soul who later to gratify his lust gets involved in a vicious cycle of saving his position as the head of monastery. He under the intoxication of power makes a person sacrifice his/her loved ones, rapes sacred relationships and kills innocent people who have done no crime than to come between his selfish motives. Common people bear the brunt in the name of the honour of a leader, family and country.

All this is happening in current political scenario of the world where autocrats, dictators, monarchs and governments use all the means to stay in power and cover up their heinous crimes. The relationship between power and politics can be explored through the microscope of Marxism. There is class struggle and the use of wealth to make the wheel run. The infamous case of the brutally murdered Jessica Lal is an example of power politics. Kari Winter in "Sexual/Textual Politics of Terror" voiced for

“Women who are at all self-assertive in *The Monk* are tortured or killed...In any society where there is an unequal distribution of wealth and power, blaming victims for their own suffering serves the interests of the dominant group”. (89-101)

Religion and politics

In *The Castle of Otranto*, the wealthy lord threatens the Church head to work in his favour. Same is happening in modern society when political leaders rush to religious heads during the time of election to sway the vote bank of disciples to their side. The Gothic novel is said to "flourish in disrupted, oppressed, or undeveloped societies, to give a voice to the powerless and unenfranchised" and therefore "often carries a heavily political or metapolitical charge". (Moynahan 110,111)

In *The Monk*, there is an uncanny blend of politics and religion where the church head uses his powers as a religious head to seduce an innocent girl and then later uses his political

powers to save the same position which he had misused. All this is happening in current society and it seems that political and religious machinery work for each other. In past, Popes' follies were covered by governments and even now religious heads propagate and convince public to keep a particular candidate in political power. Contemporary politicians and religious heads use power to exploit individuals and the public. Matthew G. Lewis hints the same-sex desire in *The Monk* when in a Catholic monastery; he presents a deep emotional bond between a handsome priest and a blushing disciple. George Haggerty in "The Horrors of Catholicism" expresses that sexual excess and political subversion go hand in hand with religious fervour.

Dynasty promotion

Family politics has never been out of fashion. Asia has great examples of dynastical politics. As in India it's the Gandhi family, in Pakistan it's the Bhutto family and even in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan only numbered families are ruling for decades and centuries. The promotion of family and dynasty in gaining power has been the prime concern of politicians. This dynastical politics in the Indian sub-continent is not only at national level but also at regional. It may not be an exaggeration to say that they have used political power in their favour. In Gothic fiction, the leading characters serve their family interests first. Manfred wants male heir for his dynasty and justifies his attempt to marry a girl of his daughter's age who could have been his daughter in law, if his son has not died.

But there are some exceptional cases where women came forward to lead and exploit the situation. The rise of Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh is contradiction to the argument that female remain suppressed. If we closely explore these cases, it is evident that these ladies were having manly qualities like dogged determination, iron will and oratory. But by saying that, I would be doing gender discrimination. These cases are few but very impressive to show case the empowerment of women in modern times. Misery for majority of females remains same yet.

Isolation

In *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the character who gives life to the monster Frankenstein suffers by going against nature and even the monster suffers from alienation. It coincides with the case of Osama-Bin Laden who was created by America but later America suffered at his hands on 9/11. Osama was also alienated with his family and lived his last days in hiding.

Conclusion

After closely analysing these two situations, one imaginary in fiction and other in current society, I would sum up that gothic fiction was precursor of modern society where male child desire, dynasty promotion, incest, female's exploitation and submission, amalgam of politics and religion were hinted at. This all is happening in contemporary society if not entirely in Europe but in Asia and spreading all over the globe gradually. So there are lessons which can be taken from this fiction. Still, there are events which have not happened as literally as mentioned in books or at very minute level like human cloning, conjuring of spirits, incestuous relationships. We may not be able to stop all this happening but we may be prepared to tackle them properly by further analyses of gothic fiction.

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