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A Society in Change: A Reading of *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Abstract:

Traditionally we consider the drama *The Duchess of Malfi* written by John Webster a stark tragedy. No one can deny that it is a horrific tragedy, yet the tragic story also reflects a society of the Jacobean time. The drama unfolds the story of a Duchess who is a widow and who marries a person, socially inferior to her after the death of her husband. Eventually she has to live a life of suffering and pain for that act of her. The paper focuses on the social significance of the act of widow remarriage in the context of the Jacobean era. The following questions are addressed through the paper— How can the Duchess be so determined and firm in her decision to remarry? Does the larger society encourage her to take such a decision? What is the greater social context considering the fact that the Duchess does not have any scope to hide herself under the shadow of a powerful husband as Gertrude in *Hamlet* could?

Keywords: Jacobean era, modernity, duality, emergent.

The Duchess of Malfi written in the year 1614 is often interpreted in terms of the triangular relationship between the Duchess, her steward husband Antonio and her twin brother Ferdinand. All the major characters of the drama are introduced in Act I itself. The audience also comes to know the reasons for the conflict between the Duchess and her brothers in the first Act itself. The two brothers warn the Duchess against remarriage and they also employ a spy, Bosola, to keep an eye on her. In spite of knowing everything the Duchess marries Antonio and in marrying him she is aware that she has to face the hostilities of her brothers. In this way an atmosphere of ambition, jealousy, deceit, lust and sadism pervade the drama and the subsequent horror that the drama unfolds towards the end leads the audience to get engrossed in the predicament of the Duchess. The traditional interpretation of the drama surrounds around the

structure and characters of the drama. Clifford Leech considers the Duchess anarchic on the basis of her union with Antonio and calls her “a woman at odds with life itself” (35-40). The Duchess is the battleground of the two conflicting forces, 'the spirit of greatness' and 'the spirit of woman'. It is indicated by Cariola's remark which concludes Act 1 Scene 1:

Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman
Reign most in her, I know not...

Travis Bogard tells us the meaning of these forces: “the spirit of implacable defiance of the worst of fate or the spirit of submission; the spirit of courage or the spirit of fear; of integrity or death” (65). This sense of conflict is sustained throughout the drama. The Duchess takes an independent decision ignoring her brothers; but she is not able to defy them totally. She is bogged down by the deceitful plans of her mischievous and powerful brothers. Ferdinand finds her out and arrests her in Act III and inflicts both physical and mental torture upon her through Bosola. The brothers frighten her and make her spirit weak through the devices of wax figures, the dance of the madmen and the offer of a dead man's hand. Yet the firm spirit of the Duchess is still intact as the dying Duchess says, “I am Duchess of Malfi still.” (IV.ii)

From another perspective it also exhibits Webster's use of disguise, dumb-shows, ghosts, maniacs, severed limbs, wax images and other typical Jacobean conventions on stage. They provide the framework for the realistic portrayal of the passions, thoughts and responses of the characters. T. S. Eliot terms these “impure art” of the Elizabethans which aimed at attaining “complete realism” without surrendering any advantages of “unrealistic conventions” and also calls them “great literary and dramatic genius directed towards chaos” (117). Eliot finds an illogical intermingling of real and unreal in the plays of Webster and hence is the dissatisfaction. However, in terms of structure Act IV touches the highest climactic point in the most crucial event of the play, the death of the Duchess to which the Act as a whole is devoted. The pace of action is slow and the impression created is that of stasis rather than dynamism because the prison-walls restrict the movements of the characters. However, the last act with its complications keeps the spectator in suspense and it proves Webster's skill as a craftsman.

Apart from this, in dramatic effectiveness, sensationalism and in the portrayal of the degenerated picture of the court life, the drama offers interesting insights into the socio-political and historical condition of the time, as the dialogue by Bosola provokes the audience:

Miserable age, where only the reward

Of doing well, is the doing of it (I.I.)

The Jacobean era refers to a period in English and Scottish history that coincides with the reign of King James I (1603-1625). The age was an age of transition from different aspects. Although the Reformation started in the mid-16th century the effect of it was still there. The Gunpowder plot of 1605 was a failed attempt to kill the Protestant king James I of England. A group of English Catholics attempted to blow up the king and parliament in the palace of Westminster. Thereby Catholicism appeared to be more corrupt than before. Peter Wagner says: “Modernity... begins at the earliest in the mid to late 15th century with the Renaissance, the invention of movable type and the voyages of discovery”(6). In this sense the period refers to the beginning of modernity. British colony was established in Virginia, North America and was spread to Massachusetts in 1620. Then happened the disastrous Thirty Years’ war which resulted in famine and disease.

In the realm of philosophy Descartes was still far but Montaigne’s skepticism was enough to mark the ending of medieval religious faith and the beginning of modern inquisitiveness. Francis Bacon had a strong influence in the evolution of modern science, which was entering a key phase in this era, as the work of Johannes Kepler in Germany and Galileo in Italy brought the Copernican revolution to a new level of development. Bacon laid a foundation, and was a powerful and persuasive advocate, for objective inquiry about the natural world in place of the Medieval Scholastic authoritarianism that still influenced the culture of British society in his lifetime. On practical rather than general levels, much work was being done in the areas of navigation, cartography, and surveying—John Widdowes’ *A Description of the World* (1621) being one significant volume in this area.

This rough historical background brings in the idea that the Jacobean period was experiencing many new social realities along with the changes introduced by the Renaissance. The drama reflects the emergent elements in the society. The drama through the Duchess represents the widows whose economic independence and experience make them comparatively stronger and determined than the other women. In the first scene Ferdinand instructs Bosola to spy on the Duchess:

I give you that

To live I’th’ court, here, and observe the Duchess:

To note all the particulars of her ’haviour,

exhibit that through the characters like Gertrude in *Hamlet* or Anne Neville in *Richard III*. Webster's Duchess is a mark contrast to such figures. Nonetheless it reflects the troubled and contradictory status of women in terms of the transmission of property, sexuality and power. In the early seventeenth century London, widows remained threatening figures in the cultural imaginary insofar as they brought together categories that, theoretically, at least, were posited as mutually exclusive, namely femininity and power. The Italian setting of *The Duchess of Malfi* is significant in that some of the restrictions on woman in Italy appear to have been greater than those elsewhere in Europe. Giovanni Giorgio Trissino pointed out, the widow's is "a bitter liberty." She may not, he specifically stipulated, interest herself in politics: "to speak of what the Turk is up to in Constantinople, or the sultan of Egypt, or of what may be decided at the Diet of Augustus... nothing is more inappropriate than to hear a woman speak of war and discuss statecraft" (qtd in Jordan 71,72). This is indeed the Duchess's predicament. Despite her clear legal claim to power, she cannot exercise it free of the control of her brothers. In case of inheritance too although in theory primogeniture militated against widows inheriting, in practice, there were other forms of law—ecclesiastical and civil—that allowed for community property in marriage and distribution of inheritance (Erickson 6). Though set in Italy, this is precisely the Duchess's situation. Since Ferdinand is her twin brother, the duchess must have inherited her sovereignty from her husband, their son being too young to inherit his father's dukedom. In these extraordinary circumstances, immediately after her brother's warning the Duchess ties the nuptial knot with Antonio. The Duchess tries to establish a familial private world against the royal aristocratic life she was leading. She allays Antonio's fear:

Do not think of them.

All discord, without this circumference,
Is only to be pitied, and feared;
Yet, should they know it, time will easily
scatter the tempest. (1.1)

She tries to banish old relations from the new. The impression of a nuclear family is suggested but can't be shown in the drama. As a widow the Duchess has the potential which she did not possess as a wife that is to wield power.

The short historical sketch at the beginning suggest the age was witnessing the dismantling of many traditional institutions and structures. The gradual demolition of the feudal system, the

rising colonial set up give birth to the emerging middle class. The coexistence of the emergent along with dominant is visible in Antonio and Bosola . As Raymond Williams says, “A new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively subordinate...” (1977:124) These two characters represent the emerging intelligent middle class. They are submissive in their respective roles as subordinates; yet Antonio is in a superior position in his discernment of the contradiction between a French court and degenerated court of his own state as he says:

“considering duly that a prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general;
but if't chance some cursed example poison't near the head,
Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.”(1.1)

If Antonio is independent, educated and gentlemanly enough to be liked by the Duchess, Bosola exhibits the complications of a changing age. Bosola knows the decadent affair of sale and the two brothers as his dialogue expresses:

“He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools;
they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit,
but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.
Could I be one of their flattering panders,
I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full,
and then drop off.” (1.1)

The lines highlight his extreme self-interest. He achieves this end at the expense of everything else. Bosola’s function as professional intelligencer appears to be parody of his quest for knowledge. He acquits himself well in this profession in which he has to a good deal of acting as is clear from the business of apricot trick. He himself is conscious of his role-playing because sickened by the tortures on the Duchess in Act IV, he refuses to continue in his own shape:

Never in mine own shape,
That’s forfeited, by my intelligence.
And this last cruel lie: (IV.I)

So, in the final stages of the Duchess’s execution he is present in the disguise of an old man. At first he announces himself to a tomb-maker and later on a bellman but never reveals his identity

to be Bosola again. Thus Bosola has to play various roles: the role of an intellectual, a malcontent, an intelligencer and murderer, a tomb maker and bellman, a causer and observer of death. Bosola seems to have revealed the conflicting urges of his personality, a self in turmoil, revealing the unknowability of the void:

We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
That, ruined, yields no echo. (V. V)

The drama also represents the transition in religion from a Catholic to Protestant position. Against the Catholic Church's espousal of perpetual widowhood the duchess exemplifies the emerging and tolerant Protestant position approving even encouraging a woman's remarriage. Forces which gave vent to a shift in the religious belief system and resulted in a belief in the supremacy of human being in his/her contact with God and also helped in the cultural sanction for the remarriage of a widow. In an article entitled "The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and The Duchess of Malfi" the writer Sara Jayne Steen's draws an analogy between Arbella Stuart(1575-1615) and The Duchess of Malfi. Stuart was King James' first cousin who secretly married someone of lower degree against the norms of her ranking male relatives. She was captured and imprisoned without trial for her crime and died while incarcerated by the male relative. It is said that like a true protestant she hated the sin not the sinner and Christ accompanies heaven. The Duchess's " Father, forgive them" on Calgary echoes the same kind of sentiment. Moreover considering the sympathy Stuart got in the contemporary society, some of the members of James' Privy Council were unhappy over Stuart's misery and many considered her a saint. Similarly Duchess's dialogues right before her death evokes the admiration for Christian heroism.

Raymond Williams in his *Marxism and Literature* says, "alternative political and cultural emphasis and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control" (1977:113). In the drama *The Duchess of Malfi* the ideological pressure is very evident. Antonio finds it difficult to reject the traditional hierarchy and that is why he utters:

Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness,
That is not kept in chains, and close-pent rooms,
But in fair lightsome lodgings, and is girt
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,

Which makes it lunatic, beyond all cure. (1.1)

In their materialistic criticism Dollimore and Sinfield refer to three aspects of historical and cultural process: consolidation, subversion and containment. The first refers to the ideological means whereby a dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself; the second to the subversion of that order, the second to the subversion of that order, the third to the containment of ostensibly subversive pressures. In *The Duchess of Malfi* the subversion is very obvious when immediately after her brother's injunctions she marries Antonio, an inferior to her in terms of class and rank. The tragic end of the duchess and also her inscription in that system where she does not have an independent proper name show that she is trapped in that hierarchical system. Yet the drama questions the containment process by making Antonio's son heir to the throne and also placing the sickness of the court as against the honesty of the duchess. Instead of indicting the duchess the play anatomizes Ferdinand in doing so places his brutal ideology in question. Webster's drama seems to have exhibit the same contradiction inherent in the process of containment as has been said by Jonathan Dollimore, "... the need to disclose the effectiveness and complexity of the ideological process of containment, this by no means implies a fatalistic acceptance that it is somehow inevitable ..." (15) The paradox is seen exhibited in the Duchess herself. She says, "I am Antonio's wife still" and to Bosola she says "I am the Duchess of Malfi still." Of course her statement to Bosola has tragic overtones. It also reveals how her private familial life was overpowered by her Aristocratic lineage.

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