



The Mastery of Man over Woman Manifested in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess": A Comparative Study

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Abstract

It has become a tradition from primitive age to now to neglect women everywhere throughout the world. The freedom of women is killed in various ways by men. If any woman goes against the order of man, they have to face untold sufferings and sometimes they are murdered. This paper is an attempt to examine the mastery of man over women as reflected in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess". In *The Duchess of Malfi*, John Webster has tried to unfold the story of cruelty of Cardinal and Ferdinand upon their sister Duchess of Malfi and showed how man could be dominative over women to keep their manhood in the Jacobean period. Through the characters Cardinal and Ferdinand, Webster has actually portrayed the whole society's patriarchal superiority over women. In fact, the attitude and values towards women were very poor and they could not be given any prestige. They were ignored, neglected and insulted by society, husbands and others. They did not have any power to protest the decision of male, if any woman went against the decision of male; she had to suffer in the long run. The Duchess of Malfi went against the will of her brothers as a result she was hanged brutally. On the other hand, Robert Browning through his poem "My last Duchess" has tried to show the negative side of power of Victorian men through the character Duke of Ferrara. In the poem "My last Duchess", the Duchess was innocent but she was cruelly killed by the Duke. In the Victorian period, women did not have any right in society, they were treated as slaves. Truly, they were the tools of Victorian men. The attitude towards women was like the colonized nation. This paper will disclose the actual picture of women faced by men in the Jacobean and Victorian period through *The Duchess of Malfi* and "My Last Duchess". Finally, this paper will be able to explore the cruel torture by men for that Duchess of Malfi and the Last Duchess lost their life but they did not bow down their head in front of their barbaric brothers and husbands.

Key words: Male dominance, Social Feature, Attitude towards women, Helpless women, Void protest, Innocent death

Introduction

During the Victorian period, the position of women were not good because of extreme male dominated society. Women were treated like the property of man as it is seen in Browning's poem "My Last Duchess". The character, the Duke of Ferrara who was the husband of the Duchess, did not have any esteem for his wife. Actually, the husbands had no respect for their wives of that time, they had just ornamental roles. Male violence towards women has always been accepted as a natural if unfortunate part of women's status as men's property (Maitse 1997). Wives were the objects of male pleasure and meant to be faithful to her husband only. In the poem "My Last Duchess", Browning showed how the Duchess was killed cruelly by her tyrannical husband. Though the Duchess, the poet reflected the Victorian all women's helpless condition where they were used as tools of male. Women did not have any language to protest that's why they had to bear untold suffering, even giving their life "Fact that men can overwhelm women in violent encounters is recognized, and looms large in gender politics" (Gregor 480). Similarly, John Webster showed the same things through his writing, he represented the real Italian life of the 17th century where he reflected the extreme corruption among the aristocratic society that normally common people did not know. Through the drama "The Duchess of Malfi" Webster wanted to explore the brutal torture by her brothers for that the Duchess had to meet unnatural death so early. Actually, Webster wanted to reveal the mask of men through his writing. So Webster's and Browning's main motto was to unfold the torture on women that happened in Jacobean and Victorian period individually. So, women were like the domestic neglected creatures. The ideal women of this era were the weak passive creature who had no identity of her own and was living as per the rules set by her husband. In fact "Women were just some utterly trivial form of life, like a louse or a flea." (Shinde 136)

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to show the cruelty of men over women in the Jacobean and Victorian period. This study will also reveal the male dominated society where there were no values of women's emotions, love, dignity etc. Through this study, it will also discuss the exact right, prestige of women in society.

Methodology

The present study has been conducted by combining both primary and secondary sources data. Primary data has been collected from text and secondary data has been formulated from journal, paper and online. This study is qualitative type research which is concerned with meaning making (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Rodwell, 1998) study for exploring the torture on the weak sex. This study is going to be dealt with the strong voice against the so-called patriarchal rules and regulations.

Literature Review

During the Victorian and Jacobean period women were the worst sufferers. Women were controlled and maintained by male power. In Britain, at the time of industrialization women were given household duty but the authority of business, commerce and politics were dominated by male. Actually it was the system of that time that girls would be married with an ideal husband and raise children. Through "My Last Duchess", Robert Browning showed the cruelty of the Duke of Ferrara who uses his power over innocent women to maintain his age-old tradition. The core concept of patriarchy—systems of male domination and female subordination—evokes images of gender hierarchies, dominance, and some- times power struggle (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Walby, 1990; Yllo, 1993; Hunnicutt, 2009).

On the other hand, the Duchess of Malfi Webster, showed real manly power over the innocent Duchess who had to take the taste of death but did not bow down her head in front of immorality. In the article on "Transcending Patriarchal Limitations: A Study of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*" The researcher tried to show that a woman doesn't have no right to speak and cannot choose whatever they want and she should follow the man. They didn't have any freedom to express anything. They led life under the guidance of religion and men, particularly who were widows and unmarried women. (Ikhlas et al 2020). Through the article, the researchers have worked about the rights of the helpless women who wanted to have their freedom. They wanted to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Again, in the article on CRUELTY IN THE (PSEUDO) AESTHETE: BROWNING'S 'MY LAST DUCHESS', The researcher tried to prove the Duke's cruel and ugly intention. He thinks of himself as a good one but he is a genuinely bad one. The Duke also showed his fake love for painting and beauty apparently but he was proud of his aristocratic birth who took the innocent life of his wife being cruel (Sahin A.R 2007). Actually I wanted to prove through my paper what was the exact condition of Victorian and Jacobean women not only that but also to reveal the torture of male figure on women comparing two respective time.

Analysis:

The Duchess of Malfi

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* represents a world of cruelty and hypocrisy. In the cruel world the Duchess appeared as a gallant woman who lived as she thought. Webster lived in a society where women were thought to be inferior to men. He showed the bestiality of man through the dominating characters in the drama as Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola. It is seen in the drama that frail people were always oppressed but as a frail woman the Duchess did not bow down her head in front of evil power that normally could not be observed in the Jacobean period.

In Renaissance times, women could not face their society, because if they tried, they would be punished severely. Thus, the Duchess could not declare that she might not obey her brother's directions because she knew that they would prevent her in various ways. The Duchess of Malfi was a story of resistance of a widow who defied her brothers in disregard to the traditions of her society. She challenged her brothers by marrying Antonio who was below her class. Bartels (2002) said that the Duchess's actions pushed women to fight back against patriarchal domination. She added "[Writers] routinely assume [women] either constrained or restrained, despite histories that suggest otherwise. The Duchess decided to lead the life she liked. Evidently, she decided to choose a man from the middle class to prove her selfhood, but, at the same time, she gave him the reins. At the end of act one, Antonio and the Duchess became husband and wife. The Duchess rebelled against male authority and showed willingness to subject herself to her husband in order to make him her lord and to be led by his hand. In this case, it can be thought that the Duchess gave Antonio the leadership by her own freewill. Webster focused on this issue by presenting the Duchess and Antonio's marriage. He wanted to show the passive image of such marriage. Leech (1963) in Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi* said that "The Elizabethans had a term, 'disparagement' for the wrong done to a person if a marriage with one of lower rank was inflicted on him...For that reason it was easier for a woman to be raised to her husband's level than for a man to win nobility through marriage" (p. 51). When the Duchess's marriage is threatened by Ferdinand's defiance, she wants to save her marriage, without heeding her duties to defend her country. Webster criticized the Duchess's marriage by saying that it made her neglect her duties. Under all this pressure, the Duchess described the miserable situation of the Renaissance women, when she said "I consider this world a tedious theater" (IV, I, 87). Here, the Duchess described her life as a tedious theater which she wanted to escape. She wanted to live her own way of life, not as her brothers'

wanted. She decided to face her society by showing that she had the power to prove her selfhood. At the end of the play, she decided to face death courageously. She did not want to live under the patriarchal society any more. In the following quotation, Webster presents the Duchess as one of the courageous women who faced torment boldly, and did not show fear of death. This situation showed that the Duchess defended her freedom. The Duchess: pull and pull strongly, from your able strength must pull down heaven upon me (IV, II, 227, 28),

The Duchess made her decision that she would marry her truthful person Antonio. The Duchess thus disobeyed her society's perception of right. Female conducted in both training her own will in a matter of personal choice and in choosing a husband. The two brothers thought that the Duchess should not dishonor her family by wedding more than once. Although they did not know about the duchess' intention to marry Antonio. The Duchess was considered primary by her brothers as a hopeful, "lusty widow" and forbidden to remarry, even though the plan that she had waited the usual period after her husband's death. The two brothers asserted:

"Ferdinand: You are a widow

You know already what man is. And therefore

Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence-

Cardinal No, nor anything without the addition, honor,

Sway your high blood.

Ferdinand Marry? They are most luxurious

Will wed twice." (1.1.296-300)

Here, the Duchess' brothers reflected the traditional patriarchal society. They believed in women's inferiority and looked at women, especially widows, as weak creatures. Christy Desmet commented, "Characters within Webster's play also attempted to define the Duchess as a woman rather than a prince by resorting to feminine stereotypes. To her brothers, she was the vices type of widow. In a studied duet warning their sister against remarriage" and he added, "Ferdinand and the Cardinal build their argument on a litany of common female faults: because women are all driven by lust, widows who remarry are not far removed from whores. Naturally shameless, women also neglect their reputation; and weak in both mind and will, they succumb easily to amorous advances and smooth tales of courtship." (Desmet 47)

The background and the setting is completely Italian. Actually dramatist has depicted the helpless condition of women through the character the Duchess of Malfi. The Duchess is the central character around whom the drama revolves. Using the character of Duchess, the dramatist has revealed the real picture of women in Italian society. In Italian society if any woman goes beyond the order of male, she has to bear untold sufferings by the male or society but the Duchess of Malfi broke the as usual norms that's why she has to take the taste of eternal death.

In his drama, Webster skillfully showed the audience the new social variation in the role of gender. Women raised their voice loudly and refused to be only a shadow for their guardians. They beat all the rules and boundaries of the patriarchal society. Kate Aughterson says, "Women are double victims. In the ideal patriarchal system they are displayed as proxies of masculine power, and vessels of masculine legitimate power." (Aughterson 225)

The play *The Duchess of Malfi* focused voice against patriarchal authority, especially in the Renaissance period. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster presented the Duchess as the heroine of the play trying to get her liberty from patriarchal authority. She had two brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who wanted to control her life. At that time, men thought that women were unable to plan their lives. Webster started his play by presenting the passive image of women in the Renaissance era. He stated that Ferdinand and the Cardinal threaten their sister so that the Duchess did not get marry again.

In this play, Webster showed the domestic life of Renaissance women. The Duchess of Malfi considered as an unusual play, because it presented the humiliation of Renaissance women. Webster revealed the negative position of women in the Renaissance period and they had no authority over anybody, even their children. The Cardinal and Ferdinand represented the patriarchal power over the Duchess. Abushihab and Abushihab (2016:95) remarked that at that time, "men control the social, political, religious, and economic lives of the whole society, especially those of women. Many of the Renaissance writers try to bind between marriage and religious issues." Leech (1963) focuses on this issue by saying that "Dr. Bradbrook noted from Thomas notes from Thomas Beard's account of the story in *The Theatre of God's Judgments* his view that the Cardinal was an instrument of God's justice 'to punish those who under a veil of secret marriage thought it lawful for man to commit any villainy', and [the Duchess] draws attention to the strong words used on the subject of secret marriage" (p.53). At that time, secret marriage was considered an evil event.

At that time, secret marriage was presented as blameworthy. For that, Webster and Shakespeare showed the dangerous consequences of it. Secret marriage was a kind of revolution against society. Webster did not show any role of religion in his play. The Church was 'secularized'. He showed the Cardinal as an official in the Roman Catholic Church who did not represent the Church. Webster suggested that men use religion to help them control women. Antonio criticized the Church, when he says "Churches and cities, which have diseases like men, /Must have like death that we have" (V. III. 20-21). Here, Antonio showed the passive role of the Church and considers it similar to men. At the same time, women could not govern their lives; they were treated as property. Many writers stressed the passive image of women in their works like John Ford in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Shakespeare in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and in other important works. At that time, any woman who dared to express her selfhood would be accused of revolting against the traditions of the society, and was called a whore. In general, we could say that Webster showed an interest in the patriarchal traditions that allowed men to control everything. He submitted in his play that the brothers were anxious to control the Duchess's sexuality. Webster showed one of the most important weapons that helped women to get their rights, which was their tongue. Their tongues gave them the freedom to govern their lives "While the

Duchess strives to move outside the patriarchal family circle, Ferdinand longs to bind her within it, as is clear when he returns her wedding ring” (Findlay 103).

The Duchess had three children and Bosola informed Ferdinand that she had three bastards and he did not know by whom. Ferdinand went to the Duchess house to justify. The Duchess was surprised by the appearance of Ferdinand holding a poniard in her room, but she continued in a powerful language, “Whether I am doomed to live or die, I can do both like a prince” (III, ii, 70). Her strength came from the language as Alison Finlay says “The Duchess's chief weapon is her tongue, which gives her freedom to govern and dispose of her own property.” (Findlay 103). At this moment she accepted her destiny with pride, superiority and as an aristocratic woman who faced the consequences whatever they were.

Webster portrayed the Duchess in two different ways: the first one was the political woman who lead many people and the second was the Renaissance woman who was controlled by the patriarchal society. Jankowski (2001) in “Defining/ Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*” says that Webster depends on three important issues: first, the political contexts of this play especially the presentation of the Duchess as a ruler of Malfi. Second, the patriarchal relationship between the Duchess and her brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal, and third, how the Duchess tries to develop her life as she wants without heeding the dangerous consequences. Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand try to warn the Duchess not to do anything against their will. Choudhury (2010) in his article “Subjugation of woman in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*” says that “Under the veil of court, Webster draws a domestic life and relations between man and woman. The head of the family, either father or in his absence his surrogate, a male, controls the social, political and economic lives of those in his charge-his kins and dependents. In this case, Webster discusses the relation between the Duchess and her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. The brothers refuse the second marriage because she is their sister, not because of her political position. The Duchess decides to challenge her patriarchal authority by marrying again. She wants to find her own identity although she knows all of the consequences. Lall (1988) in his book *John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi* commented on the Duchess’s situation in relation to her brothers: “[she] will attempt the dangerous enterprise of a re-marriage in spite of their threatening and frightening [her], just as men, by coming to grips with danger in the course of certain great battles, have accomplished impossible brave deeds”(p. 23).

Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* created a woman ruler who challenged Renaissance society’s views. She sacrificed herself for the Renaissance women. At the end of the play, the Duchess took her political role showing power as a sovereign prince. She did not give up under the patriarchal authority. She used her political role to assert that Renaissance women have rights in the patriarchal society. In this case, the Duchess was presented as an example of the rebellious woman who refused before she died, she had told Bosola that she did not afraid of her destiny and she accepted death bravely to meet her husband and kids in “In the 'other world” (IV, ii, 213). When the executioners put the rope around her neck, she faced death with bravery and strong character. The duchess asked them to pull the rope strongly this reflected her strength and powerful character. She showed herself as a radical character who exceeded the limitations and broke all restrictions to be under humiliation

At the end of the play, Webster suggested that the Duchess succeed in breaking the norms because after the death of the Duchess and the two brothers, no one remained to be the successor except her eldest son and Antonio. They ruined the aristocratic and social norms because they were from the middle class. They could establish the future of an unstable society. The death scene of the Duchess reflected her with dignity and poise. During the cruelty term in the prison, she said some words that might express her character and what she had gone over her life as:

“I am acquainted with sad misery,

As the tanned galley-slave is with his oar

Necessity makes me suffer constantly, (4.2.23-28).

My Last Duchess

“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning is centered on the life of the Duke of Ferrara. The duke of Ferrara was a notable person of a city in northern Italy (Kennedy 595), who addressed an envoy whose master's daughter's marriage to be arranged with the duke. The poem showed a rich Duke's opinion on his wife's death using a dramatic monologue. He showed the portrait of his ex-wife to a convoy and the way he described his dead wife was a mere thing. The Duke, the psychotic character could be seen as a representative of the entire male dominated race who had been subjugating women counterparts in one way or another. The Duke seemed to praise the life-like portrait of his last duchess more than his wife in reality when she was alive. Even the piece of art was given more importance than the life of women. This showed how the Duchess was treated even lesser than an object of art. “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive. I call that piece a wonder” (Browning 52) such subjugation of women is not specific to the Duke alone or to the Victorian era alone. Women even in contemporary times faced subjugation and exploitation at hands of men in patriarchal society. Husband’s control in this study referred to the exercise of power or control by the husbands over the wives’ social activities, such as meeting with female friends and through the husbands’ accusations of wives’ unfaithful-ness (Ellsberg et al. 2000; Johnson1995)

The Duke of Ferrara in “My Last Duchess” was the embodiment of pride and possession that was verbalized through his attitude and collection of paintings. Robert Browning chose the best way to present the self-representative Duke through his Dramatic Monologue which he fathered. Hiring Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck, two imaginary sculptors, collection of paintings, fame of ‘nine-hundred-years-old name’, Neptune taming a sea horse all represent his pride and controlling attitude. WhatFuko's discourse-domination idea indicates is that the authority who can decide on the meaning and the behavior related to a social issue and subsequently, using dominance impose his idea on others, will be the stronger party (Xiaobo,1999)

Furthermore, in most societies women either had minimum or no rights to inherit money or property if their father or spouse had passed away; moreover it was almost impossible for women to get a divorce, even if their spouse abused them mentally or physically and also if he had an affair which was rather common in those days (Therborn, 2004) So, Duke's behavior must be similar to ways in which women, in general, were treated during his times. Though the situation of women in the contemporary era may not be as bad as it was in the duchess's era still they are not seen as equal to men. The Duke was enraged by the behavior of the Duchess. According to him his wife had a frivolous nature and could be impressed easily by anyone.

The Duchess's appreciation of common activities like riding white mule round the terrace, or her appreciation of the behavior of a worker who brought a bunch of cherries for her from the garden, was disliked by her husband. The Duke wanted his wife as his sole property who could not even smile at her own will. He wanted to possess her like an object and to control her every activity. Riding on the mule round terrace showed that she was not allowed to go for a horse ride outside the palace. The Duke was enraged because the Duchess was "Too easily impressed; she liked whate'ershe looked at, and her looks went everywhere." (Browning 53).The duchess was easy going that's why she received a gift from her well-wisher but the duke couldn't take it easy because of his so called prestige. Th Duke said like this way

She thanked men—good! but thanked

Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody's gift.(Brownings 32-35)

When the Duchess's abnormal activities grew, he did not complain about it to his wife but he ordered her execution. The Duke had no feelings for his wife but he treated her like an object who had no identity of her to him. "This grew; I gave commands Then all smiles stopped together/There she stands/As if alive"" (Browning 54-55) these quotes prove Duke's cruel nature of personality. Even though when his wife was executed, he did not show any remorse on unnatural death; rather he hit upon a plan to get remarried. At The time of fixing his second marriage the duke showed the count the painting of his last duchess(painted by Fra Pandolf) and what attitude of her had led to her death so that he could warn his wife to omit such attitude otherwise she would also meet the same fortune. He thought that wife was his own possession and she could not have any right to smile against his will. If anyone goes against his wishes she will meet the similar end as his last Duchess. The Duke also thought himself as the god-like figure, besides he also tried to prove his power as male.

Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (Brownings 55-56)

His injustice, wrought to his wife, was apparent when he got benefit and utility from his wife even after her death. The husband exhibited his dead wife as a bad model not to be followed by the new wife; otherwise the latter will face her counterpart's similar fatal end (Keach 624). It was noted that the speaker did not demand to be treated differently because he was her husband, but rather Neptune' was the Roman god of sea, identified with the Greek 'Poseidon', who was Herculean and responsible for sending storms and earthquakes (Lurker 285).

The Duchess here was representative of the entire female race during Victorian times. The poem also revealed the future as women are even today treated as second class citizens in most society's .At last, this paper has demonstrated that power and wealth associated with Victorian royal families displaced the desirable human qualities. The analysis of My Last Duchess by Robert Browning has highlighted some of the negative aspects of wealth and power. The speaker developed intense dislike for the Duchess to the extent that he ordered for her death. Even in her death, the Duke does not seem to have any feeling for wrong doing. Actually, Women are statistically safer in the street than they are in their homes (Winters et al, 1998)

Conclusion

The Victorian age, according to some critics, was a period of social and political flux and anxiety. It was also a period that the power of men over women were visible which were shown by both poets and novelists of the age. As liberal in his thought, Browning was too sad with his age as he saw that women were the slaves of men. His poem "My Last Duchess" dealtwith the evil power of man. Through his poem "My Last Duchess" he revealed the satanic character of the Duke who was the symbol if not all but some men in Italy during the Victorian age who wanted to suppress their women and made them dominate. Finally the poem dealt with the devastating impact of masculine power over the feminine but what Browning conveyed to his reader was exactly the opposite. At the societal level, structures of male dominance supported violence against women (Yodanis 2004). Babcock et al. (1993) explained that such incidence was related to men trying to compensate for the powerless parts of themselves. Through the analysis of his poem, it was concluded that Robert Browning wanted to convey that women had no importance in society. He presented women as slaves of men and they had no high status in their societies. That's why they killed women to gain higher status in society.

So women were dehumanized and treated like any object in the patriarchal society .They lacked authority and they would follow their guardians. Women had to express their full obedience to men. They should say nothing and express nothing except their respect for their guardians. And all this

was reflected on the stage. Linda Woodbridge comments, "in the nation's political, social, and economic, and even scientific life, produced a body of plays which delineated with savage cynicism the lewdness, infidelity, aggression, shallowness, cupidity, and deceit of a legion of faithless citizens' wives insatiable widows, and homicidal whores. Women had joined other character types as scapegoats for the ills of society." (Woodbridge 249) Webster showed us the Duchess' rebellious character and action against the restrictions and social norms in the renaissance era. He showed us a woman who is able to free herself from all the limits in such a patriarchal society. The Duchess's powerful character in the play showed the audiences the ability of a woman to shift the gender role and behaved bravely in front of death. She proved her ability to stand in the face of corruption represented by her two brothers. The Duchess declared her freedom and ability to transcend the limitations in a world of man. Most critics said that John Webster's use of a confident female as the central character in his plays was innovative (Arnold 29). Perhaps by focusing on the confident female character Webster tried to plant the seeds of change for the next generation. Webster was able to portray a masculine formation in the society where corruption existed against women. Finally it can be said that both the Duchess of Malfi and My Last Duchess were real heroines who did not care the so-called mastery of man over them and sacrificed their life willingly to establish their equal rights.

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