

The Domestic Horror and Spatial Resistance in *The Duchess of Malfi*

Md. Fahad Hasan¹, Md. Ripon Ali^{2*}

¹Undergraduate Researcher, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia-7003, Bangladesh. Email: hasanfahad264@gmail.com

²Independent Researcher (English Language and Literature), Bangladesh.

Corresponding Author: Md. Ripon Ali, riponengiu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the dual role of the domestic sphere in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and shows how the house works as a resistance layer and site of horror. The Duchess shows her willingness to marry Antonio from an inferior class against her brother's approval, which is exceptional in the Jacobean period, by challenging patriarchal society. Home becomes a protective shell against a male-dominated society. At first, the house was related to security, nurturing, and comfortable places that transform into uncanny, strange, and horrible places of psychological pressure, referring to Sigmund Freud's concept of 'Uncanny.' By using Bosola's spying on the female protagonist, the sanctuary becomes a prison. In this case, the horror is associated with psychological disturbance, which makes it possible to establish a reference to suppressed fear. Consequently, once a noble place becomes the place of psychological torment that evokes feelings of uneasiness. This paper examines how the domestic realm can be a site of private resistance and horror from a psychological perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The external world revolving around *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-13) by John Webster acts as a trigger and causes panic and fear. The story begins as a secretive household romance but ends as a nightmarish family vendetta tragedy. While the play fits within the Jacobean tradition, in which violence and terror are often externalized and broadcast directly to the audience on stage, Webster drifts that abhorrence of the intimate space of the household. The Duchess's palace and chambers, which ostensibly stand for security, get reassembled into world of terror. This metamorphosis is reminiscent of psychologist Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, which literally means 'the unhomely'. Freud argues that the familiar-heimlich comes to identify with the uncanny-unheimlich, and the once-familiar space becomes an estranged and fear-evoking place. Within Webster's tragedy, the house hides the dark secrets, a forbidden marriage and secretive childbirth, which reveal violence and make the domestic facade frightening. Freud's apprehensions about "home and its secrets" and "madness" as factors of the abnormal are also realized in the dramaturgy of this play.

Concurrently, the domestic sphere in *The Duchess of Malfi* becomes the place of resistance to the heroine's subjugation. The unplanned marriage and resulting children become an instrument of rebellion, an attempt to achieve personal happiness and independence in a patriarchal setting. The Duchess enunciates a paradoxical dichotomy between two very different familial situations that are in conflict with each other. The natal family from which she comes, and the cohabiting family with which she shares her domicile and which is illegitimate in terms of the overarching patriarchal paradigm. Her brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, see the development of her independent household as a threatening contravention of their rule over the blood of the kings and the political machines that they command. Consequently, they try to oppress and destroy it, thus converting her domestic haven into a territory where to act with punitive measures. This dynamic classifies *The Duchess of Malfi* as a play at this intersection between domestic drama and revenge tragedy, supposedly. One and the same time, the intimate story of an embattled household, and a stadium cult of dynastic revenge. The house of the play turns out to be a war zone where we observe confrontation between personal life and state authority. Analyzing how Webster recycles the Duchess's home as a disturbing den of upended kinship helps explain its power as a site not only of atrocious violence, but of her resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic space in *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster is not placed in a neutral location but is a place of psychological horror and female strength. The

horror is always placed in the tightest spaces by avoiding outright open violence, and in this way, the Duchess's bedroom, the family rooms and her prison all force the viewers to recognize the unusual transformation of the familiar into the frightful. In its later critical commentary, a shift away towards physical violence to psychological torture and anxiety of space has been traced, indicating how familiar spaces can be used to generate fear, and how the Duchess uses the same spaces to become an agent. The uncanny-*Unheimlich* of the familiar-*heimlich* becoming unnatural and scary gives an explanatory framework of how the home of the Duchess was turned into a mental battlefield. According to Freud, uncanny affect is created when an element is reconstituted itself as something threatening. (2-4). Malfi performs this change by manipulating the household objects and space arrangements that should make one feel safe, and turning it instead into the tool of terror: the misjudged dead hand turns out to belong to Antonio, the realistic wax effigies of the relatives of the Duchess, and the blackened chamber where Ferdinand seals her. These iconographic decisions and dramaturgic moves correspond to the idea of Freud, whose suppressed anxieties are revived in the field of familiar milieus.

Criticism of the early twentieth century helped to re-conceive that of the story of Malfi, not as a revenge tragedy as such, but as a drama of internalized horror. In 1901, Clayton M. Hamilton suggested that Webster had used Ferdinand, the villain, to argue that Webster was the villain who "afflicts the mind ... rather than the body," using ominous death imagery, madness, and "woeful anticipation" to torment his sister (59). Although Hamilton comes before the systematic formulation of psychoanalytic criticism, his observation is a premonition of later work on the subject of psychological dread, in that it suggests that the horror of Malfi is more internal and affective than purely corporeal.

Irrestricted settings and delimited domestic surroundings, as it was used in Jacobean plays, like Malfi, give rise to the feeling of trepidation, as it was noted by modern scholar Catherine Richardson. There was a kind of pessimistic force at work in most of the Jacobean tragedies, according to Richardson "the connection between extreme physical and emotional violence and the small, bounded spaces of the house that generates much of the tension and power of Jacobean tragedies." (Richardson, quoted in MyTutor). As a result, the home environments are changed into the objects of conflict.

Feminist criticism in its early form shifted the emphasis of attention out of narrative violence and to the visualization of gendered bodies and space

domination. The ground breaking article by Theodora A. Jankowski could show how the hostile brothers of Webster attempt to control the corporeality and spatial agency of the Duchess by means of confinement and surveillance to police her sexuality and pregnancy as the sources of ideological danger (225). Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra is also using psychoanalytic paradigms in his argument in that the voice of the Duchess is equated with sincerity and agency and a voice is synonymous with sanity and devastating lust (Websters). The voice of the brothers is synonymous with madness and damaging desire, thus spatial and rhetorical subversion of the patriarchal authority (Hamamra). Judith Haber locates in this apparent contradiction, a space of the feminine, in which the reproductive interiority of the Duchess and her efforts to create a home are opposed by the masculinist narrative path, although she is ultimately destroyed by it- this is where the specificity of the spatial experience of the Duchess becomes apparent in contrast with the linear violence of her brothers (5-6).

The analysis of setting by Michael Witkoski assumes that the architectural elements of the play, such as rooms, lanterns, walls, symbolically represent confinement and crumbling of relational structures such as the darkened lantern scenes, the echoing abbeys highlight mistrust and torn communication, cram domestic space into psychologically pressurised rooms (2). Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh stresses the fact that bodily decay and mannequin effigies in the chambers of the Duchess move the line between life and death, animacy and inanimacy, which influence a creepy proto-Gothic atmosphere before the actualization of the genre (178).

Performance studies also help understand the ways in which domestic horror is magnified through staging. The analysis, provided by Farah Karim Cooper, of the production at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse shows that close indoor staging, candlelight and space design enhance psychological intensity, literally bringing the audiences into the close proximity of the scenes of dread and intimacy (2). Such staging decisions as dimmed rooms, intimacy between actors and the audience and distorted light emphasize the uncanny transformation of domestic space: what should be the place of closeness turns into the place of horror and control.

RESEARCH GAP

Critics together illustrate that *The Duchess of Malfi* transforms household spaces into landscapes of terror and insurrection. Hamilton's psychological focus, Richardson's spatial study, and the feminist contributions of Jankowski, Hamamra, and Haber illustrate that homes serve as a nexus for gender, power, and terror. Performance researchers elucidate the execution of thematic issues

through staging that manipulates the architectural proximity of space and lighting to evoke dread.

Despite the abundance of scholarly work, a significant gap persists in the theoretical literature. While individual strands of feminist criticism, spatial analysis, and performance studies examine aspects of domestic horror, there is an absence of a comprehensive theoretical synthesis that integrates psychological horror (the uncanny), spatial design (interior architecture and stage mechanics), and embodied resistance (gendered agency) into a cohesive framework. There exists minimal study that integrates literary, psychoanalytic, spatial, and performance studies to elucidate how the domestic space functions as both a site of horror and resistance, rather than focusing solely on the psychology of the characters.

The subsequent generation of research is required to develop a cohesive framework of spatial theory, incorporating perspectives such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, psychoanalytic theory (notably Freud's concept of the eerie), and feminist embodied critique, all positioned within the context of early modern performance practices and contemporary performance. This would help us understand not only the psychological terror of Malfi better, but also how the house's design and the stage's mechanical effects work together to make and change the horror.

METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a qualitative, interpretative, and textual analytical framework, which falls under the literary theory and cultural criticism, to analyze the aspects of domestic space in John Webster's work *The Duchess of Malfi*, exploring the components of horror and opposition. Based on psychoanalytic theories, feminist, geographical, and affective theories, the methodology is meant to shed light on how the domestic sphere, as seen as the place of refuge, can at the same time provoke both terror and agency. The triangulation methodology combines the Freudian concept of the uncanny-Unheimlich, Gaston Bachelard and *The Poetics of Space* and feminist analysis of space and space limitation. The uncanny, as understood by Freud, something both recognizable and estranged, comforting and terrifying, offers a critical point of contact with which the spaces of the home in *The Duchess of Malfi* can be pruned up. Corridors, bedrooms, secret chambers of the play serve as physical carnivals of space that are symbolic spaces where identity, desire, surveillance and violence are played out. This question will zero in on the manner in which domestic spaces are portrayed in the drama, bedrooms, hallways and the wax cabinet, their symbolic weight and emotional force. An

excellent example is the wax statues of the children of the Duchess, which can be interpreted as grotesque imitations that cause marvel in the so-called safe realm of the house. The paper also uses secondary sources and a wider cultural background, such as academic articles, critical essays, and theatrical reviews, to place the key analysis into the available academic discussion. Indicatively, modern performance reviews often focus on the emotional narrative that the theme of domestic terror and feminist oppression creates. Historical artefacts such as early modern domestic manuals, architectural commentaries and companionate marriage discourses are used to put into perspective domestic environments as spaces which are shaped by broader sociocultural anxieties. The choice of scenes focuses on some key moments when the domestic space is transformed, namely the secret marriage of the Duchess, the unveiling of the wax figures, her subsequent arrest, and the scene with madmen, which are some of the key moments. The physical and symbolic space of both interior settings is mapped to represent the thematic and psychological roles of the settings. Coding scenes and elements are applied with the application of psychoanalytic concepts, feminist themes and categories of space. The study is placed in the context of current critical literature, including, but not limited to, Irish discussing the concept of disgust and space boundaries, and the ideology of the household, to situate the research in the context of the rest of the body of scholarship. The final aim of this research is a humanities-driven methodology which predicts interpretative and symbolic, emotive and ideological resonance of literary spaces instead of depending on empirical scale. By using critical discourse analysis, it builds an active conversation between the central reading and the modern research. The combined use of psychoanalytic, feminist, and spatial theories helps develop a multidimensional character of the functioning of the domestic spaces in the play as a complex place of power, fear, and resistance. The study follows MLA 9th manual for parenthetical citations with an acknowledgement list at the references section.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster is built as a tense territory of domestic space between the themes of private desire, women power, and the male gaze. Since the very first scenes, the household of the Duchess is both refuge and some form of mute witness to a crime. Her bedchamber, her privy rooms and eventually her walled palace get played upon as theatre where early modern anxieties over the subjects of marriage, lineage, blood and gender are enacted with special intensity. Applying the approach of domesticity and the uncanny to the reading of the play helps to understand how the domestic house of Duchess, on the one hand, allows her to resist the influence of patriarchy until she is intruded, subverted, and turned into a nightmare by state and

brother, on the other hand. However, most importantly, Webster also gives the Duchess the chance to take control of this transgressed space again both morally and symbolically, and turn the house into a place of both shame and pride.

Early in the play, domestic space serves as an agency and self-determination space. Once Ferdinand and the Cardinal expressly prohibit her to remarry, the Duchess goes to the seclusion of her bedchamber and insists on her will. It is in the name of the normal housework sending her courtiers away at night that she plays her scene of proposing to Antonio and says, "We now are man and wife," (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 1.1/line 579). This scene is especially vivid due to the fact that it takes place behind the scenes of court politics. The privy chamber of the Duchess as it is described by Carla Spivack is a legally and symbolically heated zone in which the Duchess plays the role of performing the marriage that is both conscionably valid and unseen by patriarchal law (42-44). In this instance, sexual domesticity is not a denial to act, but the reorganization of energies in a different manner.

This illicit marriage forms a new home that does not run along the aristocratic families and rule of men. Instead of Antonio, it is the Duchess who is the head of this household, something that upsets the early modern ideas of the marital hierarchy. Catherine Richardson has indicated that Renaissance tragedy often works with the household as a model of the state, in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The dwelling of the Duchess is a female-run sanctuary, which is maintained by the relationships of trust with Antonio and Cariola, but not by the dynasty. This situation is a single occurrence of maternal housewifery in Renaissance tragedy. However, Webster intentionally puts this secrecy in a dangerous light. Act 2, the suspicion by Bosola about the pregnancy of the Duchess leads to a tense conflict over the domestic borders. Trying to come into the chamber of the Duchess, Bosola is blocked by Antonio, who claims, "Sir, this door you pass not" (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 2.3, 40/line 65). The door, which is locked, intermittently protects the honesty of the home, thus making the household space an actual barrier against patriarchal scrutiny. The maxim recorded along with Antonio says, "The great are like the base...when they seek shameful ways to avoid shame" (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 2.3, 40/line 66). The hypocrisy of the situation of the Duchess can also be seen. Her opposition leads to the use of a lie, and, more importantly, it is that secrecy that is supposed to protect her and at the same time makes her vulnerable to being exposed. She is soon undermined by the mundane products of the home. The astrological chart of a child, a lost ribbon, even the smell of apricots, are

valuable witnesses of their guilt. What would otherwise have been personal traces of family life are thus re-formed as forensic evidence. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud notes that the domestic-heimlich may suddenly take the features of the uncanny (unheimlich) when something that is supposed to be hidden is revealed (4). The very example of the household of the Duchess could be taken as a good illustration of this very metamorphosis. The familiar turns into dangerous, and the intimate obtains an accusing side as it is told "The household itself...incriminates her in the eyes of the state" (MyTutor). This observation captures Webster's irony. The Duchess is undone not by public scandal but by domestic traces that refuse to remain silent.

When her brothers found out that she had been a married woman and a mother, they went ahead to invade and poison her domestic world. The fact that Ferdinand was obsessed with the sexuality of his sister was manifested in bloody fantasies of penetration and purification. His question is "who leaps my sister" (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 2.5, 50/line 101). The debate on honour turns into a voyeuristic obsession. The transformation of the palace of the Duchess into a place of imprisonment is a radical shift between the place of refuge and the place of nightmare. She finds under house arrest that her home has been transformed into a prison, where Bosola controls it, and a vast spy network is at work. The idea of the uncanny developed by Freud still offers a useful analytic model: the domestic space becomes terrifying not because it is unknown to us, but because it has been made unfriendly by the same people who are supposed to take care of it (6). The Malfi palace, which was once a center of secrecy and protection, is thus converted to a dungeon.

The dramatics of torture that Ferdinand uses in the form of wax puppets, insane individuals, and threats of destruction are played out in this domestic setting, thus transforming the house into what Clayton Hamilton once described as a "tragedy-of-blood" environment (412). But still, as patriarchal violence takes over the home, Webster gives the Duchess a phenomenal ability to protest.

The most powerful form of resistance that the Duchess accomplishes is not fulfilled by physical flight but by word, by speech, by identifying oneself. Bosola tries to reduce her by appealing to the impermanence of worldly glory. Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright. Her reply is a bare statement, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2, 97/line 167). This statement is a reclamation of identity as well as space. She provides her name, transforming the prison into a court by stating that her powers do not

disappear even when in prison. Her own denial of empty conforming “I would thou wert hanged for the horrible curse / Thou hast given me” (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.1, 88/line112) indicates an unwillingness to follow the script of emotion that she has been forced to follow.

Even her allusions to blood turn the discourse of patriarchy in another way; her brothers argue that her family blood is corrupted, but she emphasizes a pure sense of morality saying “I have so much obedience in my blood / I wish it in their veins to do them good” (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2, 98/line 195-96). The rhetoric of blood, honour, and obedience is also appropriated and turned against those who originally practiced it, thus exposing the moral emptiness of their argument; by embracing death, stating “I know death hath ten thousand several doors” (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2, 100/line 255). The Duchess invents execution as passage and not an end. The corrupted palace is contrasted with the hope of a better, higher place of stay, hence proposing a final defiance of action with spiritual re-definition. Her calmness throws off her torturers and prompts the moral transformation of Bosola. He is met by her dignity, and acknowledges “O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps” (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2, 107/line 425).

Whether this conclusion is a form of true hope or a merely performative act to bring order has been a subject of debate in the scholarship of the literary field. The fact that Kenneth Rexroth identifies a moral vacuum is opposed to the rest of the readings which have a tentative reconstruction. Yet, symbolically, the fact that the lineage of the Duchess goes on proves that her secret love act has social repercussions. The secret family she sets up outlives the masculine elements which tried to annihilate it. The persistence of the presence is supported in the echo scene, when the voice of the Duchess leads Antonio outside the grave. Alternative ways of living are memory and legacy. The physical house was disturbed, but the Duchess retrieves it due to the memory and the bloodline. As a result, the uncanny is somewhat cleared: the place that used to be a location of horror, again, turns into a futuristically oriented place.

CONCLUSION

In the play *The Duchess of Malfi*, John Webster turns the domestic realm into the highly ambiguous theatrical environment, where opposition and fright are closely inter-woven. On the one hand, the palace of the Duchess turns into a bloody mansion with the smell of gloomy death paraphernalia and the terror of lunacy, which are thrust on her by her malicious brothers. When even the most mundane objects, such as beds, corridors and even the family members are turned into the terror zones, the ordinariness of the domestic home becomes

horrifyingly other, the epitome of the uncanny. Such a disturbing representation predicts the criticism Webster will give to the domination of the patriarch: even the most sacred domestic spheres are penetrated by oppressive forces which impose their will. However, Webster portrays the identity and resistance of the Duchess as a household base. At first, the Duchess uses her home as a refuge of love and self-choice but later takes her home as a last stage to demonstrate her eternal dignity reflect her statement "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2, 97/line 167). By doing so, the so-called uncanny house obtains a counter-narrative of a moral order and truth, although it is not able to prevent her bodily death. She finally purges evil out of her home when she dies; her murder serves her evil brothers right and her good acts continue to heal Malfi to her successor. Finally, the play assumes an interesting maxim according to which without justice and humanity no household can be called home. Tyranny takes away the domestic happiness of the Duchess, making her house monstrous and hostile; but her good qualities shed a ray of light, and claimed that a home should be a place of love, truth and ease. Webster leaves it by giving a picture of survivors viewing the ruins and swearing to settle the son of the Duchess in the right of mothers-in-law and thus recommending that the house of that woman be rebuilt by law. Delio goes on to state that the tragedy must be a lesson to be learned, and he urges his fellow citizens to make use of this great calamity. This warning holds meaning to modern viewers. As Webster notes, the home, usually mythologized as a place outside of politics, is in fact very political and may at the same time be a place of revolution or an arena of totalitarian power. The rebellious spirit in the human soul can continue to struggle, as it happened in the case of the heroine, despite the fact that the walls of her house narrow and transform into her tomb. It is her courage and eloquent agony that turn her twisted refuge of monstrosity into a monument of struggle, which is the Duchess. The reverberating exclamation of resistance in Webster and her own self-assertion to her place of domination despite the heinous acts of domestic terrorism is still relevant today, forty years after her time, and reminds us that the real nature of a home lies in the liberty and pride of its inhabitants.

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