Honour, Virtue and Oppression in Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*

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Georgian historiography being an attempt to create a shared and self-congratulatory impression of the past serves as verbal equivalent of a national monument. Ann Radcliffe's *Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* was written during the acme of popularity of gothified histories. This makes the novel a high drama of murder and revenge, usurpation and restoration, love and abduction, cruelty and virtue upholding common people's vow of joining hands to fight for ethical cause of avenging oppression against the backdrop of the Scottish highlands. On the one hand, the novel helps in perpetuating nationalist identity among English citizens by acclaiming virtuous, just, and moral act of the rightful feudal Chief Osbert and declaiming in contrast the avarice, oppression and lust of the usurper Malcolm. On the other hand, the self-devastating pride and calm resignation of the highborn women such as Mary and Louisa portrayed in the novel conform and thereby contribute to the notion of the "Angel in the House". The paper, thus, will examine the role of prevalent sense of honour and values imbibed in the major characters of the novel in bringing justice to the oppressed characters.

Keywords: oppression, gothified histories, the Angel in the House, the Gothic as the political, Vindicta mihi

Introduction

The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne, published in 1789 in London is a novel consisting of twelve chapters written by Ann Ward Radcliffe. Although being thin in comparison to Radcliffe's later to be composed more famous novels—*The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*—*The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* truly predicts the enchantress's artful texture by portrayal of the theme of murder, confinement and revenge in a mysterious and erratic atmosphere. As the epigraph of the novel denotes, the novel deals with the ways of God to bring justice:

For justice bares the arm of God,
And the grasp'd vengeance only waits his nod.
CAWTHORN. (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 1)

Literature Review

Eighteenth century was a period when interest in historicity was generated through the works of historians such as David Hume and Edward Gibbon. Further moral gravity was practised by writers such as Addison and Johnson. The grave issue of political life was also taken up by Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver's Travels*. Rousseau, the prophet of sentiment and democracy had exercised a profound impact on the cultured English

mind. Influence of these figures taken together helped Radcliffe and Clara Reeve perpetuating nationalist identity among English citizens by acclaiming virtuous, just, and moral act of the rightful ruler and declaiming in contrast the avarice, oppression and lust of the usurper in their novels *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* and *The Old English Baron* respectively.

In the eighteenth century, professionalism was never considered as a gentlewoman's identity. So in spite of acclaiming the fascination of Mrs. Siddons' influence in "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826), Radcliffe endowed all of her heroines excepting Ellena di Rosalba with merely recreational creativity. As a result, these innocent and faithful heroines initially fall victim to some lustful, suspicious and avaricious paternal figures. The theme of the final triumph of patience, virtue and modesty of female character over despotism and hedonism of male character is common in Richardson's *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *A Sicilian Romance*, and *The Romance of the Forest*. Unlike the turbulent heroines in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Henry Fielding's *Shamela*, all of the heroines in Ann Radcliffe's novels and eponymous heroines in Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Camilla* embody the desirable traits of modesty and submissiveness for women in the society. The narrative voices in these novels proclaim the conforming ones and declaim the turbulent ones and thereby manacle female readers by harbingering the concept of "Angel in the House".

Exposition

The basic thrust of the novel is that of the taking up of arms by the Scottish highlanders even to the point of risking captivity and losing life to bring justice for the wronged ones in the name of God by avenging the wrong doers. By assuming the role of Fury, the vassals on the one hand fulfil their duty to their rightful feudal lords and on the other hand form a nationalist identity through their consolidated regard for justice, honour, virtue and nationalist pride. In the opening chapter of the novel, Earl Osbert recognises the moral, social and aesthetic values of his people in his speech to Alleyn, "There are other clans as ready as your own to avenge the wrongs of the noble Earl of Athlin; the Fitz-Henrys were ever friends to virtue" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 3). As depicted in the novel, love for virtuous deeds makes some of the servants of the usurper Malcolm too choose to join Osbert's camp to that end. Even Countess Matilda succeeds in resisting grief on Osbert's perilous resolution to fight Baron Malcolm by thinking "the enterprize afforded of honour to the memory of her murdered Lord, and of retribution on the head of the murderer" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 5).

The opening lines of the novel are as follows: "On the north-east coast of Scotland, in the most romantic part of the Highlands, stood the Castle of Athlin; an edifice built on the summit of a rock whose base was in the sea. This pile was venerable from its antiquity, and from its Gothic structure; but more venerable from the virtues which it enclosed" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 1). Indeed, in their captivity the virtuous Laura and Louisa assume the status of Mary Madonna to their vassals. The story of two clans, those belonging to the Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne who are involved in feuds and mysterious romantic love affairs against the backdrop of ruined medieval castles, thus resembles the history of kings and queens of England in its being a fine drama of lust and betrayal, mystery and murder, torture and escapade, heroism and cruelty, tragedies and triumphs. As a sure characteristic of Gothic romance, each of the major characters in the novel is definable by his/her passions: the Earl of Athlin, Osbert, is principally driven by his love and revenge motif; Countess Matilda and Baroness Malcolm are driven by their concern for their children; Mary and Alleyn are marked by their attempt to resist their passion of love for each other; Baron Malcolm and Count de Santmorin are marked by cruelty and their

passion to possess Mary; Laura is marked by her grief and love for Osbert. These characteristic features are in conformation with the paraphernalia of the gothic novel.

The plot of the novel deals with larger-than-life characters set in antiquity in the midst of their ordinary pursuits of plotting, avenging, falling in love, and getting married. The mediaeval setting is ensured by the depiction of the feudal system, rebellion, call for duel, exhibition of chivalry, and mediaeval castles. The story of love intrigues and the punishing of primordial crime to bring justice revolves round the plot having the prime villain Baron Malcolm. This haughty and ambitious feudal chief brought misery to both the houses of Athlin and Dunbayne by murdering the Earl of Athlin and unlawfully taking possession of the Castle of Dunbayne and Louisa's inherited estates in Switzerland after the death of the old Baron Malcolm. His love of power and sense of wrongdoing, however, kept the scheming villain alert about possible counterattack from the two families. Therefore, he kept the widowed Baroness Louisa and her daughter Laura confined in his castle, kept more soldiers than his pomp required and "sought an asylum from virtue in the busy scenes of war" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 29). Therefore, he was always alert about the possible rebellion. While trying to avenge the murder of his father, Osbert gets imprisoned by Baron Malcolm. Osbert's chivalry and yen for glory can be marked in his will to relieve the oppressed ladies—"When he considered that so much beauty and dignity were the unresisting victims of a tyrant... he longed to become at once the champion of virtue, and the deliverer of oppressed innocence" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 15).

The Angel in the House

Despite the fact that the heroines in the novel "possess creative genius" (Clery, 2000, p. 61), they are depicted as oppressed and subjugated in the novel for they have no professional accomplishment. "Their genius is bounded by the expectation of marriage and domestic bliss" (Clery, 2000, p. 62). This conditioning, of women's being confined to the concern for aesthetic values, reflects the position of women in the contemporary Western society. Countess Matilda and Baroness Malcolm help to propagate the notion of the "Angel in the House" by their sole concern for the wellbeing and enhancement of the talents of their children even in their respective bereavement and confinement. The poignancy of gothicness of the novel is intensified by the depiction of these pure victims against whom sins are committed but never confessed. The novel thus raises gender issues by employing tragic essentialism in portraying the heroines as universally powerless and universally good. Radcliffe, by rendering her heroines as mere victims of passion, exposes the ideological indoctrination and economic inequality that contribute to women's oppression. However, her female characters' mutual bonding in having ultimate reliance on divine providence and their indomitable spirit portrayed in the novel show their nonchalance to the subjugated position generally attributed to women in a patriarchal society.

The kinship formed through subjugation among the subjugated can be evidenced in the conversation among the male and female characters too. Earl Osbert in an imprisoned state wants to help Baroness Malcolm and asks for means to "soften the affliction" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 23). Commitment to honour and chivalry make Osbert empathise with the oppressed ones and try to alleviate others' suffering. Virtue, honour and other knightly qualities further make Alleyn and other subjects take up arms against the usurper. The consolidated effort of the people to bring justice can well be evidenced in the highland story by Ann Radcliffe. This agendum, which makes the Scottish people in the novel unite and fight for honour's sake against the tyrannical usurper Baron Malcolm, helps in building a kind of nationalist identity among them. However, the well-known idea of travelling heroinism as expounded by Ellen Moers (1976) in the seventh chapter of *Literary Women*:

The Great Writers in which heroines are “in flight from male tyrants across fantastical landscapes and in search of lost mothers entombed in womb-like dungeons beneath patriarchal castles” (Wallace & Smith, 2009, p. 2) cannot be evidenced in this novel for instead of absent mother here the plot contains absent father.

Mary, though being highborn, is denied the agency of expressing her desire in the face of imminent patriarchal reproach and dishonour of her family. Regard for propriety and hierarchy keep the lovers—the highborn Mary and the apparently lowborn Alleyn—silent about their deep-rooted attachment until it is finally discovered that Alleyn is the lost son of Baroness Louisa. Till then, in addition to suffering the pang of unexpressed love, Alleyn endures the false accusations of the Earl without revolting. Such is his allegiance to his rightful feudal lord that in spite of being subjected to false charges, he does not care to remind the Earl of his being the Earl and his sister’s rescuer from death and dishonour. Indeed, it was the Earl Osbert himself “for whose safety he had suffered imprisonment, and encountered death” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 43). Therefore, when Osbert cuts short Alleyn’s self-defence after accusing him of deceiving by walking away haughtily after saying “I have now no time for parley...my moments are precious” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 43). Alleyn only feels wretched and disdains explanation. He, reciprocates Mary in choosing to mourn in solitude for his reaction resonates that of Mary in his endeavour “to exclude her idea, but with an effort so faint, that it would still intrude! Pleased, yet sad, he would not acknowledge, even to himself, that he loved” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 4).

The Gothic genre is used by feminists “to explore [psychic] conflicts in relation to a society that systematically oppresses women... It has been used to show how women are at least potentially ‘pure victims’” (Modleski, 1982, p. 83). The cult of domesticity which taught women to hold and practise the four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submission and domesticity makes the womenfolk of the novel forbear from the attempt to assume active roles in their emancipation from their subjugated state. Therefore, Mary calmly decides to be a pawn to her brother’s life to the murderer of her father “since misery demanded one sacrifice, she would devote herself the victim” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 20). This submissiveness further blinds her to the fact that she is playing scapegoat to patriarchy as although she can be given to the murderous Malcolm and pressed to marry the villainous Count de Santmorin, she cannot be married to her lowborn lover Alleyn. Being the product of patriarchy, she must assume her role in ensuring primogeniture. Therefore, she has to fall at Osbert’s feet to discourage him from “filial duty, honour, revenge” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 5) and encourage “filial love, regret, and pity” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 5) to restrain him from accomplishing the fatal act of avenging the death of their father. Indeed, the feminine concern of Mary and Matilda also creates psychic conflict in Osbert.

The Motif of “Vindicta mihi”

The plot structure of the novel parallels with that of *Hamlet* in the portrayal of gothified history of its having the theme of avenging the murder of a father by some larger than life figure. This novel too adopts supernatural machinery to intensify suspense and emotional layers. Just as in Clara Reeve’s *Old English Baron*, here we find the theme of “noble ‘foundling’ who has his usurped rights restored” (Miles, 1995, p. 76). Further, a parallel can be drawn between Ann Radcliffe’s *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* in Mary’s being put in the awkward situation of being pressed to marry Santmorin by her family members just as Clarissa was urged to marry Mr Solmes by her brothers. Indeed, “Gothics, like Harlequins, perform the function of giving expression to women’s hostility towards men while simultaneously allowing them to repudiate it” (Modleski, 1982, p. 66).

As the novel was written during the liberal Georgian reign, the fact that castle is a space for inflicting torture needed not be hushed. The feature of the depiction of the gloomy side of aristocratic life is to be found in the novel as it can be found in many other documents of Georgian historiography and literary works. Further, Great Britain was the only country in Europe that was ruled by Republicans. So, Radcliffe could think of portraying revolt against feudal lord in such a setting. A national identity is formed by the vassals' commitment towards restoring legitimate heirs to the positions of power and their concern for honour and virtue. A contrast between Alleyn and Osbert is drawn by Robert Miles by pointing out their association with natural and artificial space respectively. "The valley is associated with meritocratic values; the castle, with feudal class consciousness, a pagan sense of revenge, and a patriarchal order" (Miles, 1995, p. 82). Alleyn, being raised up in sublime pastoral landscape is a noble savage while through his inconsiderate behaviour towards Alleyn, Osbert proves himself to be an aristocratic barbarian. Radcliffe, here points out the ennobling effect of nature and the corruptive effect of civilization to be later depicted in the works of Romantic and Modernist poets. Indeed, this prevalent notion of considering corrupting and imprisoning effect of castles made the French citizens attack the Castle of Bastille in 1789.

The Gothic as the Political

David Punter in *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche* has suggested that one of the ways in which the Gothic might be considered is as a political literature and elucidated by giving examples of "obscurantist Fascism of H. P. Lovecraft, through the lightly liberal politics of Stephen King, to the valuation of anti-statist outlawry we can find in any number of recent incarnations of the vampire". The prevalent political conditioning of having riots and revolution against political authority in the novel too exemplify the notion. The transgressive behaviour of Baron Malcolm as can be exemplified by ambush, imprisonment, tyranny, and violence meted out by him help to create consolidated effort among the oppressed people to remove him from the position of power. Further, the insubstantiality in the form of her readership's anxiety in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* serves as "the background to more immediate themes, such as, for instance, sexual politics" (Miles, 1995, p. 85). The sexual politics in the novel assumes its role in the portrayal of fantasised and real violence meted out towards women which bring their honour at stake. Fantasized violence is found in the possibility of rape in the following description of Mary's flight: "fainting, she flew on the wings of terror; all her efforts were vain; the villains came up; one seized her horse, the others fell upon her two attendants" (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 9). Real violence can be found in the confinement of Louisa and Laura and the repeated abduction of Mary.

The possibility of finding both the hero and the villain in the same patriarchal figure could be realized only in Female Gothic novels for these novels instead of containing male perspective were "organized around the female perspective" (Williams, 1995, p. 141). Therefore, in the novel through the characterisation of the Earl we find the theme of doppelganger as we can find the villain Malcolm's double in the hero Osbert. He resembles Malcolm in victimizing Alleyn. Thus the novel even before the emergence of iconic "mad, bad and dangerous to know" Lord Byron, depicts admirable yet hard-hearted figure in recounting the propagation of victimisation of innocent Alleyn by the dutiful son yet callous feudal lord Osbert. The novel thus precedes in the depiction of the theme of victimisation which was yet to be lionised in slave narratives in the following centuries. This idea of doppelganger can also analyse the apparently benevolent Osbert and Countess Matilda in their being agents in perpetrating suffering of Mary by their callous patriarchal behaviour. Through the analysis

of the intricacies of human nature, Ann Radcliffe, as is posited by Paulson in *Representations of Revolution, 1789-1820*, employs the secret of making us “fall in love with what we fear to look on” (1983, as cited in Wright, 2007, p. 26).

Conclusion

The struggle and consolidated effort of the believers bring the virtuous Laura and Louisa out of captivity and help Earl Osbert to avenge the murder of his father by bringing defeat and death to the usurper Malcolm. The very common theme of the eighteenth and nineteenth century literary works of depicting the experience of condemned life as is found in the restlessness of Lady Macbeth and the Ancient Mariner can be found in the act and speech of the usurper Malcolm. The revenge actualized by Osbert not only helps Laura and Louisa assume their rightful positions but also relieves the usurper from a cursed existence. Even the highly victimized Philip Malcolm secures perfect happiness as he finds his rightful place as a Baron, marriage to Mary and appraisal of Earl. Therefore, the narrative voice remarks towards the end of the novel, “Virtue may for a time be pursued by misfortune, and justice be obscured by the transient triumphs of vice, but the power whose peculiar attributes they are, clears away the clouds of error, and even in this world reveals his THRONE OF JUSTICE” (Radcliffe, 1789, p. 51). Thus, the novel portrays the role of regard for honour and virtue in bringing relief to the oppressed ones.

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