

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CONCEPT OF GENDER IDENTITY IN ELIOT'S GOTHIC: "THE LIFTED VEIL"

Saeed Yazdani¹ and Peyman Amoozchi²

¹ Department of English Literature, Bushehr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

² Department of Dramatic Literature, Bushehr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

Abstract

During the period between 19th and 20th century the characters, in particular the women, in the Gothic structures were more likely to be trapped in domestic spaces than semi-ruined castles, which were often used. Expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic was extremely influential at the time. It engendered a body of critical work that focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic works articulated women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society. Nevertheless, the horrors of the loss of identity are not limited to women; men were also exposed to these horrors. It is here that there sometimes occurs a reversal of roles. A woman who used to be passive, turns to be active in bringing the male counterpart under her submission; he can no longer impose his will upon her, and finally, gives in to the demands of the woman. This subject is the central issue of many 19th and even 20th century novels; "The Lifted Veil" is an example.

Although 19th century is characterized by the realist tradition, but gothic subjects dealing with identity and gender issues in their contemporary societies have been a favorite topic used in the 19th and 20th centuries. Eliot made an attempt at it, although what she attempted was not only concerned with the fears of women but those of men. This is exactly what she has been trying in her novella, "The Lifted Veil". An attempt is made in this article to focus on the concept of the loss of identity of characters in Eliot's "The Lifted Veil".

Keywords: Identity, female, Gothic, Veil, Patriarchal

1 INTRODUCTION

An important topic used by the 19th and the 20th century writers and philosophers is the issue of identity. This subject has been recurrent in the Gothic fictions of the late Eighteenth century and the following period. Indeed the term "Gothic" has come to mean quite a number of things by this day and age. It could mean a particular style of art, be it in the form of novels, paintings, or architecture.

The Gothic novel has received much literary criticism throughout the years. Critics of the genre have engaged in analysis of the various elements of the Gothic novel and those elements with the repressed feelings of individuals and, in a twentieth century perspective, the unconscious of the human psyche. The Gothic novel deals with understanding attained through horror. An important aspect of Gothic novel is setting. The setting is greatly influential in Gothic novels. It not only evokes the atmosphere of horror and dread, but also portrays the deterioration of its world. The decaying, ruined scenery implies that at one time there was a thriving world. At one time the abbey, castle, or landscape was something treasured and appreciated. Now, all that lasts is the decaying shell of a once thriving dwelling.

Furthermore, the Gothic novel to be discussed here in this article is that of a female writer, George Eliot. One of the most lucid analyses of the Female Gothic narrative of the persecuted heroine is flight from a villainous father and in search of an absent mother. Eliot made an attempt at it, although what she attempted was not only concerned with the fears of women but those of men. This is exactly what she has been trying in her novella, "The Lifted Veil". An attempt is made in this article to focus on the concept of the loss of identity of characters in Eliot's "The Lifted Veil".

The term "Female Gothic" was first coined by Ellen Moers who used it in *Literary Women* (1976); she thought that it was easily defined as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called "the Gothic." A definition of "the Gothic" was, she admitted, less easily stated, "except that it has to do with fear" (90). Moers considers Female Gothic texts as a coded expression of women's fears, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth.

One of the characteristics of the Female Gothic plot is its representation of romantic love. Andrew Smith in "Love, Freud, and the Female Gothic: Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*" explores how Stoker's novel raises some complex questions about love through its use of a male love-struck narrator, who appears to be caught in a Female Gothic plot which casts him as its hero. In the novel 'love' becomes increasingly sinister as it turns into a destabilizing and dangerously irrational emotion that ultimately aligns love with feelings of justified horror. This kind of horror is well established by Eliot in "The Lifted Veil".

The Gothic hero becomes a sort of archetype as we find that there is a pattern to their characterization. There is always the protagonist, usually isolated either voluntarily or involuntarily. Then there is the villain, who is the epitome of evil, either by his (usually a man) own fall from grace, or by some implicit malevolence. The Wanderer, found in many Gothic tales, is the epitome of isolation as he wanders the earth in perpetual exile, usually a form of divine punishment. The plot itself mirrors the ruined world in its dealings with a protagonist's fall from grace as she succumbs to temptation from a villain. In the end, the protagonist must be saved through a reunion with a loved one. Even though the Gothic Novel deals with the sublime and the supernatural, the underlying theme of the fallen hero applies to the real world as well. Once we look past the terror aspect of this literature, we can connect with it on a human level. Furthermore, the prevalent fears of murder, rape, sin, and the unknown are fears that we face in life. In the Gothic world, they are merely multiplied. This is exactly what happens in Eliot's work.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ellen Moers first used the term "Female Gothic" in *Literary Women* (1976), she thought that it was easily defined as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called "the Gothic". (Moers 1976) A definition of "the Gothic" was, she admitted, "less easily stated, except that it has to do with fear" (90).

It not only engendered a body of critical work which focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic articulated women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society, but placed the Gothic at the centre of the female tradition. By the 1990s, however, partly as a result of post structuralism's destabilizing of the categories of gender, the term was increasingly being qualified and there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the Female Gothic constitutes a separate literary genre.

The heroines of Gothic novels masquerade as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilizing passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over that system.

While hysteria up to Freud's time was equated with femininity, the balance is being redressed through recent interest in the studies of male hysteria.

As far as reversal of gender role is concerned, Juliet Mitchell in her work, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1984), expounds her opinion on reversal of roles by stating: "Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity within patriarchal discourse" (Mitchell 1984).

Margaret Atwood, in *Lady Oracle* (1976), chose to use the term "Feminine Gothic" to signal her focus on the gender of the speaking subject in the text rather than the gender of the author. (Becker 1999) Such readings, influenced by poststructuralist skepticism about essentialist gender categories, have nevertheless demonstrated the continuing centrality of the Gothic in postmodern and postcolonial writings by women.

3 OBJECTIVES

The most important objectives considered in this article are as follows:

- 1- Investigating the loss of identity in George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil".
- 2- Investigating Gothic Feminism and reversal of gender role in Eliot's "The Lifted Veil".

4 METHODOLOGY

An important issue discussed in the 19th and 20th centuries is the importance of gender role and the horrors surrounding identities of individuals in the patriarchal societies. There are different attitudes towards the gender role and identity. However, one needs search this subject in the Gothic fictions of the late 18th century and the 19th century. On the other hand, there is the question of reversal of gender role that has been recurrent in the feminist literature.

Therefore, a study of Eliot's works, "The Lifted Veil" and those theoreticians like Freud, Eagleton, Jacobus, and others who have been influential in the field of gender identity and Gothic literature is also substantial. For this purpose, the author has used library and descriptive – analytical method, based on the analysis of George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil".

5 DISCUSSION AND OBSERVATION

"The Lifted Veil" (1859) is a novella, dealing with the adventures of a young man named Latimer, the first person narrator. Regarded as a Gothic tale combined with elements of science fiction, "The Lifted Veil," chronicles the story of a doomed man endowed with extrasensory perception. Although he has foreseen his own murder, he is unable to change his fate.

The narrator, Latimer, anticipates his death one month away, which he has seen in a vision. He reflects on his miserable childhood: his father's rejection, his brother, Alfred's scorn, his pervasive loneliness, and his own unsuccessful creative attempts. Sent to Geneva to finish his education, Latimer forms a friendship with another outcast, a gifted boy named Meunier. When Latimer falls seriously ill, his father comes to take him home; it is at this point he has his first psychic experience—he has a vivid and accurate vision of the city of Prague, which he has never visited. From this point, he is afflicted with involuntary telepathic powers—able to hear the petty, cruel, and disturbing thoughts of the people around him—, which leaves him afraid and increasingly isolated from human contact. The only person's mind that is impenetrable to him is that of Bertha, Alfred's beautiful fiancée. He is fascinated by her and jealous of his brother. When Alfred dies in a riding accident, Latimer inherits his money and property and marries Bertha. After several months of marriage, Latimer is finally able to read Bertha's mind, and he is shocked to learn that she hates him and wishes for his death. As a result, his telepathic power fades. His misery is alleviated for a brief time by a visit from his successful friend, Meunier. During the visit, Bertha's maid, Mrs. Archer, dies and is momentarily revived by Meunier—just long enough for her to confess Bertha's plans to poison Latimer. With this disclosure, his telepathic powers return and he separates from Bertha. As the story ends, he awaits his death on September 20, 1850.

5.1 Sense of Alienation

Critics have often discussed autobiographical aspects of "The Lifted Veil," viewing the story as a reflection of Eliot's own fears, alienation, doubts, and feelings of guilt. They note several similarities between Eliot and the protagonist of her story, Latimer; for instance, like her character, Eliot was estranged from her father, as well as her sister and brother. Moreover, commentators assert that Eliot's chief preoccupations show up in "The Lifted Veil," particularly her interest in science, psychology, double consciousness, and extrasensory powers of perception.

It is Latimer who is first isolated and is filled with the fear of alienation. He pays lavish attention to his various symptoms, including melancholy, hypnotic powers of previsions, which have given him warning of his imminent death. As he sits in his room, awaiting his death, he is reminded of the disastrous circumstances bringing about the present state of sorrow; these circumstances include the loss of his mother at an early age, the treatment he received from his harsh and ambitious father, and his older stepbrother. He asserts: "My nature, was of the sensitive, unpractical order, and ... grew up in an uncongenial medium, which could never foster it into happy, healthy development" (Eliot, "The Lifted Veil", 1985, 8).

Considering the novella as a depiction of hysterical paralysis which freezes the onward movement of narrative, Jacobus states that Eliot's novella:"in effect, refuses the future tense despite being predicted on foresight.

Latimer is locked into the narrative tense of hysteria, a reenactment which turns all futures to the inescapability of the past" (Jacobus, 1986, 261). Along with the past, the future penetrates the present. For Jacobus, Latimer's powers of prevision functions rather like reversal memory.

Latimer's alienation begins from the times he realizes that "the time of (his) end approaches" (Eliot, 1). The burden of his neurotic melancholia as well as his self-hatred seems to be, according to the process described by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia," (*Penguin Freud*, 1992) "reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on the patient's own ego" (11: 257). Latimer's identity loss can be traced in his excessive emphasis on time, when his reminiscences return obsessively to questions of time: "My childhood perhaps seems happier to me than it really was, by contrast with all the after- years. For then the curtain of the future was as impenetrable to me as to other children: I had all their delight in the present hour, their sweet and indefinite hopes for the morrow" (Eliot, 4).

The confrontation of future and present is embodied in the cluster of images of veils, curtains and impenetrability that dominates the text. Nevertheless, at this early stage it is the future which is impenetrable, the reversal of which leads the crisis of melancholia.

Latimer has turned into a hysteric who suffers not only from reminiscences but also from a compulsion to defend himself against the feared future consequences of his traumatic past. The lifting of the veil and the act of veiling itself, are associated with Latimer's blindness and his failure to enter the symbolic order. When his stepbrother dies in an accident, Latimer is somehow delighted, because now he is able to possess whatever the former possessed, that is, Bertha. He finds time suitable to unleash upon Bertha the profound misogyny at the base of all oedipal relationships. Ironically, it is not a deep romantic love which attracts Latimer to her, but the fact that she represents all he least admires:

In abstract, no womanly character could seem to have less affinity for that of a shrinking romantic, passionate youth (like himself) than Bertha's. She was keen, sarcastic, unimaginative, and prematurely cynical.....To this moment, I am unable to define my feelings towards her: it was not ordinary boyish admiration, for she was the very opposite, even to the color of her hair, of the ideal woman who still remained to me the type of loveliness. (21-22)

With the loss of his mother, he seems to have lost his identity as a man; it is a reversal of paternal to maternal dominance. In the case of Latimer, one needs to focus on these reversals and paradoxes. Here the paradoxical attitudes of Latimer towards tenderness are well established:

While the heart beats, bruise it – it is your only opportunity; while the eye can still turn towards you with moist timid entreaty, freeze it with an icy un-answering gaze; while the ear, that delicate messenger to the inmost sanctuary of the soul, can still take in the tones of kindness, put it off with hard civility, or sneering complement, or envious affectation of indifference; while the creative brain can still throb with the sense of injustice, with the yearning for brotherly recognition – make haste – oppress it with your ill-concerned judgments, your trivial comparisons, your careless misrepresentation. (3)

These antitheses prevailing throughout the novella, establish a series of gender possibilities experienced by Latimer. That is the reason for his inconsistent personality.

The vehemence of his disgust for human frailties suggests that Latimer's pain derives at least in part from his failure of empathy for others (except at his father's death)--that his discomfort with telepathic communication rests on his resistance to human connection in general. Thus, his uncanny hearing unmasks a kind of sympathetic deafness to others, and his progressive heart disease indexes the shriveling of his capacity for human love and friendship.

Through her altruistic epigraph to a painful story, George Eliot suggests that the journey to greater human fellowship often requires a passage through suffering. In "The Lifted Veil", Eliot explores the form of pain that shackles sado-masochistic relationship, and the roots of that pain—buried in the misperception that punishment is deserved. This paper will explore Latimer's attempt to change by moving through his masochistic stance into the sadism that has bound him.

5.2 Gender Identity

In most of Gothic fictions, women are in distress. As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention. The women suffer all the more because they are often abandoned, left alone, and have no protector at times.

As far as "The Lifted Veil" is concerned, Critics have often discussed its autobiographical aspects of, viewing the story as a reflection of Eliot's own fears, alienation, doubts, and feelings of guilt, and even loss of identity. They note several similarities between Eliot and the protagonist of her story, Latimer; for instance, like her character, Eliot was estranged from her father, as well as her sister and brother. Moreover, it is also believed that Eliot's chief preoccupations show up in "The Lifted Veil," particularly her interest in science, psychology, double consciousness, and extrasensory powers of perception. There is also a connection between Bertha's inscrutability and Eliot's use of anonymity and pseudonym, which she was considering ending around that time. Feminist critics perceive Latimer's extrasensory gifts and isolation as an extension of the woman's traditional role in the home, in which women often exhibit a honed intuitive sense and feel oppressed and trapped. In another feminist perspective, the malevolent character of Bertha has been interpreted as a symbol of female sexuality; because she considers her union with Latimer as soul-deadening, loveless, and without passion, Bertha's plot to murder Latimer has been regarded as an attempt to reclaim her vitality and sexuality. The story is also viewed as a symbolic expression of Eliot's struggle with the dynamics of the creative process. Some critics have approached the story from a scientific perspective, placing it in context with the medical, psychological, and scientific theories of Eliot's time, especially in relation to the Victorian views on knowledge. In fact, the limitations and danger of scientific knowledge is regarded as a major thematic concern in "The Lifted Veil."

Terry Eagleton establishes a relationship between the hysteric and the Oedipal in the Lifted Veil. ("Power and Knowledge," 1983) On the other hand, Jacobus considers the novella as a hysterical text whose hysteria, in the last resort, can be read as that of the woman writer trapped in male prevision. (*Reading Women* 1986) These critics also share the idea that Latimer's inconsistency has something to do with the Oedipal, death and castration. Some critics also believe that the horror bothering Latimer's mind and heart is due to not only hysteria, but also splitting, bisexuality and castration.

The process of reversal of the gender role takes place when Bertha's muscularity overweighs Latimer's femininity. As a "half-womanish, half-ghostly" being (Eliot 21), Latimer considers Bertha as his antithesis: "the very opposite of the ideal woman" (20). He keeps on asking himself whether "that face of hers could ever have seemed to me the face of a woman born of woman" (63). The process further reinforced when Bertha's sadistic aggression increases. This aggressive reversal of gender role develops with Bertha's conspiring to kill Latimer with poison.

Latimer realizes the dominating power of Bertha over him; this further leads to the loss of his gender identity. He finds himself submissive to the enticing power of Bertha, when he confesses that an additional screen has fallen down between him and Bertha; he says: "This only brought me more completely under her power: no matter how empty the adytum, so that the veil be thick enough" (43). Soon after the wedding, Bertha seems to lower the veil by seeing through Latimer, "a miserable ghost-seer, surrounded by phantoms in the noonday" (48). It seems to be the final revelation for Latimer. He confesses: "The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me, and I saw that the darkness had hidden no landscape for me, but only a blank prosaic wall...(Now only) our positions were reversed" (49). The veils continue to shroud the events of the story.

It is in the final scene of the novella that the very last veil falls; when Latimer and his medical friend are informed of the true nature of events by the dying Archer. Here Latimer is shocked at the sight of Bertha's face and mysterious gaze, "we all felt that the dark veil had completely fallen" (63).

6 CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic has been extremely influential among the feminist circles at the time. It encouraged women writer to focus on the subject. The subject engendered a body of critical work that focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic works articulated women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society. Nevertheless, the horrors of the loss of identity have not been limited to women; men were also exposed to these horrors. George Eliot has made an attempt at it, although what she attempted was not only concerned with the fears of women but those of men. This is exactly what she has been trying in her novella, "The Lifted Veil". She has established herself as a realist writer, but the essence of Gothic tradition can also be traced in her works.

Critics have often discussed autobiographical aspects of Eliot's "The Lifted Veil"; they have pointed out the reflection of Eliot's own fears, alienation, doubts, and feelings of guilt in her novella. It is Latimer who is first isolated and is filled with the fear of alienation. He is endowed with melancholy, hypnotic powers of previsions, which have given him warning of his imminent death. Latimer has turned into a hysteric who suffers not only from reminiscences but also from a compulsion to defend himself against the feared future consequences of

his traumatic past. The lifting of the veil and the act of veiling itself, are associated with Latimer's blindness and his failure to enter the symbolic order.

Through her altruistic epigraph to a painful story, George Eliot suggests that the journey to greater human fellowship often requires a passage through suffering. In "The Lifted Veil", Eliot explores the form of pain that shackles sado-masochistic relationship, and the roots of that pain—buried in the misperception that punishment is deserved.

The final issue explained here has been the reversal of Gender role. The process of reversal of the gender role takes place when Bertha's muscularity overweighs Latimer's femininity. This is manifest in the final part of the story when Latimer accepts the superiority of Bertha's power.

REFERENCE LIST

- Becker S. (1999). *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Diane L. H. (1998). *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Eagleton T. (1983). "Power and Knowledge in the "Lifted Veil". *Literature and History*. 9. 1., 52-61.
- Eliot G. (1985). *The Lifted Veil*. London: Virago.
- Freud S. (1990-93). *The Penguin Freud Library*, vols. 1-15. (Trans.) J. Strachey. London: Penguin. (Abbreviated as PF)
- Jacobus M. (1986). *Reading Women: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Mitchell J. (1984). *Women: The Longest Revolution: Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis*. London: Virago.
- Miles R. (1995). *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Moers E. (1978). *Literary Women*. London: The Women's Press.