John Webster and The Duchess of Malfi

John Webster was an English Jacobean dramatist best known for his tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, which are often regarded as masterpieces of the early 17th century English stage. The period from 1603 to 1625 that was followed by Elizabethan Era (1558-1603) was the period of James I. In Latin “James” means “Jacobus” and thus this period is famous as Jacobean period in the history of England. Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Jonson, Webster, Ford and Tourneur etc. were remarkable dramatists of the age. The age was an age of immorality and corruption. It is reflected in the literature. In the field of drama, horror, revenge, pathos and sentimentality, lack of creative spirit, lack of technical skill, immorality and vulgarity and loss of national-appeal are reflected very well.

The tone and calibre of Jacobean drama had necessarily to depend upon the tastes and aspirations of the society. G. C. Macaulay has summed up the degenerate condition of Jacobean society in these words: “The Court of James I had lost the chivalrous aspirations of the earlier time and the moral-corruption which had been hold in check, at least to some extent, by noble ideas, had become alarmingly prominent in the life of the upper classes of society.”

The Duchesss of Malfi : A Jacobean Play

The source of this revenge play is dealing with horror, and melodramatic atmosphere of *William Painter’s Palace of Pleasure*. It is a product of Jacobean era; therefore, the moral vision of the playwright is obvious. The sentimentalism, horror and terror are treated in a very different way. In the play, Ferdinand is The Duke of Calabria, Cardinal is his brother. They have a widow sister, The Duchess of Malfi. She is young, spirited and high-minded lady. In the words of Antonio: “She throws upon a man so sweet a look, That it were able to raise one to a galliard...For her discourse, it is so full of rapture, You only will begin, then to be sorry...”.

David Daiches has rightly pointed out that the play, *Duchess of Malfi* is structurally a much simpler play and its plot can be briefly summarized. The interest and value of the play lie in the individual episodes.

The duchess has a steward (servant) and he is Antonio, whom she loves passionately. But her two brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, warn her not to
remarry. For her remarriage will be a disgrace to the royal blood. Later Ferdinand also confesses that he warned her not to marry again so that he might inherit her property. “What was the meanness of her match to me? Only I must confess, I had a hope Had she continued widow to have gained An infinite mass of treasure by her death.”

Thereupon, the Duchess marries Antonio secretly. Suspecting that the Duchess may remarry, Ferdinand and Cardinal place in her employment a spy called Bosola. He describes both the brother as: “He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off.”

He is an ex-galley-slave and villain to the last degree. Years pass and Basola informs her brothers that she has married Antonio and has children from him. The two brothers arrive to capture Antonio and the Duchess red-handed. So the Duchess and Antonio fly and separate from each other. Antonio escapes but the Duchess is captured. Ferdinand and Bosola then subject her to painful mental-tortures.

“You are very cold. I fear you are not well after your travel: Ha! Lights; Oh horrible!”

Finally, the brothers send killer who strange her. Ferdinand goes to see her dead body. He is greatly shocked to see her lying dead. His shock takes the form of great remorse and he goes mad. Thus, Retribution starts falling upon the murderers.

Bosola’s internal struggle is shown in the play. On some level, he wants to be good, and rues being made into “a villain”; yet, he feels bound to Ferdinand because of the “bounty” that Ferdinand has given him, and he wants “to avoid ingratitude.” There is a fit of remorse when Ferdinand sees his sister dead: “Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young.”

The Duchess of Malfi is a Jacobean play as Doctor Faustus is a child of Renaissance. The Jacobean age is characterized by corruption in the upper classes of society, horror, revenge and immorality. The play is the melodrama of revenge by the dramatist of moral-vision, Webster.
The Duchess of Malfi: As a Revenge Play

The Duchess of Malfi (1613) is well-known revenge play in the history of Jacobean English Drama (1603-1625) of England by an outstanding horror playwright, John Webster. The revenge play is a type of tragedy which is centred on the subject matter of revenge and has horror, terror, sensationalism and melody of great charm. The dramatist was very much impressed by the writings of Seneca, Kyd, Sackville and Norton. The impact of Gorboduc (1561) seems paramount in the Duchess of Malfi of the dramatist. The dramatist has followed the tradition of the Jacobean writers in writing his play and this is the reason why the themes of The Duchess of Malfi and the White Devil (1612) are based on revenge and horror.

The Chief Elements of Revenge Play in The Duchess of Malfi are a) A shocking murder has been committed and it cries out for revenge. b) Some persons take up revenge as a sacred duty. c) There is a Machiavellian villain who acting on his own behalf, or for other, causes wide-spread bloodshed. d) New types of tortures and horror are produced. e) The objects of revenge are often better than the so called avengers. f) Some characters grow mad or feign madness; and The imagery and language employed often suit the violence of the action.

Almost all the major features of the revenge play of the Jacobean Age are there in the Duchess of Malfi and the dramatist has proved himself as the master dramatist of the play of horror and revenge in the lines of Seneca, Norton, Sackville. William Henry Hudson writes in An Outline History of English Literature that: “JOHN WEBSTER (1580 ?-1625 ?) was a dramatist of sombre cast of genius and great power, though his morbid love of the violent and the horrible led him too often to sheer sensationalism. His White Devil and Duchess of Malfi contain scenes of tragic passion unrivalled outside Shakespeare.”

On the whole, The Duchess of Malfi is one of the best revenge plays by Webster. The play has a central theme of revenge, horror and sensationalism. It has the melodramatic style and all these have made the play a supreme example of the revenge play like Gorboduc and Hamlet. The whole atmosphere of the drama is full of awe and tortures.

John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1613) is a sensational drama on the theme of revenge which is full of melody, horror, torture, awe and very much exciting situations or scenes. The melodrama is a type of drama of revenge and terror. According to the Webster’s Dictionary, it is “a drama with a romantic story
or plot, sensational incidents, and usually including some music and song or any sensational and emotional drama”. The Duchess of Malfi is a sensational and emotional drama of horror based on the revenge theme. It is one of the best melodramas in the history of 17th century English literature by Webster.

**Duchess of Malfi: A Play of Moral Vision**

*The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) has a quest for moral order during the Jacobean Era (1603-1625). The dramatist’s vision is moral. Webster sees life as a struggle between right and wrong or good and evil. Here, we come to one of the key facts about him. For he was a child of his age, the age was the reformation, and he conceived morality in religious terms. The vision of the life of the dramatist is on one hand religious and on the other hand moral. A very famous critic, Swinburne has pointed out that: “There is no poet morally nobler than Webster.”

As the act for the dramatist was wrong, not because it interfered with the happiness of man in this world, but because it was a sin, a breach of the Eternal Laws established by God who created man. Men to him are not the helpless sport of an indifferent fate as they were to the Greeks. The evil acts are the causes of the human tragedy. The Duchess in her heroic composition to her brothers is a symbol of life as they are the symbols of death and the play maintains a tension between the opposing forces of the life and the death. These symbolic functions of the Duchess and her brothers are arrived in the poetic imagery of their lines. Here is an example for making of the concept more clearly. “Though in our miseries Fortune hath a part, Yet in our noble sufferings she hath none: Contempt of pain, that we may call our own.”

Lord David Cecil says that the Vth Act may be justified from the moral point of view. It is in this act that all the evil do get due punishment. Throughout the play, we may observe that the dramatist has a quest for moral order within the disorder of the age. To sum up the melodrama of the Jacobean age *The Duchess of Malfi*, we may say that it has a creed for moral order in the society. Webster’s moral vision of the life which is based on the religion is of great importance. The whole story of the tragedy is centred on the conflict between good and evil. Such there is no poet morally nobler than Webster in the field of English drama.

Bosola speaks these lines as he is dying. There are multiple death speeches in the fifth act, but Bosola’s is the final: “We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves, that, ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well. It may be pain, but no harm to
me to die In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world! In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, Doth, womanish and fearful, mankind live!”

Characters

The Duchess: The historical character the Duchess is based on was named Giovanna d’Aragona – but in the play she is only ever referred to – even by herself – by her public persona, her political position as the Duchess of Malfi. In the scene in her bedroom, early in the play, we see the Duchess bantering and laughing with Antonio and Cariola – the family she has made for herself.

Bosola: He is introduced to the audience as an unpleasant person, deprived, envious: a man who “rails at those things which he wants”. Bosola's attitude towards the nobility is compounded of envy for their fortune, dislike for their subsequent power over him, and a hunger for their position, for the financial stability and prestige it will bring.

Coriola: She is the only (sane) person in the play who faces death less philosophically, and more practically. She fights when faced with death. She fights, she struggles, she argues, she protests, to save the Duchess, and later to save herself. She neither cries for help like the Cardinal; nor does she seem resigned and calm like the duchess.

Antonio: He is the first person we meet in the play. He is a commoner, and his reflections upon the effect the court has on the people, and on the importance of a ruler who recognises and accepts good counsel are the reflections of one who stands outside, and in the role of an adviser. It is through him that we realise that Bosola's thirst for social acceptance makes him corruptible, and that the Cardinal is dangerous.

Prince Ferdinand: One of the brothers of the Duchess. His obsessive madness makes him a less villainous figure than his brother – he lacks the self-command to stop himself committing his crimes; and the self-awareness to know the implications of what he does.

The Cardinal: The eldest of the three siblings, the Cardinal is more closed and reserved that his siblings. Like the Duchess, he preserves a calm exterior even when he is truly angry or agitated. Unlike her, however, when he finds himself faced with death in the person of Bosola, he is panic-stricken. He cries for help, bribing anyone who is listening with his dukedom. For someone who was, and now is again, a soldier, it is striking behaviour.
Towards the end, he remarks, “I would pray now: but the devil takes away my heart/ For having any confidence in prayer.” His religion is completely gone now – physically, when he put on his armour, and now wholly, when even prayer is impossible for him.

**Conclusion**

To conclude we can say that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a perfect revenge tragedy. There is no denying the fact that Webster raises the original theme of revenge to a higher plan. Although Webster wrote this drama following the tradition of revenge tragedy, he has modified some of its aspects to make it unique. And he is perfect enough drawing the art in his own style that makes it more acceptable to the readers to accept it as a true revenge tragedy. So, in a word we can say that it is a perfect revenge tragedy.

Maxims and proverbs abound in the play. Bosola’s “the stars shine still” and Ferdinand’s “my eyes dazzle” may be quoted in this regard. The Functional imagery contributes to the gloomy atmosphere of the play and which also brings out the significance of the themes of the play. Animal imagery is frequent in the play, and is an expression of degeneration of man. E.M. Brennan comments that “the imagery in *The Duchess of Malfi* constantly suggests a series of contrasts, and parallels: between light and darkness; health and sickness; sanity and insanity; life and death.”

**Courtesy : Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam**