

## A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF SELECT FEMALE GOTHIC FICTION

Gothic fiction has always remained an intriguing and fascinating area of interest for the lovers of literature. It evokes a sense of 'delightful horror' in the readers. Gothic fiction was, and is, essentially a reaction against comfort and security, against political stability and commercial progress. Characterized by its castles, dungeons, gloomy forests and hidden passages, from the Gothic novel genre emerged, the Female Gothic which permitted the introduction of feminine, societal and sexual desires into Gothic texts.

Significantly, with the development of the Female Gothic came the literary technique of 'explaining the supernatural'. This technique is a recurring plot device in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* which helps Adeline to decode the mystery behind the death of her father. The decision of Female Gothic writers to supplement true supernatural horrors with explained 'cause and effect' transforms romantic plots and Gothic tales into common life and writing. Another text in which the heroine encounters the 'Supernatural Explained' or the 'supposedly' dead Countess Wolfenbach is *The Castle of Wolfenbach* by Eliza Parsons. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* too, the protagonist finds a logical explanation for the supernatural events taking place in Thornfield Hall which sheds light on the hidden 'mad woman in the attic' - Bertha Mason.

Such novels speak of what in the polite world of middle- class culture cannot be spoken. It characteristically explains and demystifies supernatural events and thus applies to the theory of the Supernatural Explained. The 1990s saw the Female Gothic move from the margins into the mainstream of literary criticism, as well as a shift away from psychoanalytical interpretations to socio- cultural readings.

The heroines of our primary texts - Adeline, Matilda and Jane journey through a psychological labyrinth of suspense, terror, hidden secrets, rejection and love. They are often a response to the cultural anxieties and dominant discourses of the time. Much of their silent suffering is related to questions concerning social issues such as women's expression of sexual desire, the economic dependency of women and cultural notions of femininity. *The Romance of the Forest*, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* and *Jane Eyre* present a subtle study of the psychological effects of repression on the minds of their heroines who are forced by the patriarchal society to subdue their passionate nature.

The object of Adeline's quest is a set of parents from whom she can learn what a domestic space can be and thereby mark her identity in the society. Diana Wallace states that women's potential for upward social mobility characterises the Radcliffean Gothic. Parsons presented Matilda as a vehicle for exhibiting the misery and oppression peculiar to women, a major social issue even Parsons had to face, as a female writer of the eighteenth century. The arbitrary tyranny of a husband, a common problem most women face in a patriarchal society, is laid uncomfortably bare in *The Castle of Wolfenbach*. Brontë's novel explores the relationship between racialised and gendered categories of identity, an agonizing discrimination that exists in the Western civilised society even now. *Jane Eyre*'s sense of mysterious danger, reinforced by the use of dreams, visions and psychic phenomena, contributed to its extraordinary success, which persists to this day.

The female gothic heroine is a sort of psychological detective in pursuit of her own fulfilment and the emphasis is upon the damaging effects of patriarchal control. Thus the Female Gothic can be read as a politically subversive genre articulating women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body.