



READING ELIZABETH GASKELL'S 'THE OLD NURSE'S STORY' THROUGH THE LENS OF SPECTRALITY AND HAUNTOLOGY

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Abstract

with all its evils presented aesthetically the Victorian society was considered to be the bench mark of an idol society, however its evils never went unnoticed. Patriarchal control over women, class consciousness, exploitation of workers called hands were most heinous evils of Victorian society intricately woven into its structures. Elizabeth Gaskell, wife of a unitarian minister and women of a high birth used spectres in her narratives emblematic of hidden desires, suppressed truths and historical amnesia, these spectres stared directly into the eyes of the Victorians seeking a confrontation for their othering, appearing in uncanny forms. Her short story 'The Old Nurse's Story' unfolds within this framework shedding light on the persistent issues of the Victorian society, urging characters to confront their pasts.

Keywords: *spectres, haunting, Victorian society, past, relationship.*

Introduction

Nineteenth-century British society was rooted in its structural inequality with up 95% of the population was represented by the working class and predictably this society was guided by strong morality, but women of working class and women from elite class suffered under rigid financial and patriarchal constrains respectively, therefore marriages were designed to expand business and to maintain the prestige in the society. The workers were called hands suffered a great deal of injustice, they lived in industrial towns like coketown, which were especially designed to habituated by the works so that they can access the factories easily, working at least eighteen hours for the production of goods to be sold in the colonies. But it not as though the evils of Victorian society wend unnoticed, Elizabeth Gaskell like Charles Dickens engaged critically with the socio-cultural issues of her times, thus presented an in-depth critique of the Victorian society in literary works. Gaskell's short story 'The Old Nursery's story' when amalgamated with Derrida's concept of Hauntology and Spectrality offers a compelling critique of class consciousness of the Victorian society.



The old nurse's story' through the lens of spectrality and hauntology

Derrida's *Specter de Marx* was an influential work in terms of elucidating the concepts of Spectrality and Hauntology. Spectrality is the essence of being dead and alive at the same time, present and absent at the same time, the condition of being a spectre- not fully gone, emblematic of repressed desires, lingering traumas, suppressed truths. Correspondingly Hauntology is the framework to comprehend the return of the past in figure of the spectre. The narrative of Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's story' unfolds within this framework wherein the spectres stirred up the imagination of her readers, infused with the evils of Victorian society and mythic tales.

Gaskell wrote during intense times of her life as she was wife of a unitarian minister, and also socio-political winds were not favourable because of her gender. The patriarchal society she lived in considered ghosts and spectres as immature, lacking intellectual depth, juvenile and simple to be dealt with by women authors, therefore she employed spectres in her works which provided her imaginative freedom mirroring socio-cultural and political realities of Victorian Age, these spectres kept her away from the radar of androcentric critics. In her short story she has utilised spectres to address female relationships in Victorian era and the nexus of patriarchal control amalgamated with class structure.

'The Old Nurse's story' is a family saga strewn with envy and resentment; this story also represents the class consciousness of Victorians. It is a story of two aristocratic sisters Maud Furnivall and Grace Furnivall, falling in love with same man, a musician- man of a lower standing but also a man with similar traits of a rake as he was flirting with both the sisters at the same time but abandons both eventually. The child Rosamond who is a distant relative of Furnivall's comes to stay with them after the death of her parents, one day she goes missing which sends her governess, Hester into a frenzy. Hester along with other servants look for her in every corner of the old mansion but she was found in a shepherd's arm, who had found her in the fells, frozen to death. But what Rosamond reveals after coming back to her senses startles Maud Farnivall. Rosamond was lured into the fells by the spectre of girl that was born as the result of Grace's relationship with the musician. Maud due to her envy made her father aware of Grace's secret child, culminated in him disowning Grace and her daughter, expelling them out of the house during a cold winter night, leading to their death. Since then the old mansion has been haunted by the spectres of Grace, her daughter and the old Furnivall who plays the organ during cold winter nights as witnessed by Hester herself. Their spectres represented envy, grief and suffering of the past which leaves permanent marks in the memory of those involved.



These spectres for Maud the surviving reminiscences of her grief which keeps turning back in uncanny form to deepen her remorse. The vengeful spectres make sure that Maud is doomed to mental and physical destruction, as she acknowledges the presence of the spectres and especially the reason for their presence, therefore she warns Hester to neither let Rosamond involve with the spectre of the girl nor to let her in, therefore it is clear that she is very much aware of her impending doom. In the narrative Gaskell has represented women as destroyer, creator as well as destroyed, Grace in this case is the destroyer and destroyed as well- she destroyed her sister and niece's life by revealing Maud's best kept secret to their father. she destroyed piece by piece as the nights gets colder and colder, the music from the organ becomes louder and louder and finally the appearance of Maud's daughter seals her faith. In the final scene the spectres of Maude, her daughter and Lord Furnivall enters the mansion to finally recreate the most excruciating scene from the past, Grace couldn't bear it and faints. Her consciousness over the years had made her aware of the her betrayal of Grace, therefore leaving a deep scar in her psyche.

Each spectre in the narrative has a unique feature to itself , these features together weave the entire story together reflecting upon themes of patriarchal control over women in Victorian society, the class consciousness of the Victorians and consequence of breaking the social rules or structure. Maude's spectre represents a mourning mother who tried to raise her daughter outside of social rules by keeping her hidden from the world on the her hand the spectre of her daughter who desperately slaps on the window to get in the house she very much belonged and the house that was supposed to be her refuge from the rigid social norms but she is driven out by Lord Furnivall, atone for her mother's sin. This child represented the other- an illegitimate child, therefore she is denied entry in the manor and the social structure of the Victorian society.

The spectre of the girl is emblematic of the evil past returning back to her grandfather's house to avenge herself and by doing so she is denying the male authority which Grace and Maud were not so successful in doing. The spectre is asserting her resentment towards her grandfather for denying her a family and an identity, she is capable of doing to because she had never burdened the social rules of Victorian society, thus she has rebelled against the social norms from the very beginning. The Old Lord's act of playing the organ remind the reader that he is the aristocratic patriarch of the family, emblematic of his dominance in the lives of female characters. The music that is heard represents that his authority has outlived him therefore upon listening to the music Grace and other female characters felt weak and accurately are felt scared.

Conclusion

Gaskell inculcates her story into the social structure of the Victorians who were well aware of the spectres they have incurred could haunt the present generation and lure the



present generation into colonial insurrections, economic recessions and class disparity, her audience were well aware of the fact that it was too late for them to redeem for the sins they have committed against women due to rigid patriarchal constrains and maltreatment of the other. Therefore, the spectres were produced by their own negligence, they were the result of their own believes, now standing in front of them with their eyes looks for confrontation, seeking answers for their othering.

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