

REBECCA: A GOTHIC NOVEL OF POWER DYNAMICS, IDENTITY AND IMPACT OF PAST OVER PRESENT

Dr. Arvind Sovani

Associate Professor

Department of English

C. P. & Berar College, Nagpur

Abstract :

'Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier is a highly successful Gothic novel of the time. Though critically not acclaimed, the novel continue to remain a bestseller since almost a century and keeps coming in cinematic form since last few decades. The novel was first appeared on screen in 1940's a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Since then many versions of Rebecca appered, the recent one being a film in 2020 on Netflix. The novel captures attention due to it's relevance to the modern life.

Keywords : Gothic, modern, narrative, self-image, societal judgement, relevance

'Rebecca' was released in 1930s, a comparatively orthodox era. A simple glance through the exquisite piece of literature transports us into the world of patriarchy, giving us glimpses of how people navigated gender norms in the 20th Century. Not only does it give us an accurate description of the aforementioned, the author goes an extra mile to make an attempt to positively (and hopefully) defy those norms by giving us the elegantly engineered character of Rebecca, a woman who in essence, by mere existence, stands to defy all the socially enforceable patriarchal norms.

First, the title. Rebecca never appears in the book; she is dead before it even starts. And yet in Du Maurier's hands her absence makes her as much a presence as all the other characters. Then the second Mrs de Winter; we never learn her first name. In another book this might be annoying, but somehow Du Maurier draws you in so that you never question it.

The coup de theatre, though, is the way Du Maurier makes the reader complicit with murder. Before the final twist, Maxim de Winter believes he had killed Rebecca, yet neither the second Mrs de Winter nor the reader cares. We go along with it, we make excuses for it: we have revealed the weakness in our own moral universe. Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation could not get away with that; the story was rewritten to make it clear Maxim hadn't murdered Rebecca. His plot was as black and white as the film; Du Maurier could live with murkier shades of grey. (1)

The book revolves around the lives of Maxim de Winter, a rather handsome, high society, privileged and well-mannered gentleman. It also involves our protagonist who is an unnamed woman most often referred to as Mrs. De Winter. Before marrying Maxim, the narrator used to work for a rude but wealthy moment until she unexpectedly ran into Maxim,



who after spending the summer with the protagonist grows fond of her and falls in love with her. When it's discovered that the protagonist shares the same love for Maxim, they get married.

The protagonist in 'Rebecca' is from a humble background. She didn't have a wealthy upbringing. So, she takes her sweet time to get used to the high society life at Monte Carlo. Initially she has a tough time adjusting, as she was used to spending her life under the shadows of her employer Mrs. Van Hopper. She feels like she might be able to mix in better with someone of similar background- namely the head servant of De Winter's Mansion 'Manderly'- an elder woman named Mrs. Denvers. To her dismay, she learns that Mrs. Denvers is fiercely loyal to Rebecca- Maxim's ex-wife who passed away a while before Maxim marries the narrator. To make things worse, Rebecca's sister Beatrice talks to her about Rebecca- something Maxim never did; which was a major source of insecurity for the narrator. The way people talk about Rebecca makes the narrator feel insecure about her looks and past, and makes her question her relationship with Maxim. Needless to say, she feels uncomfortable and unwelcome in Manderley. She also learns that Rebecca was drowned in the Sea on her boat near Manderley.

As we follow the narrator's life in Manderley, we can observe that it's not at all like the fairytale she imagined to be. She has servants at her disposal at any time, all the clothes and make up a lady could wish to own and all the riches which life has to offer, yet she feels uneasy and unwelcome. A major reason behind this being the way Rebecca's closest confidant- Mrs. Denvers- decides to go out of her way at every instance to subtly remind her that she could never be pretty or classy enough to fill Rebecca's giant shoes. Even though in the foreseeable future that turns out to be false, in the moment given the circumstances the narrator can't help but believe what she hears and because of her meek and shy nature judges herself harshly for it.

"While du Maurier's works may not probe the depths of human experience, they create worlds and peoples which haunt long after the book is finished. Du Maurier believed in her own brand of predestination, a reincarnation of the human spirit. Evil is inevitable in her view, but not insurmountable. Yet people are, by their very nature, condemned to a vision that exceeds their grasp. Her interest in character took a backseat to her fascination with personality types symbolic of abstract qualities of good and evil. She told Barbara Nichols in an interview for Ladies Home Journal: "I am not so much interested in people as in types—types who represent great forces of good or evil. I don't care very much whether John Smith likes Mary Robinson, goes to bed with Jane Brown and then refuses to pay the hotel bill. But I am [emphasis in original] passionately interested in human cruelty, human lust, and human avarice—and, of course, their counterparts in the scale of virtue.'" (2)

As the days pass by in Manderley, the narrator's perception of what is and what could be keeps getting worse. She doesn't feel at home and disconnected, and Mrs. Denvers keeps manipulating and mentally torturing her. Mrs. Denvers manipulates the narrator into hosting a party so she can make new friends, be properly introduced to people and get on board with the community of Monte Carlo. The poor, naive narrator actually looks at this suggestion as a truce of friendship from Mrs. Denvers. She does the same and upon Mrs. Denvers's suggestion,



decides to wear a beautiful white dress worn by a woman in a portrait hanging in Manderley. What's unbeknownst to the narrator is that the woman in the picture was Rebecca and the dress she was wearing also belonged to Rebecca. On the day of the party, as soon as the narrator enters the party she's met with horrified reactions and judgemental looks- although verbally shouted at by only her own husband Maxim, who shouts at her to go and change into something else. The narrator is heartbroken and truly believes she will never be able to fit in. When she learns from Beatrice the truth about the dress and the portrait, she confronts Mrs. Denver's about it. Mrs. Denver's then reveals that she was Rebecca's confidant and closest friend. She admits that she knew more about Rebecca than anyone else and that she never got over her friend's death. She further tells that even to this day she feels Rebecca's presence in her house and feels as if Manderley still belongs to her. Hearing all of this horrifies the narrator, and making sure not to miss the opportunity, Mrs. Denver's blatantly suggests the narrator to commit suicide by jumping out of the window.

Luckily, before the narrator is even allowed to react, she hears a loud noise and suddenly sees Maxim running towards Manderley from the sea. It is revealed to her that Rebecca's body has been found inside the ship. While the narrator was initially told that Rebecca's body was found, she never confirmed it from Maxim because Maxim always refused to utter a whisper about Rebecca. The narrator always assumed that it was because he was secretly still in love with his perfect, beautiful ex-wife who tragically passed away, But when Maxim decides to share his side of the story, the narrator realises how wrong she was. Maxim reveals that Rebecca was, in fact, not the perfect wife. He claims that he fell in love with her because of her looks and quickly figured out that she was involved in infidelity and extramarital affairs with many men and had no intention to change. She maintained her image of a loving and caring wife to keep up appearances in the Monte Carlo community. Maxim struck an agreement with her and told her that in order to avoid a scandal, she would be allowed to live her life the way she pleases in London and that they would be together only for the sake of appearance. Although Maxim was a man who was honourable enough to keep his part of the deal, his unfaithful wife unfortunately wasn't. She continued to go behind his back and also had an affair with her own cousin Jack Favell. One day, she revealed her adulterous actions to Maxim and they had a heated argument. To further provoke Maxim, she even taunted him that she was pregnant with a bastard child and planned on raising it while claiming it was Maxim's; knowing full well that Maxim had a social status to uphold and implying that to avoid a scandal he would have no other choice but raise another man's child as his own. Bewildered by her true intentions, Maxim got in a fit of rage and shot his own wife. He later took her body to the boat and sank it by cutting a precise hole in the boat. He then confessed to the narrator that the reason he married her was because she was the exact opposite of Rebecca- she was kind caring, sensitive and pure and because of the fact that he had killed Rebecca; Maxim was clueless about as to how even begin a conversation with the narrator about this. The narrator had a sigh of relief once she understood the whole picture. All the insecurities she felt washed away. She told her husband about how she felt before she knew about this and Maxim understood and instantly regretted the damage caused due to a lack of communication from his end. But the narrator expressed her love and affection for him and told him that she understood where Maxim was coming from and forgave him- Which made Maxim fall in love with her even more than before.



But the happiness of the reunited couple was short lived as they realised that Rebecca's body was found. The narrator assured her husband that whatever happened, they were in this together and would do everything in their power to navigate these troubled waters together. Shortly after, Jack Favell- Rebecca's lover and first cousin- showed up to Manderley to blackmail Maxim. He showed them a letter from Rebecca where she asked him to meet her urgently as they had something important to discuss. Favell asked a handsome amount of cash every year from Maxim and threatened to reveal the letter to the police if he didn't comply. Maxim, knowing that Favell's demands would only increase in the future, declined and told Favell to do whatever he wanted with that information. Favell went to Colonel Julyan, the coroner and inspector of Monte Carlo, who now decided to investigate the matter. Upon interrogating Mrs. Denver, he found out that Rebecca kept a diary of her appointments and the last entry she made for the day before she died was with a Dr. Baker in London. Upon this revelation, Maxim, the narrator, Favell and Colonel Julyan all went to visit Dr. Baker in London. Dr. Baker made the surprising revelation that Rebecca was actually sick and about to die an slow, ailing death. Maxim and the narrator spun the story to convince Colonel Julyan that Rebecca had committed suicide by sinking her own boat. Mrs. Denver's unknowingly helped Maxim by telling Julyan that the only thing Rebecca feared in life was a slow and ailing death- confirming Maxim and the narrator's theory. Everyone went their separate ways after seeming to know the entire truth of the story, Maxim and Rebecca went back to Manderley to find that the beautiful, cold mansion was on flames and had burned to the ground. Although it seemed abnormal, the couple were somewhat happy that with the burning down of Manderley along with all the unpleasant memories it held was symbolic for them to move on from their dark past and start a new, bright and happy chapter in their new lives as husband and wife.

'Rebecca' has also seen numerous adaptations and reinterpretations, demonstrating its enduring appeal. Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film adaptation is perhaps the most famous, but the story has also been adapted for stage, radio, and television. In 2020, a new film adaptation was released on Netflix, introducing the story to a new generation and highlighting its timeless relevance. "'Rebecca' remains relevant in modern times due to its exploration of themes such as identity, power dynamics, and the impact of the past on the present. The book's focus on the protagonist's struggle with self-worth and societal expectations resonates with contemporary issues surrounding mental health, self-identity, and the pressures of conformity. In today's world, where social media and public personas often create unrealistic standards, the unnamed protagonist's insecurity and comparison to Rebecca reflect ongoing struggles with self-image and societal judgment." (3)

References :

- Crace, John Crace, Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca Taught Me How to Love Literature, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/20/rebecca-daphne-du-maurier-classic-literature>
- Mambrol, Nasarullah, Analysis of Daphne du Maurier's Novels, <https://literariness.org/2019/06/07/analysis-of-daphne-du-mauriers-novels/>
- <https://bookanalysis.com/daphne-du-maurier/rebecca/historical-context/>

