

# A STUDY OF GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S "WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE"

Dr. Smita Mishra

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Basic Sciences & Humanities,

PSIT, Bhauti, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

## ABSTRACT:

The term 'Gothic' was used as a medieval style of intricate architecture and ornate around the 12<sup>th</sup> century which also originated in France. It was in the Romantic age in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when this was actually applied to literature. Gothic literature was mentioned in 1764 for the first time, in English writer Horace Walpole's, '*The castle of Otranto*'. A Gothic novel consists of supernatural events and combine elements from horror and romanticism. It can also be explained in a way that it deals with such elements or happening in nature which cannot be explained easily or over which humans have no control. It's most common plots are mystery and suspense. Gothic literature contains characteristics like horror, mystery, magic, clanking of chains, ghosts, supernatural activities, dark elements, dark castles to create an uncanny effect. Over the period of time gothic elements have shifted from the outer aspect to an inner aspect of human psyche. Shirley Jackson's novel '*We have always lived in the castle*' depicts the power of gothic through the hands of a master artisan. My paper will introduce the background of Gothic fiction in Literature and will also explore the elements used in crafting this novel which makes it a remarkable work in the genre of mystery, thriller and gothic.

Keywords: Gothic, mystery, horror, supernatural, haunting, death.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for the English was a period of discoveries and a lot of exploration in all kinds of fields, industry, science, religion and many more. It was also a time when people were fighting to believe whether there is God or any supreme power. Gothic novels allowed writers to portray these ideas through story telling. These things which we consider to happen at night, all unexplainable happenings in nature provided ways to explore the fear of the unknown. People started believing in the path of night and not in the path of light. It also questions what control do we have over the unknown.

### Characteristics of Gothic literature

1. Uncanny feeling.
2. Horror houses with mysterious architecture and trapdoors.
3. Supernatural beings like witches, vampires, ghosts, unidentified phenomena.
4. It also includes zombies, giants, wizards, werewolves.
5. Prophecies and curses are present as well.
6. Extremely intense emotions.
7. Heroes and dark magic.
8. Romance.

### Background of Gothic Literature and it's treatment in fiction.

The betterment of gothic literature and the emergence of romantic literature in fact happened simultaneously. There is something common in them as well, that is "imagination", and it is the keyword for romantic poets and the driving force for gothic novels. Gothicism has its own contribution to Romantic literature. One of the key points in gothic literature is that the idea is so offensive, it is considered as a sin either against the church or humanity or the idea is extremely twisted to the point of being ugly. The darkest gothic style revolves around death.

Writers of romantic period used gothic literature to compose, over their anxiety of social and political structure during that period. The gothic works depicted what can go wrong, what might happen and what will be lost by continuing in the path of social, political and theological changes. Gothicism was in English literature, European literature, American literature, Russian literature and is still there in all kinds of literature. Depression and sadness are also the elements of gothic. Adolescence is a time when individuals face depression. It is one key point that exemplifies gothic really well. Gothic is an overemphasized representation because people who face depression are also capable of experiencing joy.

The tradition of gothic in literature was bestowed by many romantic poets such as John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Since the beginning gothic literature has gone many adaptations and changes but its main role of showing human's deepest, darkest fears and inexpressible evil is both imaginative and real.

The key elements of modern gothic literature are:

- Role of women
- Supernatural
- Change of setting
- Horror

Stephen King is one of the most famous gothic and horror writers of modern times because he is able to mix the elements of Dracula and modern times horror and gothic so well that it becomes intriguing. One of his greatest abilities is his way of using the gothic elements like vampire and other supernatural creatures and makes the readers see them in a different light or aspect. His way of writing and describing horror ideas, gothic ideals and realistic settings help us to see new dimensions of our perception towards gothic stories.

Magic is also one of the most famous elements of gothic literature. In 'Harry Potter' the setting of the novel is something uncanny, in fact the ghosts which fly and talk in the castle depicts the Gothicism of the novel. Hogwarts, the forbidden forest, the graveyard and other elements from the Triwizard tournament evoke the feeling of darkness in readers which is common to gothic novels.

Gothic novels generally contain a hero or a heroine as we can also see in a lot of horror movies and gothic novels, they become a form of archetype as there is a pattern of characterization. There is always a protagonist who is the most vulnerable, isolated either voluntarily or involuntarily and an antagonist who has fallen down by his own grace or of some certain circumstances considered as the epitome of evil.

Death in literature, in religion, in life has always been a strong driving force in many humanities.

### **Treatment of Gothic elements in 'We have always lived in the castle'**

'We have always lived in the castle' was published in the year 1962. It was the last novel written by Jackson. The novel has been narrated in the first-person by Marry Katherine known as Merricat Blackwood. She lives with her sister and everyone in her family is dead. The story then gradually shows the backstory where six years earlier the rest of the Blackwood family dies of poisoning during a family dinner. The brief outline of this backstory tells us about the gothic elements. The isolation of the Blackwood family from other villagers bleeds into another element of gothic in the novel, its setting. Jackson also uses the setting, another work of late gothic literature. The crisis of the book occurs when Charles Blackwood, Constance and Merricat's cousin arrives to disturb their existence and circumstances.

The novel's opening paragraph's final sentence is in accordance with one of the gothic elements 'death'. She also mentions that she likes Richard Plantagenet, her sister and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom and then she says 'Everyone else in my family is dead', which clearly signifies the horror and mystery of the novel. The entire setting of the Blackwood home, 'the castle' is another gothic element used in the novel. The forest that surrounds the Blackwood castle, the village around, all of these elements are dense, noticeable and strangely sensual. The use of imagery is done very well. The feeling of isolation also arouses within because of the setting of the novel. The element of gothic is also there in the end of the novel when Constance states and wishes that she would be more happy if she could cook a child or eat it, though it's mainly in the form of jokes but the idea of gothic definitely comes in the mind of the reader because practically this imagination of the character is not possible.

Mr. and Mrs. Blackwood, the girls' 10 year old brother, their aunt also dies that fateful night. Uncle Julian, their aunt's husband, becomes very ill but recovered and is totally dependent on Constance and Merricat and Constance takes care of him while her sister largely watches. That night Merricat did not eat dinner and it included berries so the suspicion fell on Constance who did not eat berries and was tried and acquitted. In addition to the emphasis on death and murder and the sense of anxiety and further upcoming downfall, Merricat's characterisation also contains gothic implication. Constance is agoraphobic so Merricat goes into the village for supplies twice a week but she had made a game for herself and quite a trip about where she should walk and how she should act. In addition to all the rules for herself, she does weird things like burying stuff around the family property and attaches a book up on the tree as a protective talisman, these actions invoke magical thinking and what we think is what we do, so she does what she believes in. Magical thinking is very common in young children, who believe that things around them occur due to their actions and thoughts but the presence of this magical thinking in the 18 year old Merricat suggests a disturbed mind, which is another aspect of gothic. We have often seen in many gothic movies and read in books that a person who believes in supernatural has a disturbed mindset which is what shown in this novel as well: a deranged mind of Merricat. She also continues to believe that her family is better than the villagers and should avoid communication with them because the villagers are less worthy.

Mr. Blackwood puts up a fence all around the Blackwood castle and ties it with a padlock and this isolation of their castle from the village brings upon the setting of the novel which as mentioned before is another gothic aspect. Gothic elements continue as a plot throughout this novel and when their brother Charles Blackwood arrives, the crisis of the book occurs, he wants to take over the property and family existence and Merricat uses magic to protect her existence from her brother. When the fire breaks in the house then the volunteer firefighters come to do what they are required to do; then a truly horrifying scene, which implies of a satanic ritual, occurs as the villagers insist the firefighters to let the house burn and then looting everything which has not burned. Merricat and Constance continue to live in the small kitchen area of the house afterwards. The story ends with what once was a castle in the beginning has now become fruition.

### **Conclusion**

Every gothic novel contains its own kind of narration of gothic elements or supernatural in the novel and so is done by Shirley Jackson in 'We have always lived in the castle'. Ghost is a supernatural element but there is no as such presence of this element in the novel but yes there are novels which contain these kinds of gothic aspects like Jackson's 'The haunting of the hill house', which actually contains ghost.

'We have always lived in the castle' gives more of an uncanny effect and portrays scenarios like a family living in their normal weird life in a supernatural purgatory. Imagery is well versed in this novel and once a reader keeps on reading the novel it adds up and would want to read it further. Symbolism is also used in the novel like Food is a symbol of power, when Merricat used to feel disturbed by her family she used food to hurt or destroy them. The Moon symbolizes Merricat's wish of an ideal and a simple life;

it was her escape from those parts of her life that she did not like. The Safe represents the Blackwood family's lineage and wealth as Merricat kept all the money in the safe and their father also did the same.

The entire novel gives us the feeling that there is an actual existence of gothic in the novel when there is not. It is actually a story which makes us fall in love with the places we live in, haunted houses; the echoes of violence and emotion that are imprinted on these places. It is possessed with death but hovering over with life, but that is perhaps the awesome mixture of making the best of the supernatural of all, Jackson's work is scary, horrifying and plain weird and invokes astonishment when read thoroughly with great interest. Her description of gothic is marvelous.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Jackson, Shirley, *We Have Always Lived In the Castle*, London, 2009
- [2] Lewis, Matthew, *The Monk*, South Australia, 2014
- [3] Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, South Australia, 2014

