



## SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN GOTHIC LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT:

The major aim of writing this research paper is to explore the subject of social critique in Gothic literature, focusing on how it reflects the horrors, anxieties, fears and social values of its times. Social critique in the domain of gothic fiction talks about social, political and cultural affairs around humans. Gothic literature since its beginning i.e. 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day continues to work as a means to discuss social and cultural matters along with an amalgamation of gloomy and horrifying settings that gives thought to and exposes the marginalized and suppressed groups. The classical authors of Gothic fiction such as Mary Shelly, Bram Stoker and Edgar Allan Poe often question the themes of gender bias, imperialism and socio-economic inequality. Even in the present scenario, the writers try to use this genre to discuss globalization, post-colonialism and ecological apprehensions by using the elements of the grotesque.

In other words,

By combining the elements of disorganized characters and the supernatural, Gothic literature provides a prolific ground for social critique and how it has evolved over the years and how it has considered changing societal matters.

### INTRODUCTION:

Gothic literature emerged in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic era could possibly be the major movement which flourished this fiction. This genre uses both romance and horror

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simultaneously. The interplay between these two makes this fiction different and many ways. The Gothic fiction talks about the old castles, dungeons, monasteries and dark basements which gives the proper outlook of eerie atmosphere. The Gothic texts deal with the notion of social and political problems that the society battled with.

In simple terms, this genre talks about intense feelings which pairs terror with amusement, death and romance. The gothic fiction as a genre was first introduced with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* which is regarded as the first gothic work ever written. Since then this genre has evolved and the authors have produced many prolific works which had dark, psychological, disturbing and haunted features. The genre mainly is a combination of the perils of society along with mysterious settings and deformed creatures which terrorized the other main characters. The emotions which this genre holds can be categorized as – distress, fear, terror, surprise, haste and dismal. The tone of the gothic fiction tries to evoke terror and fear. Gothic literature is considered to be dark and strange which involves bizarre elements. This fiction talks about power, captivity and separation. The Gothic, a literary movement stressed on the elements such as – death, decomposed, terror, mayhem and exorbitance, also immense passion over rationality and reason which prospered in response to the sociological, psychological, historical and political factors of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. If we delve deeper into the gothic literature, it is more than just dark and eerie elements combined with disturbing characters but also has different layers, for instance if we try to critique horror fiction, we can see many social aspects too.

Social critique in Gothic literature is a critical examination and analysis of societal concerns such as gender roles, class hierarchies and political unrest. Since its establishment, Gothic fiction has always explored the dark sides of the human psyche, it is a genre mainly associated with fear and a deep passion for the paranormal and the morbid. In other words, Gothic literature is infused with the elements of gloomy, caliginous and mysterious narratives which are combined with different social issues. Apart from having such aspects, it has also been a platform for social critique. The gothic genre has the power to portray the sins and foulness which is prevalent in society. Many authors have used this genre and discussed issues ranging from gender injustice, political tyranny and the hypocrisy of the aristocrats. Works written in this fashion have an inherent link with the social context in which they were produced, also involving a critical commentary focusing on the representation of societal and cultural fear in the face of the cessation of tradition, oppression, gender roles and race in the domain of Gothic fiction. These texts were not only disputed but also inspected and critiqued in cultural and societal forms. In the meantime, elaborated on them with romantic notions, immorality, and sexual perversion, deformed creatures. During the Victorian times, there was extreme social unrest between different groups and a common concern about the future: uncertainties about the nature of law, society, family and sexuality which dominated gothic fiction. Therefore, Gothic literature provided a place for people to express their emotions and

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feelings towards certain things in such a way that they could not have initially been expressed through conventional writing patterns.

The term Gothic literature originally included medieval tales about knights and castles but with time it was shaped into dark involving more disturbed narratives which reflected cultural anxieties during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gothic fiction reached its pinnacle in the Victorian era, which includes the works of great gothic writers such as Mary Shelly, Bram Stoker and Edgar Allan Poe. Even in today's era, this genre continues to stimulate and impact the works of literature, films and other forms of media. Gothic literature involves dark, mysterious and suspenseful characteristics such as supernatural elements, monsters, ghosts and vampires as well as subjects of madness and horror. It is celebrated for its intense sentiments and portrayal of terror and fear. The gothic genre has left an inerasable mark on literature and also inspired later works in various mediums from film to music and even fashion. It continues to bewitch its readers with its uncanny characters and eerie settings.

Gothic fiction as a means of social critique: From Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto to recent works like Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace and other Gothic works, this genre has always been an important tool for social critique. Though the writers use different narrative ways to analyze social issues, the main feature remains the same Gothic figures and settings bring out the feeling of fear, horror and disgust in the readers to reflect the societal agitation and terrors of the time.

For instance, In Mary Shelly's famous work Frankenstein, the monster emblemizes the fears of science and its misemployment by the elites to dominate humans. Shelly has used the creature to symbolize isolation and societal rejection that people face who are different from the conventional standards. The monster was different from the human race and his appearance petrified them. The novel also highlights how society's agitation for the undisclosed can lead to prejudices and separation who are different and the detrimental effect this can have on people. "Believe me, Frankenstein, I was alone and benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me."(Shelly 103).

The author of the novel also argues that knowledge and power, if not used healthily, can have adverse effects on both humans and society as a whole.

Shelly's contemporary readers can take this as a warning bell against the abuse of knowledge in the face of rapid industrialization. Additionally, Frankenstein's hunger for scientific knowledge can be seen as a delusion that ultimately ruined him and the people around him. Therefore, the novel critiques the societal perils of intolerance against those who are



dissimilar and warns against the immoderate use of scientific knowledge without setting a moral boundary.

Gender roles are also an integral subject for critique in the Gothic literature. We see that women are often oppressed and victimised. Charlotte Bronte's work Jane Eyre explores the theme of gender inequality. "You have no business to take our books; you are dependant, Mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years." (Bronte 13). They are often abused and dominated by the males. The women were characterised as brittle, virtuous and unsafe to the menace of the supernatural.

But with the evolution of the Gothic genre, writers like Bronte has questioned the gender inequality by portraying female characters as independent, determined and self sufficient. The novel talks about the protagonist's fight for equal rights and independence and also shows the changing viewpoint of 20th-century women. With the setting of thornfield hall, Bronte was successful in depicting the suppressed women of Victorian society and their fight against gender discrimination. Jane's character signifies her own rejection of the society's rules. The novel presents a critique of the society of the Victorian era which throws light on the oppression of women, prejudice gender inequality. Also, it depicts the struggles of a woman in a male dominating society who is examined to be lower in status than the other sex and is restricted to her social position.

Through the experiences of Jane, Charlotte Bronte has employed the power dynamics between men and women. Jane's encounter with Mr. Rochester and St. John discloses how men employ their power over women, leaving them endangered to ill-treatment. Furthermore, the novel also critiques the class divide that influenced the Victorian era. With the representation of the character, Bertha Mason. She is confined to the attic of thornfield hall as she belonged to a marginalized community lack of action and voice. Hence, the novel critiques Victorian society, pointing out the oppression of women and gender bias.

In general terms, Gothic literature may be identified as a genre that only includes frightening settings, horror, fear and supernatural elements but this genre is not just limited to this extent, beneath these tensions and fears there lies a profound critique of social standards and practice. It involves an evaluative examination and analysis of social issues including supernatural ideologies, gender roles, class ranking and political confusion. If we discuss the themes of Gothic fiction, it has always talked about the struggle between logic and superstition. The authors of this genre have always tried to showcase the characters in a way that they were either confined by the supernatural or interrogated by the soundness of the



supernatural. As I've discussed earlier, in Mary Shelly's novel Frankenstein, Victor believed in science but ends up creating a monster which he hardly was able to control. This novel analyzes the Promethean aspiration of humans and their, wish to trifle with the Almighty. Another important work Dracula, by Bram Stoker, criticizes the obsession of Victorian society with the supernatural by talking about a ceremonial personality as an inverted thought of their unreasonableness.

Class hierarchies were also a notable point of the argument in the horror genre. Novels in this genre showing the rich and aristocrats as shrewd, dissipated and cruel. On the other hand, the poor or the downtrodden were shown as weak, and pious. The genre also discuss the issue of class hierarchy, which can be seen clearly in the novel Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte, the character of Heathcliff , a poor orphan who tries to get successful and raise his standard in society. Eventually, he gets involved in the circle of vengeance and brutality. "And he'll never be able to emerge from his bathos of coarseness and ignorance. I've got him faster than his scoundrel of a father secured me... Don't you think Hindley would be proud of his son... almost as proud as I am of mine . but there's this difference ; one is gold put to use of paving-stones and the other is tin polished to ape a service of silver. Mine had nothing valuable about it; yet I shall have the merit of making it go as far as such poor stuff can go. His had first-rate qualities , and they are lost: rendered worse than unavailing."(Bronte).

Political turmoil was another important aspect of social critique in Gothic literature with special reference to the Romantic period. The writers of this era portrayed political subduing and revolutionary upheavals in their works. For instance, the novel Celeb Williams by William Godwin , shows how the protagonist is accused of an illegal act and how he tries to get all the answers and discloses the truth. "Strange that men, from age to age, should consent to hold their lives at the breath of another, merely that each in his turn may have a power of acting the tyrant according to the law! Oh, God! give me poverty! Shower upon me all the imaginary hardships of human life! I will receive them with all thankfulness. Turn me a prey to the wild beasts of the desert, so I be never again the victim of man, dressed in the gore-dripping robes of authority! Suffer me at least to call life, the pursuits of life, my own! Let me hold it at the mercy of the elements, of the hunger of the beasts, or the revenge of barbarians, but not of the cold-blooded prudence of monopolists and kings!"(Godwin).

The novel critiques the dishonest judicial system of those times. Therefore, the Gothic literature has much more than just eerie atmosphere, grotesque , creepy monsters and haunted castles. In short, it acts as a matter of discussion on the grim aspects of society and a cry for a change.

## CONCLUSION:

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Gothic literature has as been an important instrument for writers to delve deeper into the societal issues of their times and their association with the horror and supernatural to portray social issues which are appealing and poignant. Social critique in gothic fiction involves the investigation of society's problems through the employment of supernatural, dark and grotesque settings. Gothic novels summon the status quo by evaluating superstition, gender roles, class ranking and political squashing. Gothic fiction, therefore, continues to grow as a crucial genre that points out the dark side of the human psyche and society,

Its vices and hypocrisies, as well as its societal function as a medium for criticism, will continue to exist.

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