

Infanticide as Fiction: Goethe's Faust as a Model

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'ගවුස්ට්' නාට්‍යය ජර්මන් ජාතික කතුවරයකු වූ යොහාන් වොල්ෆ්ගන්ග් ෆෝන් ගොයෙතෙ විසින් වර්ෂ 1831 දී රචනා කරන ලද්දකි. කොටස් දෙකකින් යුත් නාට්‍යයක් වූ එය එකල ජර්මන් ජන සමාජයේ මතවාදයට කුඩු දුන් ළදරු ඝාතන පදනම් කරගෙන රචනා වී තිබේ. සුසානා මාගරිතා බ්‍රාන්ට් නැමැති විසි හතර හැවිරිදි අනාථ මෙහෙකාර තරුණිය සිය ළදරුවා මරාදැමීමේ වරදට වර්ෂ 1772 ජනවාරි මස 14 වැනි දින ෆ්‍රැන්ක්ෆර්ට්හි දී හිස ගසා ඝාතනයට ලක් කරන ලද්දී ය. ඒ අවස්ථාව ඇසින් දුටු සාක්ෂිකරුවකු වූ ගොයෙත ඒ අනුභූතිය ඇසුරින් මේ නාට්‍යය රචනා කළේ ය. ඇගේ ඉරණම අත් වූ තවත් තරුණියන් රැසකගේ ජීවිතවල සැඟවුණු පැතිකඩක් සමාජ අවධානයට ලක් කිරීමට 'ගවුස්ට්' නාට්‍යය දායක වූ අන්දම මේ ලිපියෙන් සාකච්ඡා කෙරේ.

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සංස්. ජයමල් ද සිල්වා, දිල්ශාන් මනෝජී රාජපක්ෂ, දුලන්කා ලංසකාර,
දිනේෂ් සඳරුවන්

'ප්‍රභා' ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, තුන් වැනි කලාපය - 2013/2014

මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨය, කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

Infanticide as Fiction: Goethe's Faust as a Model

Goethe's Faust a great dramatic German poem in two parts, completed in 1831 based on the medieval legend of a man who sells his soul to the devil in seek of the true meaning of life, portrays the following sequence of events: "passionate inexperienced deceitful love that leads to unwanted pregnancy, the birth of the child in secrecy and the murder of the child by his own mother and the execution of the murderer."¹

According to the infanticide act in the UK, infanticide could be defined as "the intentional killing of a child, under the age of twelve months mostly by his or her own parents."²In Medieval Era infanticide was mostly considered as a crime which was committed by the mother of the child. In early Medieval Era in Germany, infanticide was not considered as a highly punishable act, as an unbaptised infant was not considered fully human. Later, in the latter part of the Medieval Era it was declared by the "**Constitutio Criminalis Carolina**" (Procedure for the judgment of capital crimes of Charles V.) that infanticide should be considered as serious murder case, as it was started to believe, that the soul of an unbaptised child could not reach the eternal salvation. Therefore, the Mothers who have committed the crime, were either deported from the country or were demanded death penalty which was carried out by a series of typical medieval execution forms, such as beheading, hanging by the neck, impalement, or by burying alive.

The earliest form of Goethe's Faust known as Ur- Faust was created between 1772 and 1775 and consisted of twenty two scenes, but later declared the manuscript to be lost, but a copy could be discovered in 1886. The first fragment of a printed version of the Faust could be found in 1790.

"Goethe's Faust is a classic of European literature. Based on the fable of the man who traded his soul for superhuman powers and knowledge, it became the life's work of Germany's greatest

poet. Beginning with an intriguing wager between God and Satan, it charts the life of a deeply flawed individual, his struggle against the nihilism of his diabolical companion Mephistopheles. Part One presents Faust’s pact with the Devil and the harrowing tragedy of his love affair with young Gretchen.”³

The Character of young Gretchen, the main female character in Goethe’s Faust, portrays the image of a delicate, well mannered, soft hearted maiden of a lower class family, who is bounded by the duties to her family yet care free, who is attending to the church’s feast daily, who is highly religious, immature and could easily be tempted by a man due to her lower class upbringings and inexperienced nature. The intention of Goethe, through his creation, was to represent, the social background of the female victims of the Infanticide in the early 19th century and to unfold their untold confessions to address the burning social problem, in a different point of view.

The victims of infanticides in the medieval era were mostly from lower class families, who were being helplessly, put in to the circumstance, where their final solution was to murder the newborn infant. In most cases the females were from lower class families who are either being abused by men or have had love affairs with men from upper class families who are being promised to marry them , but later being dumped after their pregnancy has been revealed. This tragic circumstance of women, their desires, their way of living and their immature expectations vs. reality is well portrayed by the character of Gretchen.

Gretchen, who was first introduced to Doctor Faust by her female neighbor, is fascinated by the aristocratic Attire of Faust. The above poem depicts Gretchen’s immature feelings towards her newly met aristocratic lover.

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“Without him here
my grave is near,
my world around
is sadness bound.
His lofty walk,
his noble sight,
his smiling face,
his glance’s might,
And his expressions
magic bliss,
his touch of hand
and, oh, his kiss”⁴

The execution of Sussana Margaretha Brandt, in 1771 in Frankfurt was the greatest inspiration for Goethe to write his drama Faust, as he himself was an eye witness of the execution process. Susanna Margaretha Brandt was a twenty four year old orphan House maid, who was being raped by a goldsmith and later has strangled her newly born infant to death and buried him at the backyard of a farm house. She has worked in a guest house where the drunken goldsmith apprentice has raped her. Therefore, she had no clues to prove her innocence and did not know any proper information about the identity of the father of the child. Therefore, she was beheaded with a sword for hiding her pregnancy and killing her new born infant in 1771 in Frankfurt am Main. Goethe who was at that time a 22 year old lawyer was greatly moved by this injustice, and wanted to make Sussana’s character immortal through his own creation of Gretchen’s Character.

The character of Gretchen unfolds the desires of lower caste females, who are being deprived by their financial backgrounds yet fortunate enough to win the heart of an aristocrat, by their natural delicacy. Gretchen, who has unexpectedly found a jewelry casket in her wardrobe, reacts with mixed feelings of fear and happiness.

Fear of owning something which she does not own by her birth,
yet being happy that she is chosen by God to keep it.

“How comes that lovely casket here to me?

’Tis truly wonderful! What can within it be?

“And here there hangs a key to fit:

I have a mind to open it.

What is that? God in Heaven! Whence came

Such things? Never beheld I aught so fair!

Rich ornaments, such as a noble dame

On highest holidays might wear!

How would the pearl-chain suit my hair?

What helps one’s beauty, youthful blood?

One may possess them, well and good;

But none the more do others care.

They praise us half in pity, sure:

To gold still tends,

On gold depends

All, all! Alas, we poor!”⁵

Faust uses the casket of jewelry to show how the desires and weaknesses of lower class females, who could be easily tempted by upper class men. The difficulties which pregnant unmarried maidens have to undergo and the criticisms of their secret pregnancy from the society’s view point were reflected in the Lienschen’s character in Faust. Lienschen, another maiden, a neighbor of Gretchen, is relating a story of a girl called Barbara who was dumped by her lover after knowing she was conceived.

“Lienschen - Hast nothing heard of Barbara?

Gretchen - No, not a word.

Lienschen -It stinks! She’s feeding two, when’er she eats and drinks.

Gretchen – Ah!

Lienschen - And so, at last, it serves her rightly.

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She clung to the fellow so long and tightly!
That was a promenading!
At village and dance parading!
As the first they must everywhere shine,
And he treated her always to pies and wine,
And she made a to-do with her face so fine;
So mean and shameless was her behavior,
She took all the presents the fellow gave her.
'Twas kissing and coddling, on and on!
So now, at the end, the flower is gone.”⁶

Through the above discussion between Gretchen and the maiden called Lienschen Goethe tries to highlight the society's impression on female victims who were being betrayed by their males. Furthermore, Goethe tries to point out how pathetic the situation of a female victim in a patriarch society could be, as the female only be guilty and judged for losing her virginity and being pregnant, simply because it was easy to put the blame on women as they were from lower class families and the society had the impression that they easily could be tempted by materialistic items such as money, jewelry, foods and clothes.

Yet, the inner confession or the complaining conscience of a female victim of infanticide could never be heard by the society, as they rarely get a chance for a confession. The Gretchen's confession at the dungeon was not merely a confession of the character of Gretchen, but her confession could be taken as the confession of all female victims including Sussanne, who were being executed during this period.

“And I am yet so young, so young!
And now Death comes, and ruin!
I, too, was fair, and that was my undoing.
My love was near, but now he's far;
Torn lies the wreath, scattered the blossoms are.

Seize me not thus so violently!
Spare me! What have I done to thee?
Let me not vainly entreat thee!
I never chanced, in all my days, to meet thee!
Now am I wholly in thy might.
But let me suckle, first, my baby!
I blissed it all this livelong night;
They took 't away, to vex me, maybe,
And now they say I killed the child outright.
And never shall I be glad again.”⁷

The theme of infanticide has attracted many writers who belong to the German literary era- Sturm und Drang. Their creations carried out the theme of the injustice of infanticide, in which the seduction of the innocent girls are being involved, and the execution of the victims, while the seducer escapes without penalty. Goethe's Faust could be regarded as a book of confession where the main female character portrays what reasons might persuade an unmarried pregnant woman to murder her child. Furthermore, Goethe reveals the fact that it is the society that puts the females in that helpless position, where they see the murdering of the infant as the final solution. It also highlights the fact that it is necessary to identify infanticides as the final process of complex human feelings such as deceitful love, temptation, burning desires, lost expectations, seduction, poverty and the gap between social classes, which finally persuade a woman to murder her child.

End Notes

¹ Perinatal risk factors for neonaticide and infant homicide: can we identify those at risk? Available at <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1079289/>>

² Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy ; with the Unpublished Scenarios for the Walpurgis Night and the Urfaust; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, John R. Williams, Jan 1, 1999

³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Faust: Eine Tragödie - Kapitel 18

⁴ Faust, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; Evening a Small, Neatly Kept Chamber

⁵ Faust, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; at the Fountain

⁶ Faust, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; Scene XXV; Dungeon

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