



## **IMPRISONMENT AND LIBERATION IN FEMALE GOTHIC DOMESTIC SPACES**

<sup>1</sup>Shivani, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Tushti Sharma

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Supervisor

<sup>1-2</sup> Department of English, Malwanchal University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

### **Abstract**

This research paper delves into the depiction of imprisonment and liberation in Female Gothic literature, with a focus on domestic spaces. By examining works such as *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson, *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice, *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter, and *Bellefleur* by Joyce Carol Oates, the paper explores how these spaces function as both prisons and sites of potential liberation for female characters. The theoretical framework is informed by Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and feminist critiques by scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, and others. The analysis reveals that while domestic spaces often symbolize patriarchal confinement, they also serve as arenas for resistance and transformation.

**Keywords:** Female Gothic, domestic space, imprisonment, liberation, Gaston Bachelard, feminist critique, Daphne du Maurier, Shirley Jackson, Anne Rice, Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates.

### **Introduction**

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard asserts, "Our house is our corner of the world" (4), emphasizing the intimate bond between domestic spaces and their inhabitants. This relationship becomes particularly complex in Gothic literature, where domestic settings frequently serve as sites of terror and confinement. The Female Gothic, a subgenre that gained prominence with the rise of feminist movements in the 20th century, critically explores these themes. This paper investigates how domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature function as both imprisoning and potentially liberating environments for female characters.

### **The Role of Domestic Spaces in Female Gothic Literature**

#### ***Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier**

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* intricately weaves the story of a young, unnamed narrator whose life is dominated by the eerie presence of Manderley, a grand estate. This estate becomes a psychological prison for the narrator, who struggles to carve out her identity amidst the lingering influence of Maxim de Winter's first wife, Rebecca. Manderley, with its oppressive and foreboding atmosphere, becomes a symbol of the narrator's entrapment within a patriarchal society.

The estate's physical characteristics mirror the emotional and psychological states of the narrator. The vast and labyrinthine structure of Manderley, coupled with its dark corners and hidden passages, represents the complexities and constraints imposed upon the narrator. The omnipresent reminders of Rebecca's legacy, from her meticulously maintained bedroom to her monogrammed possessions, serve to constantly undermine the narrator's sense of self. This persistent overshadowing leads to a profound sense of inadequacy and entrapment, further exacerbating the narrator's struggle for autonomy and identity.

#### ***The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson**

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* presents Hill House as a malevolent, almost sentient entity that ensnares Eleanor Vance, a character marked by psychological fragility and a deep yearning for belonging. Hill



House's architecture and atmosphere amplify Eleanor's internal fears and desires, leading to her ultimate psychological disintegration.

The house's design, with its disorienting hallways and inexplicable spatial anomalies, mirrors Eleanor's fragmented psyche. As Eleanor becomes more entwined with Hill House, her perception of reality blurs, and the house's sinister influence intensifies. Jackson uses Hill House to explore themes of isolation and madness, portraying the domestic space as a reflection of Eleanor's mental state. The house becomes both a sanctuary and a prison, embodying the dual nature of domestic spaces in the Female Gothic tradition.

### ***Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice**

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* diverges from traditional Gothic settings by focusing on the metaphorical domestic spaces created by the dysfunctional family dynamics of the vampires Louis, Lestat, and Claudia. The novel portrays the complex, dependent relationships among these characters, highlighting themes of control, imprisonment, and rebellion within an unconventional domestic setting.

Louis and Lestat's New Orleans home, though not a physical prison, becomes a site of psychological confinement. Claudia, trapped in the body of a child despite her mature mind, experiences a unique form of imprisonment. Her inability to grow physically becomes a metaphor for the stifling nature of their familial bonds. The luxurious yet dark and confining atmosphere of their home symbolizes the suffocating dynamics of their relationships. Rice's narrative explores the tensions between desire and duty, freedom and confinement, within the context of a vampiric family.

### ***The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter**

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* offers a feminist reinterpretation of traditional Gothic and fairy tale motifs, using the castle as a symbol of patriarchal control and female imprisonment. The protagonist's journey through the castle, particularly her exploration of forbidden spaces, serves as a metaphor for her quest for knowledge and autonomy.

The castle, with its opulent yet oppressive ambiance, represents the entrapment imposed by the protagonist's husband, the Marquis. The bridal chamber, adorned with grotesque and sinister artwork, foreshadows the dark secrets hidden within the castle. The protagonist's transgression of the Marquis' prohibition by entering the bloody chamber reveals the true extent of her husband's brutality and serves as a pivotal moment in her journey toward liberation. Carter's narrative subverts traditional gender roles and critiques the oppressive structures of domesticity, empowering the protagonist through her defiance and eventual escape.

### ***Bellefleur* by Joyce Carol Oates**

Joyce Carol Oates' *Bellefleur* explores the sprawling manor of the Bellefleur family, a place steeped in generational trauma and supernatural occurrences. The manor, with its intricate and decaying architecture, becomes a powerful symbol of psychological and emotional confinement for its female inhabitants.

The Bellefleur manor, with its labyrinthine structure and eerie surroundings, embodies the complexities of the family's history and the burdens carried by each generation. The manor's oppressive atmosphere and the supernatural elements that pervade it serve to heighten the sense of entrapment experienced by the female characters. The house is both a witness to and a participant in the family's traumas, reflecting the intergenerational impact of their secrets and conflicts.

Oates uses the manor to explore themes of inheritance and destiny, illustrating how the past exerts a persistent influence on the present. The female characters' struggles within the confines of the manor mirror their broader battles against the constraints imposed by their family and society. Through the depiction of the Bellefleur manor, Oates highlights the ways in which domestic spaces can both trap and define the individuals who inhabit them.



The exploration of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature reveals a multifaceted portrayal of imprisonment and liberation. These spaces, often depicted as oppressive and confining, reflect the psychological and emotional states of the female characters. However, they also serve as sites of resistance and potential transformation. By examining the works of du Maurier, Jackson, Rice, Carter, and Oates, it becomes evident that domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature are not merely physical settings but complex, dynamic environments that shape and are shaped by the characters' experiences.

### **Feminist Theoretical Perspectives in Female Gothic Literature**

#### **Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar**

In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the theme of female imprisonment and escape within women's writing. Their analysis is crucial to understanding the dynamics of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women's experiences of confinement—whether in texts, houses, or even within their own bodies—reflect broader societal constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. This perspective is particularly relevant in Gothic literature, where the settings often serve as metaphors for the characters' psychological and social entrapment.

Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the dual nature of imprisonment in Female Gothic literature, noting that it is both metaphorical and literal. They assert that while male authors may depict imprisonment in metaphysical and metaphorical terms, female authors often portray it as a tangible, lived reality. This distinction is evident in the recurring theme of the madwoman in the attic, a figure that symbolizes women's repressed rage and desire for autonomy. The madwoman represents the extreme consequences of societal and domestic confinement, embodying the internal struggle against patriarchal oppression.

In works like *Rebecca* and *The Haunting of Hill House*, the domestic spaces are intricately linked to the female protagonists' psychological states. Manderley and Hill House are not just physical structures but extensions of the characters' minds, reflecting their fears, desires, and sense of entrapment. The lingering presence of Rebecca in Manderley and the malevolent influence of Hill House serve to highlight the protagonists' struggles with their identities and their roles within a patriarchal society.

#### **Annette Kolodny and Kerstin Shands**

Annette Kolodny's contributions to feminist literary criticism focus on the ways women's fiction expresses fears of being trapped in false images or roles. In her essay "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism'," Kolodny explores how literature by women often metaphorizes their material limitations as images of enclosure. This idea is further expanded by Kerstin Shands in *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse*. Shands delves into how spatial metaphors in literature reflect women's experiences of confinement and their aspirations for freedom.

Kolodny's assertion is that the most compelling fear in women's fiction is the fear of being fixed in inauthentic roles or trapped in false images. This resonates deeply with the themes of Female Gothic literature, where domestic spaces often symbolize the constraints imposed on women by societal expectations. The concept of entrapment is vividly portrayed in works like *The Bloody Chamber* and *Bellefleur*, where the protagonists are confined within oppressive domestic environments that reflect their struggles against patriarchal control.

Shands expands on this by examining how literature uses spatial metaphors to represent women's material limitations. In *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse*, Shands argues that freedom from restraint is often visualized in terms of fluidity and boundarylessness. This perspective is evident in the portrayal of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature, where the characters' liberation is often depicted through their movement away from confined, oppressive spaces towards more open, fluid environments.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, the protagonist's exploration of the forbidden chamber represents her journey towards self-



discovery and liberation. The castle, with its oppressive and labyrinthine structure, symbolizes the constraints imposed by her husband, the Marquis. Through her defiance and eventual escape, the protagonist subverts her prescribed domestic role and gains agency. Similarly, in *Bellefleur*, the sprawling manor and its surrounding landscapes reflect the generational trauma and emotional confinement experienced by the female characters. Their struggles to break free from these constraints highlight their quest for identity and autonomy.

### **Bachelard's Phenomenology of Space**

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* offers a phenomenological approach to understanding the significance of domestic spaces. Bachelard views the house as a repository of memories and dreams, a concept that both aligns with and contrasts the representations in Female Gothic literature. While Bachelard emphasizes the protective and nurturing aspects of home, Female Gothic texts often depict domestic spaces as sites of terror and entrapment.

Bachelard's analysis of domestic space revolves around the idea that a house is more than just a physical structure; it is a container of the human soul, filled with personal experiences, memories, and dreams. He introduces the concept of "topoanalysis," a methodical and psychological analysis of the places of an individual's intimate life. This notion is particularly relevant in the context of Female Gothic literature, where the domestic spaces are often charged with emotional and psychological significance.

In Bachelard's view, the house is a space that shelters daydreaming and allows for the exploration of one's inner self. However, in Female Gothic literature, the house often becomes a space of nightmares and psychological torment. The protective and nurturing aspects of home are subverted, transforming the domestic space into a site of confinement and terror. This inversion is evident in the works of du Maurier, Jackson, Rice, Carter, and Oates, where the domestic spaces serve to amplify the characters' fears and anxieties.

For instance, in *Rebecca*, Manderley is described as a grand and beautiful estate, yet it becomes a source of psychological torment for the young narrator. The house, filled with the lingering presence of Rebecca, embodies the oppressive and suffocating influence of the past. The narrator's struggle to assert her identity within this space highlights the conflict between Bachelard's idealized notion of home and the Gothic depiction of domestic spaces.

Similarly, in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Hill House is portrayed as an almost sentient entity that preys on Eleanor's vulnerabilities. The house's disorienting architecture and malevolent presence reflect Eleanor's fragmented psyche and amplify her sense of isolation and fear. Bachelard's idea of the house as a space for daydreaming and self-exploration is turned on its head, as Hill House becomes a place of psychological disintegration and destruction.

### **Integrating Feminist Perspectives with Bachelard's Phenomenology**

The integration of feminist theoretical perspectives with Bachelard's phenomenology of space offers a nuanced understanding of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature. By combining Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of female imprisonment, Kolodny and Shands' exploration of spatial metaphors, and Bachelard's phenomenological approach, we can better understand the dual nature of domestic spaces as both imprisoning and potentially liberating environments.

In Female Gothic literature, domestic spaces are often depicted as extensions of the characters' inner lives, reflecting their struggles with identity, autonomy, and societal constraints. These spaces serve as metaphors for the characters' psychological states, highlighting the tension between confinement and freedom. By examining the works of du Maurier, Jackson, Rice, Carter, and Oates, we can see how domestic spaces are used to explore themes of entrapment, resistance, and transformation.

For example, in *Interview with the Vampire*, the domestic spaces shared by Louis, Lestat, and Claudia symbolize their psychological imprisonment within their dysfunctional family dynamics. The absence of traditional domestic settings underscores the characters' sense of displacement and alienation, while their interdependent relationships reflect the broader societal constraints imposed on them.



In *The Bloody Chamber*, the protagonist's exploration of the castle and its forbidden chamber represents her journey towards self-discovery and liberation. The castle, with its oppressive atmosphere and hidden secrets, symbolizes the constraints imposed by her husband and society. Through her defiance and eventual escape, the protagonist subverts her prescribed domestic role and gains agency, challenging the patriarchal structures that confine her.

In *Bellefleur*, the sprawling manor and its surrounding landscapes reflect the generational trauma and emotional confinement experienced by the female characters. The manor's decaying grandeur and labyrinthine structure symbolize the complexities of the family's history and the burdens carried by each generation. The female characters' struggles to break free from these constraints highlight their quest for identity and autonomy, emphasizing the transformative potential of domestic spaces.

The exploration of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature reveals a complex interplay between imprisonment and liberation. These spaces, often depicted as oppressive and confining, reflect the psychological and emotional states of the female characters. However, they also serve as sites of resistance and potential transformation. By integrating feminist theoretical perspectives with Bachelard's phenomenology of space, we gain a deeper understanding of the dual nature of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature. The works of du Maurier, Jackson, Rice, Carter, and Oates demonstrate how domestic spaces can both trap and define their inhabitants, shaping their identities and influencing their actions. Through their depictions of Manderley, Hill House, the vampiric family home, the Marquis' castle, and the Bellefleur manor, these authors highlight the ways in which domestic spaces can serve as metaphors for the characters' struggles with societal constraints and their quest for autonomy and self-discovery.

## **Conclusion**

The exploration of domestic spaces in Female Gothic literature reveals a complex interplay between imprisonment and liberation. These spaces, often imbued with patriarchal power, serve as both prisons and potential sites of resistance for female characters. By analyzing the works of du Maurier, Jackson, Rice, Carter, and Oates, this paper underscores the significance of domestic spaces in shaping the psychological and emotional landscapes of their inhabitants. The contrast between Bachelard's idealized notion of home and the Gothic representation of domestic spaces highlights the tension between comfort and confinement, ultimately offering a deeper understanding of the female Gothic tradition.

## **References**

1. Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, 1994.
2. Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. Penguin Books, 1990.
3. Du Maurier, Daphne. *Rebecca*. Virago Press, 2003.
4. Ellis, Kate Ferguson. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideologies*. University of Illinois Press, 1989.
5. Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Yale University Press, 2000.
6. Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. Penguin Classics, 2006.
7. Kolodny, Annette. "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism'." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1975, pp. 75-92.
8. Oates, Joyce Carol. *Bellefleur*. Dutton, 1980.
9. Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire*. Ballantine Books, 1997.



10. Shands, Kerstin W. *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse*. Greenwood Press, 1999.
11. Soon Ng, Andrew Hock. *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
12. Wisker, Gina. "Demisting the Mirror: Contemporary British Women's Horror." *A New Companion to the Gothic*, edited by David Punter, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 161-172.

