

Schehrazade Revisited: Reconsidering Femicide in Daphne du Maurier's

Rebecca

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Abstract

Literature and folklore often depict abnormal, sadistic men who develop psychological complexes that ruin their marital relations. The jealous homicidal Shahrayar, the main character in *The Arabian Nights*, who murders his wives on the eve of their wedding nights, often figures in fairy tales, plays, and stories that explore the war between the sexes. William Shakespeare's *Othello* and the folktales of Bluebeard and his bloody chamber are notable examples and they have been a source of anxiety for women because of the murderous spouse. These works emphasise the marginal status of women and their suffering from persecution in patriarchal communities. This research deals with Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, focusing on the figure of the homicidal husband and his difference from his traditional eastern counterpart, Shahrayar. It also sheds light on the experience of the Schehrazade-like protagonist and her role in curing her husband of his traumatic memories.

Keywords: *Rebecca*, Shahrayar, homicidal, femicide, patriarchal, Schehrazade

The Legacy of Schehrazade

The Arabian Nights, also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, is a collection of tales, narrated within ١٠٠١ nights, and framed within the main story of the jealous King Shahrayar and his new wife, Schehrazade's, struggle to survive his homicidal advances. Schehrazade volunteers to cure Shahrayar of his psychological complex, an excessive marital jealousy, that he develops due to his first wife's infidelity to him. Every night he marries a new bride and before dawn, he murders her sadistically.

In spite of her marginal status as a woman, living in a male-dominated society, Schehrazade hopes to put an end to the suffering of young maidens, who do not have the will to refuse the King's proposal of marriage. They are forced into marriage and are then slaughtered viciously. Schehrazade's deep knowledge in history and folklore is her means of understanding the complex psychology of the King. Storytelling, for Schehrazade, is not only a means of survival, but it is also her medical approach to brainwash the king and to cure him of his excessive jealousy. Through the ethical stories, she tells him, he is able to reconsider his false assumption that all women are unfaithful. She shows him the real meaning of love and helps him reexamine the nature of human relations. She knows how to fathom his troubled psyche and how to choose and connect her stories for each and every night. She also knows how to survive the horrible nights with the king who was impatient to behead her, thanks to her method of arousing his curiosity and suspense through the stories she tells him. Thus, at the end he spares her life and she lives with him as his queen.

Schehrazade's life with her jealous, homicidal husband, like that of Bluebeard's brides in Western literary traditions, remains a gothic experience for women worldwide. The psychological complex these men develop is what motivates them to commit their vicious acts of violence. These abnormal marital relations are not rare cases, viewing the horrible news we read daily, especially in Eastern countries. Husbands murder their wives driven by suspicions and false accusations of infidelity.

Literature Review

Daphne du Maurier's work is often compared to the works of the Brontë sisters and Romantic writers. It is commonly described as 'Neo-Romantic' fiction and is viewed as being out of the canon, because it deviates from the *avant-garde* mainstream in modern fiction (Davenport, ١٩٣٨:٥; Watson ٢٠٠٥; Nungesser ٢٠٠٧). Her seminal novel, *Rebecca* (١٩٣٨), belongs to the Female Gothic tradition in fiction, since it focuses on the trials of a young, gullible female protagonist and her struggle with the ghosts of the past, impersonated by her husband's former, dead wife, the title character, and the secret of her murder (Russ ١٩٩٥; Horner and Zlosnik ٢٠٠٠).

The novel is also studied as representative of the era in which it was written with its focus on social change. It delineates the demise of the aristocratic order. Besides, it explores the change in gender roles and the challenge the patriarchal system encountered in the aftermath of World War I (Harbord ١٩٩٦; Hallett ٢٠٠٣; Pons ٢٠١٣)

However, no attempt has ever been made to evaluate the text and the characters in relation to Eastern counterparts. This research is a comparative study of the characters in *Rebecca* and their Eastern equivalents in *The Arabian Nights*, namely King Shahrayar and his last bride Schehrazade. The article also aims at evaluating the character of the homicidal husband, Mr. de Winter, focusing on the motives that drive him to kill his first wife, Rebecca. It also focuses on the character of the nameless narrator/protagonist and her essential role in saving her husband from his traumatic memories, caused by his first wife's murder.

Schehrazade Revisited

The narrator, who later identifies herself as the new Mrs. de Winter, is a timid woman, who unknowingly accepts to marry a man who she later discovers to be a murderer of his former wife. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator tells of her character development, as she relates the events retrospectively. Prior to her marriage, the narrator is poor, helpless, and has no one to protect her. She is maltreated and exploited by a dominant, abusive woman, Mrs. Van Hopper, for whom she works as a maid.

In *The Arabian Nights*, King Shahrayar is a nightmare to the young damsels to whom he proposes, because they already knew the tragic fate they are liable to in their wedding nights. Unlike Shahrayar's ill-fated wives, the poor protagonist is so excited and overjoyed when the enigmatic widowed Mr. Maxim de Winter proposes to her, while touring in the bohemian Monte Carlo, South of France. She does not like to wake from this romantic dream, finding in this opportunity an outlet from her unhappy and humiliating life with her snobbish mistress. Besides, she never questions the motives that prompt him to enter into such a marital alliance with her, being socially and financially inferior to him. She does not even question the sincerity of his

feelings towards her. What motivates her to accept his proposal is her desire for social promotion and material security.

However, these happy moments are spoiled by the resentful and envious Mrs. Hopper who instead of congratulating her employee for this privileged union, tells her that this marriage will lead to nothing but misery. She also informs her that conventionally a gentleman as wealthy as Maxim would not have ventured to marry a woman in her position had it not been for his own circumstances as a grieving lonely widower:

Of course, you know why he's marrying you, don't you? You haven't flattered yourself he's in love with you? The fact is that empty house got on his nerves to such an extent he merely went off his head. He admitted as much before you came into the room. He just can't go on living there alone..." (*Rebecca* ٦٦)

She makes her dubious of Maxim's feelings by reminding her of his devotion to his recently dead wife, Rebecca, saying that the main reason of his departure of his ancestral country estate, Manderley, is to be away from the traumatic memory of his first wife's death.

While Shahrayar's brides view the King's castle as the gothic site of their inevitable death, the narrator is impatient to see Manderley and to enjoy her new status as the lady of the house: "Mrs. de Winter...I would be Mrs. de Winter...I was going to live at Manderley" (*Rebecca* ٥٩-٦٠). When the newlywed couple return to Manderley, the narrator is disillusioned and realises that this place, in spite of its grandeur, does not provide her with the happiness and the security she most craves. Because of the inferiority of her origin and her unfamiliarity with the manners of the upper class, the new Mrs. de Winter is daunted by the lavish way of life in Manderley.

Her dream turns into a nightmare. The memory of the dead wife haunts still. Besides, the narrator finds herself an undesirable intruder into a world that she does not belong to. No one of the servants in this house, especially Mrs. Danvers, Rebecca's devoted maid, welcomes her or accepts her new position as the new lady of the house.

Ostricised in her new residence, the narrator suffers from a crisis of identity and struggles to achieve self-assurance and acceptance among her new acquaintances. The growing sense of restlessness at Manderley intensifies and the narrator believes that not only the servants, but even her husband is haunted by the memory of his first

wife. Rebecca remains a threat to the narrator—a barrier that stands between her and her happy life with her husband: “He wanted something I could not give him, something I had had before....He would never love me because of Rebecca” (*Rebecca* ٢٨٠). The narrator’s sense of estrangement distracts her from investigating the nature of the cloudy relationship between her husband and Rebecca.

Maurier’s enigmatic Shahrayar equivalent, Maxim, never opens his heart to his new wife, and avoids saying anything about his life with his former dead wife, Rebecca, which the narrator attributes to the sad memory of her death. As a result, she does not dare to ask him about his previous marriage or the circumstances that surround Rebecca’s tragic death. All she knows about Rebecca’s death is the rumour circulated by her previous employer Mrs. Van Hopper that Rebecca died in a boat accident in the nearby waters of the Cornish Coast, in South West England, months before their meeting with Maxim in France.

Forced into the threshold of hysteria by Mrs. Danvers and by her own lack of confidence, the narrator starts to develop paranoia, only to be saved by the sudden discovery of Rebecca’s dead body. She realises that her husband’s alleged sadness and his mysterious silence covers his need for support and his fears of the discovery of his horrible secret that he struggles to maintain. The narrator’s discovery of her husband’s eerie secret comes not through her curiosity to uncover the past, because until this moment in the text she believes that Maxim is so devoted to Rebecca’s memory. It is Maxim who reveals the secret, asking his wife to be on his side and to help him overcome the trauma of his homicide. She realises that it is her husband who is in need of protection as he holds her “hands tightly like a child who would gain confidence” (*Rebecca* ٢٩٧).

This belated realisation of the Scheherazade-like narrator of her husband’s homicide increases her confidence in herself. She is not frightened by this revelation and she offers her husband a hand in this moment of need. Meyers (٢٠٠١:٣٧) points out:

The revelation that Maxim is a murderer brings him and the narrator closer together. The insuperable impediment between them was the fact that there was a secret; the content of the mystery matters little to the second Mrs. de Winter....Now that she knows her husband’s secret, Mrs. de Winter finally feels that she will be able to enjoy a happy married life with him.

Motivated by her love and loyalty to Maxim, the narrator chooses to stay by her husband's side and to support him in spite of his vicious act of murder. Like Schehrazade, who is able to cure her homicidal husband and to live happily with him ever after, Mrs. de Winter backs Maxim till the end when the authorities find him innocent of the crime.

The narrator finds out that Rebecca was driving her husband to the edge of insanity and she forced him to shoot her when she unfolded her infamous past and her extramarital affairs. This is mainly because she was diagnosed with cancer and she did not want to suffer from the pain of this incurable disease before she died. Still, her defiant nature and her sexual freedom is what led her husband to kill her.

Margret Forster quotes du Maurier, saying that her novel, *Rebecca*, is "a study in jealousy" (١٩٩٣, ١٣٧). Maxim's murder of Rebecca is similar to honour killing, common in the East and in tribal cultures. Mrs. Danvers tells the narrator about Rebecca's alluring nature and her husband's jealousy:

Of course he was jealous. So was I. So was everyone who knew her. She didn't care. She only laughed...A man only had to look at her once and be mad about her...They made love to her of course, who would not? She laughed...it was like a game to her...Who wouldn't be jealous? They were all jealous, all mad for her. Mr. de Winter, Mr. Jack, Mr. Crawley, everyone who knew her, everyone who came to Manderley. (*Rebecca* ٢٦٩)

She also discovers that Maxim's first marriage from Rebecca was miserable and loveless, no matter how beautiful and charismatic Rebecca was. Maxim then reveals to the narrator Rebecca's true nature as a morally depraved woman: "She told me about herself, told me things I shall never repeat to a living soul. I knew then...what I had married" (*Rebecca* ٢٢٧). He informs his second wife, "I hated her, I tell you, our marriage was a farce from the very first. She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal" (*Rebecca* ٢٩٨). Maxim also tells her that living with Rebecca was like "living with the devil" (*Rebecca* ٣٠٠) and that he was "glad [he] killed Rebecca" (*Rebecca* ٣٣٠). Instead of divorce, he resorts to murder because as he justifies to the narrator:

[Rebecca] knew I would sacrifice pride, honour, personal feelings, every damned quality on earth, rather than stand before our little world after a

week of marriage and have them know the things about her that she had told me. She knew I would never stand in a divorce court and give her away, have fingers pointing at us, mud flung at us in the newspapers, all the people who belong down here whispering when my name was mentioned, all the trippers from Kerrith trooping to the lodge gates, peering into the grounds and saying, 'That's where he lives, in there. That's Manderley. That's the place that belongs to the chap who had that divorce case we read about. (*Rebecca* ٣٠٠)

Listening to his secret, the narrator contemplates: "...none of the things he had told me mattered to me at all. I clung to one thing only, and repeated it to myself, over and over again. Maxim did not love Rebecca. He had never loved her, never, never" (*Rebecca* ٣٢٦). What matters to her is the discovery of Maxim's true feelings towards her. She does not see Rebecca's death as a crime since she now views her as a ghost. Maxim's confession is fundamental in helping the timid narrator gain maturity:

At the moment it inspires me...at least with confidence. And confidence is a quality I prize, although it has come late in the day. I suppose it is his dependence on me that has made me bold at last. At any rate I have lost my diffidence, my timidity, my shyness with strangers" (*Rebecca* ١٠).

Ultimately, the narrator is confident and strong after exorcising the ghost of her powerful rival, Rebecca from her husband's memory. She celebrates her new-found knowledge and maturity, saying: "It seemed to me that Rebecca had no reality any more. She had crumbled away when they had found her on the cabin floor. It was not Rebecca who was lying in the crypt, it was dust. Only dust" (*Rebecca* ٣٥٣).

Mr. de Winter and Sharrayar

Maxim's reticence misguides the narrator and makes her unable to see his reality as a man with a skeleton in the cupboard. When she meets him for the first time in France, she believes that "he was not normal, not altogether sane" (*Rebecca* ٣١). Throughout the novel, Maxim remains "a remote and emotionally chilly figure..." (Horner and Zlosnik ١٠٢). Similar to traditional gothic antagonists, who

often pose threats to the identity and existence of innocent, powerless maidens, Maxim apparently looks “medieval in some strange inexplicable way” (*Rebecca*, ١٥).

Maxim is inspired by the narrator’s innocence, her delicate manners, her tolerance in dealing with her ill-mannered employer, and above all her lack of carnal knowledge. He “continually surveys the narrator for signs of a fall from innocence” (Horner and Zlosnik ١٠٣). He wants his wife to be different from the rebellious and open-minded Rebecca: “Listen my sweet...There is a certain type of knowledge I prefer you not to have” (*Rebecca* ٢٢١). He also wishes her not to grow up: “It’s a pity you have to grow up” (*Rebecca* ٥٧).

David Adams (٢٠٠٩:٢٢٠) remarks that women endure domestic abuse and violence when the men have traumatic childhood. However, there is not any reference in the text to Maxim’s childhood or his suffering from abuse or trauma in childhood that mirrors on his life in the present and leads him into anti-social or violent behaviour. Maxim, as a patriarchal figure, views Rebecca as a corrupt and fallen woman. To him, she is a threat to the established social order because of her promiscuity and rebellious nature. Jane S. Bakerman (١٩٨٥:١٣) states that “Maxim de Winter resorts to extreme violence to preserve his reputation and it is the consensus among those of his peers privy to his secret that he acted properly in doing so.”

The dark, deep waters of the sea cannot keep Maxim’s secret intact. He finds himself obliged to tell his wife about his role in Rebecca’s death after a ship is stranded in the nearby cove. The sailors who try to free the ship find Rebecca’s sunken boat with her dead body. He confesses his secret to his new wife:

There never was an accident. Rebecca was not drowned at all. I killed her. I shot Rebecca in the cottage in the cove. I carried her body to the cabin, and took the boat out that night and sunk it there, where they found it today. It’s Rebecca who’s lying there on the cabin floor. (*Rebecca* ٢٩٣)

Maxim kills Rebecca when she threatens him to give birth to an illegitimate heir out of wedlock:

It would grow here in Manderley, bearing your name. There would be nothing you could do. And when you died Manderley would be his. You could not prevent it. The property’s entailed. (*Rebecca* ٣١٣)

The detectives, investigating the murder, initially believe that Rebecca was entrapped in the boat and was not able to free herself in time enough for her to

survive. However, a closer inspection reveals that someone wittingly made holes in the boat to accelerate its sinking. However, Colonel Julyan (the local magistrate) closes the case again with the verdict of Rebecca's suicide. The coroner's inquest unfolds the secret that Rebecca suffered from cancer prior to her death and that she was sterile and unable to give birth to any illegitimate child, who would, as she threatened, desecrate the estate of "the de Winter family" (Habermann ٢٠١٠:١٨٩).

Unlike his Eastern equivalent, Shahrayar, who is never intimidated by a memory nor a sense of guilt over his bloody act, Maxim is subject to different kinds of anxiety, fearing the consequences of his murder on his life and reputation. Nonetheless, Maxim's murder of Rebecca is not only triggered by his jealousy and his desire to preserve his honour as a man, but it is also an act that helps him to maintain his powerful patriarchal authority. Like many other feminist commentators on the text, Teresa Petersen (٢٠٠٩:٥٨) views Rebecca's murder as representing the oppressive patriarchal system that advocates "the containment of women within traditional power structures."

Maxim is also different from the misogynic Shahrayar who murders his brides because of his first wife's betrayal. He does not think of killing his new wife motivated by jealousy and sexism. When Rebecca's doctor unfolds the reality of her malady, Maxim realises that she urged him to kill her, only to escape the experience of a slow painful death. This placates Maxim's anxiety since he begins to view his act as a kind of euthanasia. Like Shahrayar, he overcomes his melancholic, dark past, and he looks forward towards an optimistic future with his supportive new wife who is, similar to Shehrazade, able to cure her husband of his dark memories. He acknowledges his new wife's role in saving him and changing his life, saying: "You have blotted out the past for me, you know, far more effectively than all the bright lights of Monte Carlo" (*Rebecca* ٤٢).

Conclusion

In spite of the differences among the characters in du Maurier's *Rebecca* and those of King Shahrayar and his brides in *The Arabian Nights*, it is possible to trace some identical aspects. Shahrayar's story and his sadistic nature make the experience of women in the story more sinister than that of Rebecca and the new Mrs. de Winter. The latter differs from Shahrayar's short-lived wives, who wait to be slaughtered

overnight. Still, both stories depict the same man-centered world, in which women are liable to different kinds of abuse and violence, especially when they express any transgressive behaviour.

Unlike Shahrayar, Mr. de Winter's homicide is not revealed until the end of the story. The narrator's search for identity in her new surroundings is what enables her to find out the reality of Rebecca's death and her husband's homicidal act. She discovers that he is driven into killing Rebecca because he views her a threat to his dignity and honour. Rebecca refuses to meet the social expectations demanded of women in this patriarchal society.

However, in both *The Arabian Nights* and *Rebecca*, women play an essential role in helping the homicidal men overcome their trauma and live a normal life at the end. Like Scheherazade who cures the King of his psychological complex, the narrator helps Maxim to go beyond his traumatic past and to start a new life. This can be a reference to the positive role of women in society through which social calm and happiness is achieved on the one hand and proves women's pivotal role in society.

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المستخلص

غالباً ما يظهر في الأدب والفلكلور رجال ساديون غير طبيعيين ذوي عقْدٍ نفسيةٍ تدمر علاقاتهم الزوجية. أن شهر يار الغيور القاتل العائلي، والشخصية الرئيسية في (الف ليلة وليلة)، الذي يقوم بقتل زوجاته في ليلة زواجهم، شخصية غالباً ما تظهر في قصص الجن، والمسرحيات والقصص التي تتناول الحرب بين الجنسين. ان مسرحية (عطيل) لشكسبير وقصص بلويبرد الشعبية وحلقته الدامية هي امثلة (نماذج) كانت دائماً مصدر قلقٍ للنساء بسبب الازواج القتلة. ان هذه الاعمال تؤكد الوضع الهامشي للنساء ولمعاناتهن من الظلم في المجتمعات الذكورية.

تتناول الدراسة هذه رواية (ربيكيا) للكاتبة دافني دو مورير وترتكز على شخصية الزوج القاتل واختلافه عن نظيره الشرقي التقليدي شهر يار. كما ويلقي البحث الضوء على البطلة الشبيهة بشهرزاد (شبيهة شهرزاد) ودورها في معالجة زوجها من ذكرياته المرضية