

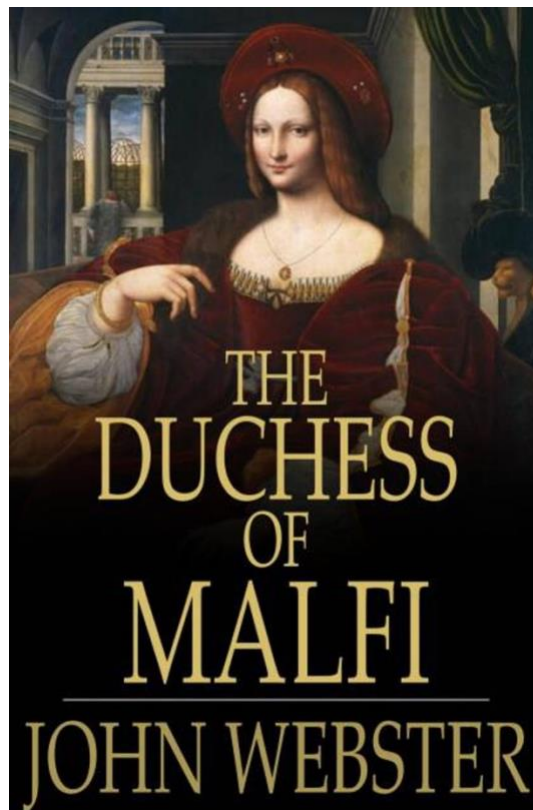
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Incomprehensible Concepts and Contexts: Teaching *The Duchess of Malfi* in Bhutan

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THE DUCHESS OF MALFI (1623) BY JOHN WEBSTER

It was spring time in Bhutan when I, an Indian teaching in a Bhutanese college, started teaching John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623). This was to the M.A. students of Yonphula Centenary College, a government postgraduate college affiliated to the Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan. It was a mixed-gender class of 27 students, of whom 9 were women and 18 were men, and all of them were in the age group of 31-42 years. Being in-service salaried government teachers, who were sponsored by the state to upgrade their qualifications with a goal to improve the quality of education in Bhutanese schools, they can be categorised as "middle-class" in South Asian terms. For students living in a Buddhist country, where even the killing of animals for food is prohibited and the Gross National Happiness is prioritized, the psychological trauma, the violent and gory events portrayed in the play were appalling. But it was the concepts which made such violence possible that the students could not understand. As the Bhutanese were not acquainted with the concept of pure-impure blood, nor with the concept of "the female body as an embodiment of honour," nor the "honour-killings" so familiar to Indian peoples, they could not understand the so-called defilement of "blood-lines" in the Jacobean play.

As the class read Act I, Scene 3 of the play, I realised that dealing with the text was a challenge as the Bhutanese society is unacquainted with the restrictions and proscriptions placed upon women by male family members as exemplified by the Duchess's brothers. When the students read the implicit threats from the brothers about her remarriage, and her witty rebuttals in Act I, Scene 3, they were shocked and could not understand the authority of the brothers over their sibling, the Duchess. The classroom was filled with doubts, questions, and comments such as "How can brothers restrict their sister thus?" "How can brothers decide what is good or bad for their sister?" As they explained to me, "In our Bhutanese Buddhist culture, parents and brothers do not interfere in the marriage decisions of our women. Marriages are done based on the choices of women and men, without fuss and pomp, just with the exchange of locally brewed liquor 'araa.' Women can choose a groom from any community; Bhutanese, Nepali, or any other country, and there is no question of the family 'blood' being tainted by marrying a man/woman from another community." The comment about tainted blood was again raised when we reached the point where Ferdinand receives information about the Duchess's secret marriage/liaison and the birth of her child, when he bursts out in an uncontrollable rage, and describes her as "notorious strumpet," "cursed creature" and speaks of her "infected blood" (Act II, Scene 5).

Then the students reached Act IV, Scenes 1 & 2, wherein the Duchess is imprisoned and awaiting her inevitable murder and is subjected to a number of cruel methods of psychological torture, including being forced to kiss a dead man's hand and hear the clamorous and hysterical noise of the madmen, and finally put to death followed by the execution of her two babies and Cariola (her maid). The students could not imagine a world such as this.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book," suggests that while teaching a culturally different text in a college curriculum, students and teachers

should be "prepared to take the texts historically and/or politically" (p. 73). She further argues that literature, being "a vehicle of cultural self-representation" and "direct expressions of cultural consciousness," can help readers in comprehending the "contemporaneity" (p. 74) of the author's times by contextualizing the texts within their historical and political milieus. In a similar vein, the class (the teacher and the students) tried to place *The Duchess of Malfi* (a culturally different text for the Bhutanese students) within the socio-political scenarios of the Jacobean era, and tried to read and analyse it through the social hierarchy and gender-lens. However, the Bhutanese students, being unacquainted with a class and gender-based hierarchical social system, were unable to comprehend the nuances of the world of the Duchess. It was then that I realised that I may have to relate the text to contemporary and comparable socio-political scenarios.

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As someone who hails from India, I thought that one way of helping them understand these concepts was to turn to the Indian context, which provides several examples of the concept of purity-pollution, and caste-based honour killings. I decided to show them how the events of *The Duchess of Malfi* are similar to what happens often in India.

To help the students understand the Jacobean gender disparity, male chauvinism, and the nature of patriarchal structures in the world of the play, I took two newspaper clippings from two leading dailies of India, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, which reported the caste-based honour killings in India. The sensational news item from *The Hindu* titled, "Pranay was killed in the fifth attempt," was shown to the students to familiarize them with such concepts. The news, as reported, talks about the brutal murder of a Dalit youth for loving and marrying a girl from a different caste. The father of the girl, Maruthi Rao, and his hired goons had, in their fifth attempt, killed Perumalla Pranay Kumar in broad daylight at Miryalaguda on September 14, 2008 ("Pranay was Killed"). A similar news article titled "Honour Killing? Inter-caste couple murdered in Karnataka's Vijayapura," published in *The Times of India* on June 23, 2021, reporting the murder of a Dalit boy and upper caste girl for meeting secretly in the fields and loving each other, was also read to the class for the purpose of understanding the text. In addition to the newspaper clippings, a video clip was played from a Hindi film named *Dhadak* (2018), a romantic social drama which is the remake of a Marathi original movie named *Sairat* (2016). In the movie, the female protagonist hails from an upper caste community while the male protagonist belongs to a lower caste/Dalit community. In the final scene, the brother and relatives of the female protagonist visit the family of the eloped couple and brutally murder the male protagonist and their baby boy (Tragic *Dhadak* 0.18- 4.04).

The presentation of the afore mentioned examples of caste and community-based honour killings from their

neighbouring country, India, helped me to explicate the text to the students, but they still could not believe that such heinous and inhuman incidents were everyday occurrences in their neighbouring country in the 21st century. To a society where there is no race, caste, or gender hierarchy, teaching a play such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, which is built upon culturally specific patriarchal and social hierarchies, was a real challenge. This is in stark contrast to teaching this or similar plays in India, where the prevalent social contexts help students to immediately comprehend the world of such plays.

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