

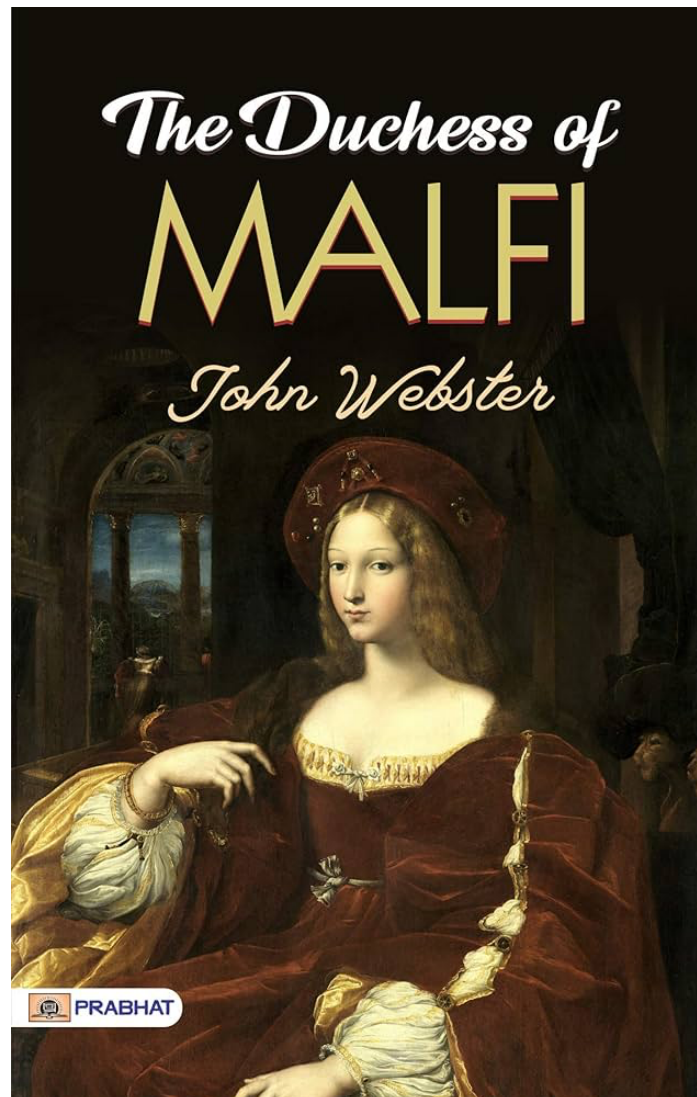
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

So Much More Than Honour Killing: Reading *The Duchess of Malfi*

by Anna Kurian



WEBSTER, JOHN. *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*. EDITED BY LEAH S. MARCUS, ARDEN SHAKESPEARE, BLOOMSBURY, 2009.

Many of the plays taught in the Early Modern literature survey courses in India are useful to demonstrate the almost-unchanged ways of perceiving women and their straitjacketed roles, both at the time the plays were written and when they are read in the 21st century in India. *The Duchess of Malfi* is an often-taught text in survey and elective courses related to Renaissance Drama and Early Modern Literature, in undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms in India, and the students usually focus on the honour killing aspect, the patriarchal imperatives, and the attempts by the Duchess to escape the narrow confines prescribed for her by her brothers, in addition to Bosola's role and desire for social mobility, of course. However, while discussing the play in an MA classroom in Hyderabad, India we moved past these to consider the messy merger of the Duchess's personal and political personas, and engage with the Duchess's multiple roles within the text: as sister and widow, as ruler of Malfi and the prince of her court, but also as wife and mother. It was in considering the personal and political roles of the Duchess that the class understood the personal was the political then and that the same situation obtains in the world we inhabit (India in the 21st century) four hundred years later.

The Duchess's hold on political power as the ruler of Malfi is rendered precarious by her desire for marriage and a family life. But even in the latter, Antonio, her husband, and she have to hide their marriage and initially her pregnancies too. The Duchess's negotiation of her political role as it intersects with her personal roles is uneasy and eventually leads to failure and death for her and all her family. Many of the students were familiar with essays which dealt with the Duchess's identities as ruler, wife, and mother, her public and private roles, and the conflicts that their messy entanglements give rise to. However, the direction of the discussions changed when we began to explore the parallels between the Duchess and Indian women who as professionals hold salaried jobs as well as look after their homes and families. This interested several students whose mothers were career women but also homemaker-in-chief within their families. We heard from a student who told us about her mother who would return from her day-long shift at the airport where she was an Air Traffic Controller and then check on her children's homework before putting dinner on the table. If one of the children was unwell, the mother would call to check on their food intake and medication even while ensuring the safe flow of aircraft at the airport. The juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities with little support and often with much criticism coming their way from their own family members was something quite a few students recognized. We focussed on how the Duchess is hemmed in by her role as the widow of the Duke of Malfi, and hence the ruler of Malfi, primarily by her natal family, which, with the death of her husband, is determined to organise her life for her. Their insistence that she be only a ruler, even though she has "youth/and a little beauty," comes into conflict with her desire to marry Antonio: both of which are embedded in patriarchal systems. Her inability to escape those systems is made clear when, prior to her death, she exhorts her maid and friend, Cariola, to give some syrup

to her little boy for his cold and make sure that the girl will "say her prayers ere she sleep."

That the care of the children is primarily the mother's job in India even today, even when both parents work outside the home as well, was underscored for the class with anecdotal evidence from some students. A student whose parents were separated told us how, as a child, each time he started a throat infection and his hearing would be affected, if he was at his father's place, the father never noticed it. But the day he returned to his mother's, she would return from the college where she taught, discover that he was unable to hear and rush him to the hospital. The onus was on her to ensure the health of the child and his well-being, even though she held a full-time job and a position of considerable responsibility at the college. That the woman will perform the primary nurturing function is a given in our world, expected of her by others who may be within or outside the immediate familial contexts, but also, quite often, by herself, irrespective of how well educated she may be, or how highly placed at work. The Duchess's dilemma remains that of the Indian woman as well, one who is both a professional and a homemaker.

A public role, as the ruler of Malfi, and a private one, as Antonio's wife and mother to their three little children, and the impossibility of doing justice to either or to her selfhood, was the takeaway for my class. They saw the Duchess as caught in a quandry where her agency was circumscribed by internalised patriarchal norms which eliminated all possibilities that were not patriarchally inscribed. The parallel to the ways in which thousands of Indian women work outside the home and then return home to cook, help children with their homework, and take care of the many chores that homemakers do on a daily basis was inescapable, especially to the women in the class who expected their future to be similar in many ways. In the Indian household, irrespective of class, home chores and looking after children are largely still seen as the domain of the woman. At the same time, women are educated by their natal families and encouraged to take up jobs as it is seen as evidence of a more modern outlook. To be a stay-at-home traditional wife is not something that middle-class families in particular encourage, unless the husband's family desires it. However, expecting the husband to look after the children or the home is also not seen as acceptable. A student spoke of how her mother was criticised in dramatically opposed ways by her grandfather and grandmother: by the former because she was not advancing rapidly in her career, in spite of being well-educated and extremely hardworking, by the latter because she saw her daughter as prioritising her career above her husband and the family. The impossible nature of the situation where there is no winning for the woman in either her personal or her professional life was something that resonated with the students and the parallels with the Duchess were inescapable.

The Duchess who tries to fit the frames imposed upon her by the patriarchal structures of Early Modern Europe bears a close resemblance to 21st century middle-class Indian women who must bring in a salary, bear children, and look after the husband, the children, and their home,

while not neglecting their professional duties. The patriarchal expectations which burden the Duchess of Malfi continue to burden Indian women in the here and now. While women such as the Duchess and women in today's Indian contexts perform their personal and political roles and labour within both, both are rendered routine and invisible, as is the labour itself, by the structures they inhabit.

Anna Kurian teaches in the Department of English at The University of Hyderabad, India. Her areas of interest include Shakespeare and Early Modern English Drama, and the pedagogy of English Literary Studies in contemporary India. She is the Principal Investigator of the world's first OER for Indian Writing in English and Faculty Fellow, UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies.



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