



The Role Of Death In Awakening Bosola's Conscience And The Metamorphosis Of The Antagonist

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ABSTRACT

John Webster's one of the greatest revenge tragedies *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) demonstrates the aspect of human nature, especially the journey of a Machiavellian villain to a man of morality. It is evident that the sudden death of the protagonist shudders the antagonist to a great extent. Is it only the death which convulses his conscience or is it the money or wage? He got metamorphosed completely that he even turned his mind from everything and uttered religious scripture. This paper will elaborately discuss and throw light on the above mentioned questions in the play. Webster's play presents the bloodshed and deaths in shocking manner specially at his contemporary time because showing murder and bloodshed on the stage was not in vogue then, that's why it was a new kind of tragedy to the audience. The character of Bosola is very unique in comparison to other antagonists, where a murderer will become an avenger which is quite unseen in any other tragedies. And finally, the metamorphosis or transformation of Bosola is also shaking the audience as well as the other characters, which is very typical to Webster's tragedy.

KEY WORDS: death, conscience, consciousness, metamorphosis, tragedy

Introduction:

John Webster's tragedy-play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) was written in between 1612-13 and first performed at Globe Theatre in 1613-14. The plot of the play is derived from William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567). It is the story about Giovanna d'Aragona, the duchess of Amalfi who was a widow and later married to her steward, and was killed by her brothers. The person who is involved throughout the play in plotting against the Duchess with her brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal is Bosola, the antagonist of the play. Bosola is a mercenary who earlier works for Cardinal and later for Ferdinand, although he was unwilling to spy on the activities of the Duchess but finally agreed. He was working for them with devotion and did many bad things successively to satisfy his master. But then he was torturing the Duchess his conscience continuously tormenting him, he continues without listening to them. Because of the death of the Duchess sudden changes in his attitude were prominent, he became repentant of his own earlier deeds, the metamorphosis happened. The betrayal of his masters Ferdinand and Cardinal to whom he had been a devoted servant all throughout, suddenly awakened his sense of morality which played a great role in the metamorphosis of his character which is really noteworthy. The different reasons and continuously changing of mental conditions in Bosola transforms him little by little and finally make him the avenger of his own murders.

I will divide my paper into two parts, in part one I will discuss how the deaths of the Duchess and other characters affect Bosola and to what extent it plays told in awakening his conscience. In the second part, I would be focusing on why this metamorphosis happens to Bosola, what are the other things which influence Bosola so much that a murderer can become an avenger.

I

The play begins with Antonio coming back from France, where Delio and Antonio were talking about his experience about the 'French Court', a very formal Frenchman in your habit. / How do you like the French court? (Webster 3-4). Antonio is one of the most important characters in the play for he is the secret husband of the Duchess. Bosola, the antagonist of the play did not like Antonio at all, he continually was plotting against the Duchess after being employed but then agreed to Ferdinand. According to Bosola Ferdinand and Cardinal 'are plum trees that grow crooked over/ standing pools: they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit but none/ But crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them' (Webster 48-50). Bosola was not satisfied with them and this is evident from his speech. Bosola was not a good man after all earlier, he had bad record about him, as Delio said about him, 'I knew this fellow seven years in the galleys/ For a notorious murder, and 'twas thought/ The Cardinal suborned it' (Webster 69-70). Ferdinand and his brother always use Bosola as a tool and sometimes he expresses repulsion:

I would have you curse you curse yourself how, that your bounty
Which makes men truly noble, e'er should make
Me a villain: oh, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must do
All the ill man can invent. Thus the devil
Candies all sins o'er: and what heaven term vile
That names he complemental (Webster 262-68)

Bosola was often compared to the villain Flamineo of *The White Devil* (1612), like Bosola Flamineo is also resentful with his social position, As he tells his mother:

I would know where lies the mass of wealth
Which you have hoarded for my maintenance
That I may bear my beard out of the level
Of my lord's stirrup (*The White Devil* Act1, Scene2)

As Roberta Barker points out in a journal article; ' Like Bosola, Flamineo in crisis is shocked by the stirrings of some faintly sensed interior reality that rejects the outcomes of his amoral acting "I have a strange thing in me, th' which/ I cannot give a name, without it be /Compassion"(5.4)' (Barker 41). Bosola is not certain about his own decision, he is in ambiguity throughout the play:

The character of Bosola is unquestionably one of the most complex
elusive in the major Jacobean drama. In the face of the monumental
complexities of the play in which he is such an important figure
critics have, almost without exception, avoided the task of attempting
a complex examination of the character. But to me it appears undeniable
that Webster intended Bosola as a major tragic protagonist, and the
strategic unwisdom of examining the characters must therefore
be risked (Thayer 162).

After doing all these vile actions Bosola finally goes to murder the Duchess, actually Bosola's calculation was wrong, murdering the duchess could not make him comfortable. Though Bosola did not commit the murder consensually but he did it, and this made him repentant a lot. As a researcher Syed Faizan Bukhari notes down in an article, ' Webster manages to orchestrate a fearful comfort through the murder of the Duchess by Bosola . This macabre transcends all earlier questions of Duchess' guilt or innocence in what has been called "the long ecstasy of pain". Webster's genius is visible in the creation of this transcendence through an integration of symbolism borrowed from the tradition and his own poetic voice' (Bukhari 2.

Bosola when gets the responsibility for murdering the Duchess, could not approach in his own appearance he had to disguise himself as an old man, before murdering her he praises her:

Thou art some great woman sure, for riot begins to sit on thy
Forehead, clad in grey his twenty years sooner than on a
Merry milkmaid's. Thou sleepest worse than if a mouse should
Be forced to take up her lodging in a cat's ear, a little infant that
Breeds it's teeth, should it lie with that would cry out as if thou
Wert the more unquiet bed-fellow (Webster Act4, Scene2).

Bosola strangles her, the irony is instantly heightened in which Bosola as murderer largely shifts his demonic role to that of an angel of comfort. She is not afraid of death, knowing (Bukhari 4). When Bosola murders her, he suddenly becomes very sad about what he had done and even confessed his sin to the dying Duchess, her death changes his mind entirely perhaps:

Oh! she's gone again: there the cords of life broke
On sacred innocence that sweetly sleeps
On turtles' feathers, whilst a guilty conscience
Is a back register wherein is writ
All our good deeds and bad, o perspective
That shows us hell – that we cannot be suffered
To do good when we have a mind to it!
This is many sorrow:
This tears, I am very certain, never grew
In my mother's milk. My estate is sunk
Below the degree of fear: where were
These penitent fountains while she was living?
Oh, they were frozen up. Here is a sight
As direful to my soul as is the sword
Unto a wretch hath slain his father.
Come I'll bear thee hence
And execute thy last will; that's deliver
Thy body to the reverend dispose
Of some good women: that the cruel tyrant
Shall not deny me: then I'll post to Milan
Where somewhat I will speedily enact
Worth my dejection (The Duchess of Malfi).

When Bosola sees the dead body of the Duchess, he feels great sorrow and tries to undo what he has done, in Martha Ronk Lifson's words, 'Bosola in particular learns too late, though as I will argue, what he learns in his encounter with the Duchess, imagined in that moment in which he takes her in his arms, is enormously significant' (Lifson 47). Martha wants to focus on the sorts of moral questions raised and at least partially resolved by such duplication; on the central part of the body, the Duchess' body; and the way in which Bosola in act v comes to duplicate the Duchess, symbolically and physically (Lifson 47). The death of the Duchess though convulses him to a great extent but it is not the sole reason behind this change, he actually being a mercenary wants to go to higher position through flattery. He learns his mistake that he should not have done so to the Duchess and her family, he should not have swayed by the orders of Ferdinand and Cardinal, the death serves as one of the turning points in Bosola's life brings out his conscience and his moral self. Bosola's realisation of the wrong done by him makes him recall Antonio and confessed his guilt: 'Oh poor Antonio, though nothing be so needful/ To thy estate as pit, yet I find/ Nothing so dangerous. I must look to my footing; / In such slippery ice-pavement men had need/ To be frost-nailed well, they may break their neck else./ The precedents here afore me: how this man / Bears up in blood seems fearless' (Webster Act5, Scene3). The death of the Duchess as well as

trickeries to the Antonio and his children make him suffer and lead him to change his inner self as well as the outer nature.

II

Bosola has been presented as a Machiavellian villain, a Machiavellian character is he who lives his life conforming to the suggestions made by Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1532). Bosola conforms to Machiavelli's law of leading life. According to Machiavelli 'men ought to be well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious one they cannot; therefore the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge' (*The Prince*). Being a Machiavellian hero like Barabas in *Jew of Malta*, who continuously did villainous activities to be in higher position and it was fair to him. Bosola also tries to do such but ultimately fails to do. Chang Chin-Yi observes that Bosola is a figure of the malcontent, disenchanted with his low status in society and railing against it because it does not benefit him but his choice of allegiance with the Cardinal is eventually regretted as he seeks revenge for the Duchess and her family by killing Cardinal and Ferdinand in the end as he experiences a genuine pity and sympathy for the Duchess whom her brothers have ruthlessly destroyed when she failed to be a pawn to their power (Chin-Yi 71). Bosola faces some inner conflict with his own self as whether to go by his own will or listen to the 'Aragonian brothers'. He bears similarity also with Iago, the villain of Shakespeare's *Othello*, like Bosola, Iago pretends to get position and to cause downfall of Othello:

For when my outward action with demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am (*Othello* act1, scene1)

In pursuit of revenge Iago assumes many tricks, manipulates others like Bosola he only wants to get higher position and wealth. Bosola also knows the Machiavellian saying that any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good (*The Prince*). His ideology is much the same as the ideology of Sandip in Tagore's *The Home and The World*, Sandip manifests the aspect of a typical lowerclass character who does not believe in so called 'humanity' and 'morality', according to him " 'That is really mine which I can snatch away'. My country of my birth. It becomes mine on the day when I am able to win it by force. Every man has a natural right to possess and therefore greed is natural" (*The Home and the World* 48). Bosola like Sandip tries to attain a position by refusing all his moralities and humanities but ultimately failed to get so like Sandip.

Bosola finally got to know that to be honest to one's master also cannot make good result, he does his duty but he does not get his well-deserved payment, as Baker points out 'with a poetic justice, Cardinal's plotting caused him to be an unwitting conspirator in Bosola's revenge. His coldly rational evil has himself as its final target, just as Ferdinand's passionate rage finally turns inward. The Aragonian brothers become victims of their own rhetoric' (Baker 350-51). After being refused to get this wages for his works, he regrets and suffers internally and bursts out:

Let me know
Wherefore I should be thus neglected sir,
I served your tyranny, and rather strove
To satisfy yourself than all the world;
And though I loathed the evil yet I loved
You, that did counsel it, and rather sought
To appear a true servant than an honest man (*Webster* Act4, scene2)

Bosola repeatedly got rejected by the the brother, Ferdinand and Cardinal, Cardinal also want to kill him: ‘ About this hour I appointed Bosola / To fetch the body: when he hath served my turn,/ He dies’ (Webster Act4,Scene4) but Bosola already has understood then that he is deceived by wicked Cardinal as he says : ‘My death is plotted. Here’s the consequence of murder ./ ‘We value not desert, nor Christian breath, when we know back deeds must be cured with death’. (Webster Act4, Scene 4). Bosola’s cynical vision presents a challenge to the Duchess,’ values that intensifies them by contrast when they are reasserted. But Bosola’s vision also serves another purpose in the play’s dramatic construction by further humanizing and illuminating the Duchess’ (Lucky 275-76). Bosola witnesses various dismal things like the death of the Duchess, the death of Cariola, Antonio and his children, the death of Julia, the betrayal of Ferdinand and also Cardinal, these successive incidents turn him a good man, he learns that one can not only get success by doing wrong things, there are many good deeds to be done. As he says towards the very end of the play:

Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
By the Aragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poisoned by this man; and lastly, for myself,
That was an actor in the main of all,
Much ‘gainst mine own good nature yet in the end
Neglected (Webster Act 5, scene5)

As C. G. Thayer points out, ‘Bosola has been, in effect, an actor playing a role. If it has been playing a role, then, necessarily, he has been not himself. The symbolic throwing-off of the disguise must certainly mean that the actor has become the man, that instead of acting out further the role of Ferdinand's creator or the role of a vicious malcontent, he will now abide by his own principles. This of course is not merely a technical device to tell us that Bosola has changed. It has profound philosophical implications, and in the tragic context it is intensely ironic. Bosola, acting a part in the tragedy of the Duchess, has prospered. But now he must step forward and be the protagonist in his own tragedy, and this cannot do until he is indeed himself, understanding himself and committed suicide doing what he knows is morally right’ (Thayer 168). Bosola does not be happy for his whole life, neither he wants to be happy because what he seeks cannot be achieved. ‘Bosola’s world-weary pessimism when he dismisses the vanity of his actions does not close off the development of his identity. Even as he speaks those words, Bosola remains engaged in social struggle. Not only is he complaining of being unfairly neglected, but he is also in the process of reinventing himself as the Duchess' murderer's revenger, fashioning a new persona through which he may perform his ‘good nature’ as well as his talent for murder (Barker 43). At the end Bosola was very repentant and crying delivers his final speech before going to heaven or hell, though he was a Machiavellian villain, but finally turns to a hero, almost a protagonist of the play:

Oh I am gone.
We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
That ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well.
It may be pain but no harm to me, to die
In so good a quarrel. Oh this gloomy world!
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
Let worthy mind, ne'er stagger in distrust
To suffer death or shame for what is just.
Mine is another voyage (Webster Act5, Scene5).

To conclude, The death of the Duchess changes the whole plot and the characters of the play . The betrayal of the world, the realisation of the world, transformed him entirely. The metamorphosis of the most complex character takes place throughout the course of the play. The subsequent murders done by him, the lying, the tricks, the misdeeds done by him affect and torment him profoundly, his complete devotion towards his master and then being neglected and humiliated by them, metamorphose him entirely. He acknowledges his guilt and accepts his death as the punishment of what has done so far.

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