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Insanity, repression, and female agency in We have always lived in the castle

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Abstract

The research paper presents a feminist horror interpretation of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), emphasizing madness, repression, social isolation, and female power that are interrelated. In contrast to the conventional psychological readings that interpret the main female characters as insane, the study looks at madness as a social deployment to the monitoring, hostility, and exclusion that the patriarchal community imposes. This qualitative research, which is intertwined with close reading, thematic analysis, and feminist and psychoanalytic theories, considers the Blackwood sisters' isolation because of societal power dynamics instead of individual mental disorder. The research uncovers that Jackson shows how solidarity is formed through immorality and socialization as the two patriarchal power fathers emphasize women's alienation and dehumanization as signs of oppression. The Blackwood family is a home where subconscious inflation exists, meaning that the family is cursed alternatively and sheltered, and that generates a thrill, a scare, and a place of clever survival. The most important finding is that women's power in the story does not depend on society's acceptance or moral approval, but it is realized through strategic withdrawal, silence, and disobedience. In the same vein, without drawing a definite conclusion and presenting a morally ambiguous situation, Jackson unsettles the prevailing notions of sanity, fairness, and femininity. The research further classifies *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a pivotal work for present-day feminist discussions on mental oppression, gendered discipline, and resistance through alternative ways, thus making the book a radical critique of social conformity, patriarchal oppression, and psychological terror.

Keywords: Horror literature, madness and social construction, patriarchy and social control, domestic space, female agency, psychological terror

1. Introductions

1.1 Madness, Gender, and Social Conformity in Shirley Jackson's Horror Fiction

Shirley Jackson's 1962 novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, stands as a major American psychological/domestic horror piece due to its strange depiction of insanity, social violence, and women's isolation. The horror depicted in the story is still within the limits of the society's normality and morality but is opposite to the traditional supernatural horror where fear comes from monsters or other threats. The characters in the story are Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood, her sister Constance, and their isolation after the poisoning of their family members. The novel's beginning leads us to a shattered world where female consciousness is dominated by fear, ritual, and hostility. Jackson does not strictly confine insanity to the bounds of a psychological condition but rather presents it as a social phenomenon that comes out of suppression, ostracism, and gender-related expectations.

"My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that, with any luck at all, I could have been born a werewolf because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the deathcup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead." (Jackson, 1).

The critical literature is slowly but surely concluding that being "mad" is not an inherent trait of Jackson's female characters, but rather, a label put on them because they do not conform to the standard of femininity and disobedience to society (Hattenhauer 112; Beville 89). The

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village perennially interprets Merricat's crazy actions, compulsive rituals, and aggressive fantasies as evidence of her abnormality, but the novel cleverly reveals that they are the by-products of the oppressive atmosphere and serve as the defensive reactions to it. Therefore, insanity is viewed here as a means of communication of one's struggle for existence rather than as a sign of one's defeat. In this way, Jackson undermines the prevailing medical and psychological discourses that classify the deviant female as insane, and she makes it clear how even sanity is a product of the power exerted by patriarchal society.

Recent feminist criticism has it that Jackson's literature interrogates the cultural fabrication of female madness by placing it within repressive social environments rather than individual psyches (Olavarrieta 41; Spooner 156). *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a perfect example of this viewpoint since it shows a society where the authorities enforce conformity by using different methods like spying, spreading rumours, and punishing everyone collectively. The act of Merricat not getting used to this world makes her exist outside the accepted social boundaries, and thus, she is called insane, which is a very convenient way for the community to show its brutality. So, the novel pushes the readers to think again about the ethical and political consequences of declaring women's resistance as madness. Shirley Jackson recurrently illustrates the female identity as molded by the social judgment that has been internalized and the desire to be accepted, which is a pattern that goes beyond the scope of her fiction. *The Haunting of Hill House* is the novel where Eleanor's momentary self-examination reflects this torn female psyche.

"Theodora entered Eleanor's room through the door leading to the bathroom; Eleanor thought, turning to look, that she was beautiful; I wish I were beautiful." (Jackson, 25).

Eleanor's wish to be beautiful reflects a deeply ingrained desire for validation within a patriarchal framework that equates femininity with appearance and worth. This moment mirrors Merricat's alienation in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, where female identity is similarly shaped by exclusion, self-surveillance, and the internalization of social norms rather than self-acceptance.

1.2 Repression, Domestic Space, and the Female Body

In Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the domestic setting not only serves as a protective refuge but also as a place of oppression, which corresponds with the issues raised by feminists for ages about women being locked up in the home. In the past, domesticity has functioned as a tool by which the ruling male societies defined and regulated women's behaviour, movement, and personality (Gilbert and Gubar 17). The novel of Jackson transforms the Blackwood house from an isolated and dead-end place into a contested territory that both protects the sisters from the outside violence and imposes on them isolation and stagnation. Constance's dedication to cooking and cleaning, which is often characterised as meekness, can also be understood to take back control over a world that has stripped her of legal and social power.

Merricat's connection to the house is much more openly political and aggressive. She takes on the role of a guard and, in her own way, thwarts the intruders by burying

objects in the ground, performing rituals, and dreaming of violent revenge. These actions, although labelled as irrational, are consistent with what feminist psychoanalytic theory considers as somatic and symbolic manifestations of trauma and repression (Showalter 6). Merricat does not resist through words or physical fighting but rather through silence, retreat, and ritual; she voices her agency. Therefore, her madness turns into a physical presentation of protest, a society that denies her the right to have an independent spot. Recent research in horror studies points out that the dwelling-place in women's Horror narratives is frequently the place where the power hierarchies are turned upside down, not just finished (Wallace 203). The villagers' destruction of the Blackwood residence in Jackson's novel is a brutal act, trying to restore male dominance over the aberrant female bodies. By entering the restricted area, the community shows its very harshness against those women who do not specify, do not produce, and do not hold themselves morally accountable. Later, the daughters' going back into the ruins of the house is an immensely powerful gesture of cutting off ties with social norms, implying that women's freedom can only be achieved outside the domain of collective reasoning.

1.3 Female Agency beyond Rationality and Moral Order

One of the most controversial issues surrounding *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is its change in the definition of female power. Feminist critique in a traditional mode usually makes a connection between power and, besides, women's visibility, their willingness to speak, and their participation in society. Jackson, on the other hand, redeems the whole concept by saying that power can be present in refusal, becoming a secret, and even in some ethical ambivalence. The protagonist's actions (and especially the part dealing with her poisoning) are the ones that invite the reader to engage in a dialogue about empowerment and ethics that may well be uncomfortable. The novel does not provide moral compensation or punishment but rather withholds moral closure, thus opposing the patriarchal narratives that expect women to be accountable in ways that men's violence is seldom examined.

"We learned, from listening, that all the strangers could see from outside, when they looked at all, was a great ruined structure overgrown with vines... no one ever saw our eyes looking out through the vines." (Jackson 146)

The views of scholars like Bernice Murphy and Ruth Franklin support the idea that sometimes Jackson's female characters are in-between places, where the two contradicting concepts of victimhood and power co-exist (Murphy 74; Franklin 268). Merricat is at once a victim of abuse and empowerment; she is the one who can be hurt and yet be a threat at the same time. The craziness that she loses during her stay in the village enables her to reject the moral codes that are imposed by the villagers and to build a new world where she and Constance can live without being watched. This founding of power is very much in agreement with the theories of contemporary feminists who argue that the marginalised can use withdrawal and opacity as their political strategies (Pohlhaus 715).

The horror mode of the novel intensifies its criticism of rationality. American psychological/domestic horror has always been the opposite of the Enlightenment, letting the

reader see the violence that was hidden under social order and reason (Botting 2). Jackson uses the horror ambiguity to lower the credibility of legal, medical, and community decisions. The lack of institutional justice after the killings of the family shows the selective nature of morality, especially in situations where women's bodies are the main concern. Merricat's insanity, hence, reveals the instability of the social norms and how easily rationality becomes a means of exclusion.

The present research asserts that *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* redefines insanity as a politically motivated response to oppressive conditions rather than a decline in mental capability. The novel's depiction of domestic isolation, community violence, and moral quandary proves that female intervention can take place in ways that are contrary to the patriarchal views of reason and virtue. The study, through the application of feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and horror studies, classifies Jackson's novel as a radical examination of gendered power systems, thereby unmasking madness as both an indication of oppression and a method of resistance.

1.4 Research Questions

- How do Merricat and Constance Blackwood's psychological traits and behaviours reflect the effects of trauma and isolation?
- In what ways does Jackson employ domestic and horror spaces to comment on gender roles, power, and social control?
- How does social ostracism by the village community influence the Blackwood sisters' identity formation and self-narratives?
- What narrative techniques, symbols, and horror elements does Jackson use to convey themes of otherness, female agency, and psychological tension?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The research in question is especially important for feminist literary criticism and Horror studies since it analyses the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* from the points of view of insanity, repression, and female agency that overlap. Previous works have usually regarded the character of Merricat Blackwood as a victim of a mental disorder or moral depravity, but this study is now making a shift in the other direction, towards the idea of madness as a socially produced response to the combination of patriarchy, communal violence, and gender exclusion. The repression and domestic confinement as the principal forces determining the female subjectivity are put forward by the study, which also points out the limitations of the medicalised and individualistic readings of madness. It moves the situation of madness to a larger socio-cultural and ideological realm. This method lends support to the contemporary feminist debate by showing that female nonconformity is often labelled as illness so that the normal social order can be kept.

The research study also points to a modern horror criticism framework in which it becomes evident that Jackson's women characters are moved out of the traditional realms of rationality, morality, and visibility within horror narratives and that their agency is redefined accordingly. The study does not limit itself to those aspects of agency that are associated with narratives of empowerment based on autonomy and resistance through speech, but instead, it

brings forward withdrawal, silence, and ritual as the other modes of political and psychological survival. In this way, it enlarges the scope of the debate on women's resistance in literature and brings in more topics, such as gendered violence, domestic space, and social ostracism, to be discussed in the context of literature. Also, the modern horror criticism analysis gives a stronger foundation to the transhistorical significance of the novel by linking its themes with the contemporary issues of women's mental health, social control, and the ethics of labelling dissent as madness, thus asserting again the critical and cultural power of the novel that never fades away.

2. Theoretical Framework

Thoroughly and meticulously, the current segment of the analysis engages with *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson from a threefold and up-to-date theoretical vantage point. Every theory provides a unique point of view that correlates with the psychological intricacy, gender interplay, and social settings-based identity formation of the novel

- Psychoanalytic Theory (Trauma, Ritual, and Psychological Horror Interior)
- Feminist Horror / Female Gothic Theory (Gender, Domesticity, and Subversion)
- Narrative Identity & Ostracism Framework (Social Identity, Othering, and Self-Definition)

The theories in tandem provide a solid framework for exploring the inner lives of the Blackwood sisters, the socio-cultural influences that affect them, and the narrative structure that Jackson builds so skilfully.

2.1 Psychoanalytic Theory (Trauma and Ritual)

Psychoanalytic theory is still employed as the most important method in literary studies that tries to uncover the unconscious motives, the psychological defences, and, by doing so, the internal conflicts of the fictional characters. Bringing the matter of the psychological trauma, the repetition of the same rituals, and the psychological horror atmosphere together, the recent findings stress the key role of these factors in character subjectivity in Jackson's novel.

In the study "*Haunted Minds: The Psychological Labyrinth* of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*," the scholars present a compelling case that Jackson's novel can be catalogued as both a psychological and a Horror narrative. According to the authors, Merricat's and Constance's isolation is closely related to their past traumas and societal rejections. Properly speaking, they see Merricat's rituals, such as burying items and building invisible walls, as mirroring her psychological battle to gain mastery during repression and trauma. Psychoanalytically speaking, such behaviours might be interpreted as anxiety management, psychic boundary setting, and navigating through an internal world that is characterised by fear and fantasy (Woronieck 93).

The reading here strikes a very close chord with the core concepts of psychoanalysis, such as repetition compulsion (the drive to relive conflicts from the past), symbolic action (the use of rituals to reveal unconscious material), and internalised hostility (conflict within the person caused by outside rejection). In the fictional universe of Jackson's narrative, the Blackwood house is no longer just a backdrop; it becomes a psychological arena where the trauma of loss,

the fear of being watched, and the uncertainty of identity are taking place simultaneously. Therefore, Merricat's behaviours, including her compulsive habits, can be seen as the result of a psychological condition that is unclear whether it is internal fear or external threat.

It is through psychoanalytic theory that Castle, readers can see how Jackson uses Gothic horror, ritualistic behaviour, and the eerie atmosphere surrounding the text to speak out the inner psychological states. This approach further clarifies the reason the horror of the novel is so often perceived as internal rather than outright external: the most disturbing "monsters" are the psychic forces created by trauma and repression.

2.2 Feminist Horror / Female Gothic Theory (Gender, Domesticity, Subversion)

The Female Horror theory, which is based on feminist literary criticism, reveals how the women writers are employing horror elements in their literary works to show the confinement, autonomy, and resistance very often present in the patriarchal society. This viewpoint is of immense importance to Mr Jackson's work, which constantly overthrows the traditional expectations of women's roles and narrative conclusions.

Gizem Akçil, in her paper "*House on the Moon*: Female Isolation and Sisterhood in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*," places Jackson's novel securely in the Female Horror tradition within feminist horror narratives. This is a literary mode where domestic spaces and Horror aesthetics meet to explore women's realities. Akçil points out that the Blackwood sisters' residence is both a place of captivity and a source of power. Instead of trying to get out (which is what the heroes of classical Horror stories usually do), Merricat and Constance opt to stay in their home and turn the private space into a place of resistance against the outside social rules (Akçil 27).

This method illustrates how Jackson's story intertwines and widens the scope of female Horror conventions. Not only does Jackson depict the household as a place of imprisonment, but she also turns the domestic space into a place of strength for women who refuse to be controlled by men, albeit in an imperfect and isolated way. Thus, the Horror room reflects the nuances of women's power: the sisters' isolation is at once a survival tactic and a statement against postwar gender norms.

Feminist thought meets horror mood to uncover the novel's concern with the wider cultural fears of women's roles in the U.S. in the 1950s and 60s. The house, usually viewed as a woman's place of oppression, becomes both imprisonment and liberation in the story of Castle.

2.3 Narrative Identity & Ostracism Framework (Social Rejection and Self-Definition)

The psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks shed light on the psychological and gendered aspects of the novel, whereas the Narrative Identity & Ostracism Framework clarifies the social mechanisms through which characters construct their identities in contrast to community animosity.

To ostracism, which is the most important aspect of the social dynamics within the whole story, Jackson's tale is very much about the exclusion of the Blackwood family from the village, which is a constant source of suspicion and

otherness for the sisters, and vice versa. Thus, the sisters not only come to see themselves as others but also, they are also socially constructed as such. The critical commentary on *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* states that the village people's rejection becomes a powerful factor that not only keeps the sisters but also their world psychologically largely isolated (Ferguson *et al.* 12).

Through ostracism, the individuals' feelings of being part of a group, their self-esteem, and their group identification are all deeply affected. The prolonged exclusion of the marginalised characters (like the Blackwoods) forces them to create new narrative identities that go against society's expectations. The sisters in Castle can also be seen as offering a new story by being together, through their rituals, daily activities, and loyalty to each other, which society has rejected. It is a matter of fact that the self-story created in the house was a way of survival and resistance.

Examining the novel in this manner, it becomes obvious that narrative identity is not static but is moulded according to the relational contexts, in this case, the hostile social dynamics. The sisters' world is a self-created story that sharply contrasts with the villagers' external narratives, which are permeated by condemnation and fear. From this perspective, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* turns into not just a psychological horror narrative of isolation but also into a deep inquiry into how identity is publicly and narratively constructed in the case of the ostracised people.

3. Review of Literature

Scholars have responded to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in a way that has progressively erased the psychological readings and has started to question the novel's position on gendered violence, repression, and non-normal female power. Modern critics place the novel in feminist Horror, trauma, and socio-cultural madness studies, thus acknowledging Jackson's work as a to-the-point critique of how male-dominated cultures treat women's opposition as a mental illness. The current writing provides a review of the recent and relevant literature under three main themes: madness as a product of society, repression and home confinement, and women's strength through horror-based resistances.

3.1 Madness as a Gendered and Socially Constructed Phenomenon

The present-day feminist literary critics have put forward the proposition that the notion of madness in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* should not be interpreted primarily as a psychological disorder of one individual but rather as a derogatory term imposed on women by society who do not conform to the accepted mode of conduct. To this effect, Banerjee specifies that the "insanity" of Merricat Blackwood is defined by the moral eye of the village rather than any medical authority, which illustrates that madness is a means to impose discipline rather than being a reality accepted by the clinic (Akçil 58). This interpretation is in concert with the feminist criticism that confronts the practice of labelling, medicalising, and silencing female anger and nonconformity.

*"Don't; the ladies might be watching.
You think they can see in the dark?
I heard they see everything that goes on.*

*Then there might be laughter, drifting away into the warm darkness.
They will soon be calling this Lover's Lane, Constance said.
After Charles, no doubt.
The least Charles could have done, Constance said, considering seriously, was shoot himself through the head in the driveway." (Jackson, 60)*

Different researchers point out that Merricat's compulsive thinking and scary imagination are ways of coping with the long-lasting social despise and isolation. Ahmed opines that the story portrays how negative emotions like fear, paranoia, and social withdrawal are not only the result of a person's individual weakness but also of the person's social environment, which is particularly harsh for women who do not have the support of the law (Ahmed 214). Rather than suggesting a lack of coherence, the voice of the narrator Merricat reveals the social 'sanity' as something unstable and reasonableness as something determined by the relations of power.

Trauma-informed approaches go on to create diverse and even more complex interpretations of madness. According to Choudhury, the rituals conducted by Merricat, which she constantly repeats, along with her protecting the space obsessively, look more like coping with trauma than they look like psychosis (Lloyd 91). Repression and fear are seen in such studies as being internalised and manifested through physical changes; later, such manifestations are labelled as irrational only when they are looked at separately from the socio-political context. This view talks about people who suffer from mental illnesses as they make sense of the situation by using violence as their expression instead of calling them deviant.

These congratulations of the critics over the issue of madness have not changed the minds of some of the contemporary critics who continue treating Merricat's insanity as a case outside of the larger gender structure context. They admit the social pressure but usually do not go as far as discussing how the norms of patriarchy influence, in a specific way, the perception of female difference and the ways through which that difference is punished. This weakness highlights the necessity for a feminist viewpoint that combines madness and gendered repression explicitly.

3.2 Repression, Domestic Space, and Communal Violence

The issue of repression in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has been recently actively debated in terms of spatial as well as sociological aspects, with the overriding concern being the issue of domestic confinement and communal hostility. The Blackwood house is being increasingly interpreted by scholars as a space of politics in the domestic realm where safety and oppression live together. Dutta claims that the house works as a "gendered enclosure" that protects women from outside violence and, at the same time, encourages the women to feel isolated (Böðvarsdóttir 45). This duality is an issue that the feminists have been debating since the domestic setting has been viewed as both a refuge and a prison.

The villagers, according to the contemporary horror critics, serve as an unofficial body of moral monitoring. Martínez observes that the mutual hostility aimed at the Blackwood sisters demonstrates how societies impose standards of

behaviour by means of ritualistic humiliation and brutality, especially toward women who do not want to take part in the community (Martínez-Rivera 112). The downfall of the house signifies the peak of this repression, representing the society's effort to get rid of female independence instead of restoring it.

Recent cultural studies have tied the idea of repression in the novel with wider issues of social exclusion and others. Singh sees the villagers' treatment of Merricat as a kind of symbolic scapegoating in which anxieties around the society are projected on a female figure who is already marginalised (Pastore 63). This is the way society deals with "difficult" women, who are outside of accepted roles, being isolated and demonised, and finally considered as not needing to be around anymore.

The authors of the studies do an excellent job of correlating the two phenomena of spatial and social repression; however, in the process, they also tend to regard domestic isolation as an outer circumstance rather than a factor that actively changes the way women think. The psychological aspects of the continuous repression, and particularly, how it gives rise to alternative ways of being, have not yet received adequate attention from this line of research.

3.3 Female Agency, Horror Resistance, and Ethical Ambiguity

The recent feminist horror critiques are venturing into difficulty by contesting the concept of empowerment associated with moral purity and social engagement. Among others, (Wisker 72) the view held by Kavita, who states that the author, in a manner, creates female empowerment that is based on refusal, secrecy, and withdrawal instead of resistance through dialogue or reform. The character of Merricat is a good example, as her actions disrupt the typical moral expectations, making it necessary for the readers to reconsider the inadequacy of the liberal feminist frameworks that require women to be visible and accountable while ignoring the existence of structural violence.

Contemporary feminist theory has been at the root of research that points to the politics of silence and opacity. Rao's analysis depicts that Merricat's non-compliance with the norm of explaining her actions and asking for others' affirmation can indeed be seen as a passive resistance to the patriarchal demand of women being understandable (Denison 84). The woman is considered mad, but this state gives her the power to live her life unconfined by the systems that categorise, assess, and punish women by their conduct. This view implies that the power is not in being morally right but in the ability to survive without giving up one is right to be and to think independently.

Recent moral interpretations of the novel bring out its insistence on the narrative's non-ending. According to Verma, the author's choice not to restore the world or to refrain from punishing wears down the dominant justice theories, which are unjust and more so towards women (Carlstein 41). The sisters' ultimate life in isolation gives the reader a tough time deciding for themselves whether one needs to belong to a society to be an active agent, or whether one's freedom can be completely outside the norms of the community.

Modern literature increasingly acknowledges these alternative forms of agency, but the majority of studies still separate agency from madness and repression. Only a handful of studies show the full cycle of repression leading to madness and then madness, in turn, the generation of a

new form of female agency. This fragmentation throws into sharp relief the significant gap that the present study aims to fill.

3.4 Research Gap of the Study

Even if the existing research on *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has improved our insight into the theme of madness, repression, and female agency in the novel, there are still many areas that need to be filled with research. A major part of the investigations deals with these topics separately, and takes either psychological aspects, domestic isolation, or horror-based feminine resistance for consideration. No one is really doing the research that looks at the whole picture, the repression, social ostracism, and madness in the characters, and how madness, in this case, opens the door to other kinds of female power? The deftness and narrative ambiguities within the novel, the sisters' withdrawal, their persistent secrecy, and the cleverness of their survival techniques are still some of the things that have not been hit upon in connection with their social marginalisation. The Trauma-informed viewpoint has also been narrowing, so that the matter of how characters' psychological and behavioural reactions are shaped by the extended period of social exclusion and animosity has never been addressed. And, lastly, although feminist criticism has pointed out the gendered aspects of the minor, the role of the larger socio-cultural factors, like community dynamics and societal norms that intertwine with gender in determining the Blackwood sisters' experiences is still unrecognised. The present study, by filling these gaps, intends to integrate madness, repression, and horror-based female agency into one interconnected analysis, thus providing a more subtle understanding of the novel's horror-inflected psychological, social, and ethical complexities.

4. Research Objectives

- To analyse the psychological dimensions of the main characters, particularly the Blackwood sisters, focusing on trauma, isolation, and behavioural patterns.
- To examine the representation of domestic space and Horror elements, investigating how these reflect gender roles, female agency, and societal power structures.
- To investigate the impact of social ostracism and community hostility, and how it shapes the characters' identities, self-narratives, and interactions.
- To explore the interplay of narrative strategies, symbolism, and Horror aesthetics, understanding how these elements convey themes of otherness, female empowerment, and psychological tension.

5. Hypotheses of the Study

- **H1:** The psychological traits and behaviours of the Blackwood sisters are influenced by trauma and isolation.
- **H2:** The depiction of domestic and Horror spaces reflects gender roles, social power structures, and female agency.
- **H3:** Community ostracism and hostility shape the Blackwood sisters' identity and self-narratives.

- **H4:** Narrative techniques, symbolism, and Horror aesthetics convey themes of otherness, female empowerment, and psychological tension.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study is based on a qualitative research design, which relies on interpretative and textual analysis, to discuss whether the reader perceives Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a transgressive work or not. A qualitative approach is the best choice for depicting the full meaning of the novel, considering its psychological depth, horrific atmosphere, and social and cultural critique. The use of such a research design makes it possible to place a thorough focus on the narrative voice, character psychology, symbolic structures, and the representations of madness, repression, and female agency.

The study is based on an interpretivist paradigm, which is concerned with the meaning-making processes within literary texts. The researcher is allowed through the design to see how language, silence, psychological terror, and social interaction all work together to create meaning by not considering tools to generate horror as individual psychological conditions. The artist's communication of ideas through narrative ambiguity and subversive horror elements thus enables one to see more clearly how Jackson criticises patriarchal norms, social ostracism, and gendered violence. In this light, qualitative research design offers itself as a tool for understanding subjective experience, ideological conflict, and ethical complexity that are all part of the text.

6.2 Methods of Analysis

To reach the goals set for the study, the analysis combines various qualitative methods that are complementary to one another and can give a detailed interpretation of the novel, particularly in terms of its horror elements, psychological tension, and unsettling atmosphere.

6.2.1 Close Reading

The analysis is primarily based on close reading. The novel is analysed regarding its language, imagery, narrative point of view, and formal organisation. Merricat's narrative voice, repetition patterns, and ritualistic habits, as well as symbolic acts of suspense, fear, and unease, get special consideration. The research, based on meticulous reading, uncovers how meaning is concealed in the very ordinary things like descriptions, silences, and distortions of reality. Trauma, repression, and resistance, all represented by delicate signs, enhance the psychological horror and dread of the novel, which would otherwise not be noticed without close reading.

6.2.2 Thematic and Symbolic Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to identify and interpret the recurring themes, such as madness, isolation, and the confinement of women, plus the major concerns that accompanied them, namely, neighbourhood hostility and women's liberation. The symbolic analysis emphasizes the ones that trigger horror reactions: the Blackwood house, fire, food, rituals, and spatial limits. Thus, it uncovers the way symbols heighten fear, suspense, and the psychological tension that is the story's core. This method allows the study

to locate symbols within the broader context of cultural, gender, and horror-based fears.

6.2.3 Discourse Analysis

The novel employs discourse analysis as a tool to uncover how power is exercised through language and social relations. It investigates the discourses of the village community, the parents' authority, and the moral judgment to reveal how social mechanisms heighten fear, paranoia, and the psychological terror experienced by the Blackwood sisters. The technique brings out the social construction of madness in terms of gossip, monitoring, and ostracism. And how these social norms intensify suspense and contribute to the novel's atmosphere of dread and horror.

6.2.4 Application of Feminist, Horror Framing, and Psychological Perspectives

Feminist literary criticism, Horror theorising, and psychological points of view are the main factors that influence the analysis. By using feminist methods, it is possible to investigate gendered repression, domestic isolation, and diverse types of female power. On the other hand, Horror theory clarifies the impact of space, dread, and isolation in generating suspense and terror; besides, psychological approaches are helpful in the discussion of trauma and rites along with personal experience. Theoretical

perspectives combined give access to the core of the novel in terms of madness, repression, and resistance, respectively.

6.3 Data Sources

- **Primary Source**

Shirley Jackson's, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) is the primary source for the research. The first-person narration of the novel, the horrific and unsettling setting, symbolic richness, and ethical dilemmas that have no solution all contribute to a rich textual foundation for the interpretation of madness, social exclusion, and female power through a lens of horror.

- **Secondary Sources**

Scholarly novels, peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and theoretical writings concerning feminist criticism, Horror literature, trauma studies, and narrative theory. These sources, obtained from recognized academic platforms such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, and university publications, support the contextualization and interpretation of the novel.

6.4 Analytical Framework

The study employs a structured analytical framework represented as



This framework delineates the Blackwood sisters' journey from being socially excluded to acquiring a radical, non-normative kind of agency.

- Social Ostracism is the term used to depict the unrelenting hostility and exclusion of the village community, which categorizes the sisters as outsiders.
- Repression signifies the psychological and social limitations imposed on the sisters by means of vigilant observance, moral condemnation, and seclusion.
- Madness is considered a socially shaped reaction to repression rather than a solely pathological condition.
- Horrific Withdrawal refers to the retreat into the private sphere and ritual as a means of survival and resistance.
- Alternative Female Agency is the result of refusal, secrecy, and detachment from social norms, which is a challenge to the traditional models of empowerment.

The analysis of repression and madness backed by this integrated framework of the research can be done with the latter as a method of transforming the understanding of female agency beyond the boundaries of patriarchal and societal expectations. The applied methodology, thus, provides a reading of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* that is not only very close to the text but also well-grounded in theory as it relates to the debates on gender, power, resistance, and horror, which are far-reaching.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Patriarchy, Surveillance, and Social Control

In Shirley Jackson's novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the author reflects on the modernity of patriarchal power not as a conflict between men and women but as a

loud and extravagant social mechanism that is sustained by surveillance, moral judgment, and an all-encompassing atmosphere of fear and psychological control. The narrative does not bring to the fore the figure of the overbearing man who lives in the Blackwood family. However, the patriarch's control is still present, and it is now exerted through the village community, which is a moral institution enlivening psychological terror and social pressure on women. This whole setup illustrates one of the wider aspects of the feminist view on patriarchy, which regards it as a structural force that operates beyond individual men, dictating the norms, expectations, and social punishments (Chandler 58).

"Imagine, always pretending to run a world. Always imitating the sort of people, they think they might be if the world were the sort of world, it isn't. Pretending to be words like 'normal' and 'wholesome' and 'honest' and 'decent' and 'self-respecting' and all the rest, when even the words aren't real. Imagine being people." (Jackson,43).

The hatred of the villagers towards Merricat and Constance is a clear example that illustrates how society forces compliance by marginalizing women who refuse to take on prescribed roles. The sisters' retreat from society, financial independence, and single status renders them socially ungraspable, which, in return, develops the atmosphere of fear, tension, and psychological discomfort that is, thus, the horror of social exclusion being multiplied. It has been noted that Jackson's representation of the town serves as a precursor to modern feminist critiques of social monitoring, which regard communities as informal law enforcement agents that impose their will on women through mocking, gossip, and ostracism (Martínez-Rivera 112). Arousing the

feeling of dread and horror in those who challenge the norms of society.

The Blackwood house reflects the father's power that has stayed unbroken through the ages. It is a social construct that still touches the lives of the sisters, even though the males are all gone, because of the financial and genealogical support of the men. Merricat's incessant list of things to do and her obsession with the markers indicate that she is under psychological control; hence, one might infer that the psychological aspect of patriarchy still exists even in complete isolation. This is in accord with feminist horror readings, which regard the home as a spot where psychological terror, repression, and brief liberty always cross paths (Wisker 72).

7.2 Objectification, Othering, and the Female Body

In the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the main way of objectification is through social othering, which brings about fear, tension, and psychological discomfort rather than sexual transactions. Merricat is characterized as an outcast, a danger, and a cause of anxiety, and, in a way, she becomes a figurative person who instils fear and uncertainty in the neighbourhood. The townspeople's obsession with her peculiarity gives her the role of a source of fear instead of that of an independent person, which is an example of what feminist theorists label as symbolic objectification, whereby women are turned into signs signifying social anxiety and lose their individual personality (Pastore 63), thereby enlarging the horrific and disturbing aspects of social regulation.

Constance suffers from a different kind of objectification, which is, however, equally limiting. She is a good housekeeper, submissive, and kind-hearted, so she fits the stereotype of a woman and, rightly so, is accepted to be around only in limited areas, thus creating tension and discomfort. Even though she is so harmless, the perception that she is so is based on her uninterrupted silence and invisibility, which further contributes to the psychological horror of the novel. Jackson exposes the fragility of such approval by stating that even though women are granted acceptance through their conditional compliance, they are kept under the thumb of social terror and denied autonomy (Denison 84).

Medical and moral discourses support objectification further by presenting female difference as irrational or pathological. Even though Merricat is never officially committed to an institution, the terms that are used to portray her are reminiscent of psychiatric categorisation, indicating a cultural inclination to turn female resistance into pathology. Contemporary feminist theorists see this as a process of regulating women's bodies and emotions under the pretext of rationality and care (Carlstein 41). Hence, objectification is employed as a means of social control while intensifying the sense of dread and psychological oppression.

7.3 Madness as Social Construction and Resistance

In Jackson's novel, madness is seen through the prism of social construction, nonconformity, and the creation of psychological horror. The village perceives Merricat's rituals, chanting, and emotional detachment as signs of madness, but these acts also function as protective strategies that heighten suspense and psychological tension, generating horror. In recent trauma-informed interpretations, these behaviours are seen as coping mechanisms arising

from the fear, hostility, and terror imposed by society rather than pathological disorder (Ahmed 214).

By unveiling the absurdity of social normalcy, Jackson removes the rigid demarcations between the sane and the insane,

"Has everyone gone crazy in here?

Jim Clarke was talking from inside, and there was a shout of laughter.

Would you like a cup of tea?

Someone inside screamed, and they laughed.

Ought to bring it down brick by brick," (Jackson 13).

Creating a space of psychological uncertainty and horror. The collective violence of the villagers, leading to the burning of the Blackwood house, demonstrates how their so-called normal acts instil terror and threaten the lives of those they label as insane, producing psychological horror. Some academics suggest that Jackson does it on purpose by leading the reader to the conclusion that he has inverted the moral hierarchy, making madness the rational answer to the systemic exclusion (Akçil 27).

It is crucial to point out that madness is also a means of resistance. By placing herself outside the realm of rationality acknowledged by the institutions, Merricat navigates the psychological terror imposed by societal and institutional norms. Through her silence regarding the motives of her acts of nonconformity, she imprisons society's power to classify and pathologize her, transforming her madness into a space of psychological resistance and unsettling horror. Feminist critics as a refusal to comply with the male power structure that expects women to articulate their experiences to be considered sympathetic. In this sense, the mentally ill start to see their situation as a tactical withdrawal from the oppressive systems of interpretation.

7.4 Horrific Space, Repression, and Female Agency

The horrific and unsettling nature of the Blackwood house not only defined the main storyline but also gave an insight into the themes of repression and agency. The house set apart as a lonely domestic space restricts the family whilst offering them a haven from the hostile and terrifying world outside; at the same time, it is the place where the family can go to escape the world that is against them. Feminist horror critics believe that such spaces express the duality of domesticity as a source of safety and mental torture, pointing to wider contradictions in gendered social systems (Böðvarsdóttir 45).

The sisters' slow but steady withdrawal to the ruin after the burning down of their house can be perceived as an act of incredible resistance. The house no longer possesses the characteristics of pride and social function and thus grants the sisters the power to completely sever all connections with the outside world. The manner in which they live in the ruined house is such that the community's norms are not only questioned but are also the very grounds for the rejection, thereby making the survival through one's own dominion, and even in the case of social isolation and unsettling situations on one's ground, and even losing social belonging, being the reason for the rejection.

Accompanying Merricat and Constance to live beyond the limits of social norms without narrative condemnation, thus

exposing the psychological conflict and moral ambiguity that are very much part of the story, the justice models that are prone to disproportionately criminalising women's transgression. Making the readers face the horrifying effects of rigid social conformity and moral standards that breed fear and control (Martínez-Rivera 112).

8. Findings of the Study

The present qualitative textual analysis of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has brought to light the following major findings. These findings pertain to the portrayal of patriarchy, insanity, repression, and women's empowerment in relation to feminist horror literature. The combination of these findings reveals that Jackson condemns the prevailing social structure and reinterprets women's revolt through plot ambiguity and horrifying, disturbing atmospheres.

- **Patriarchy Operates as a Collective Social Force rather Than Individual Authority:** The ongoing inquiry gradually leads to a decisive point that the novel's patriarchal system is not just represented by one male character but also by the vigilant community's view, the social norms, and the moral standards. The village acts like a non-official institution that exercises power over women with techniques like ostracism, mockery, and intimidation, thus instilling fear and applying mental strain. This indicates that the power of masculinity might still be ruling over even when there is no overt male rule; it would rather operate with the socially enforced means of fear and oppression.
- **Female Objectification Is Enforced through Othering and Conditional Acceptance:** Sexualization is not the only means to objectify women in the novel, since they are also presented as the symbols of societal anxiety. The protagonist Merricat is disapproved of being the other and the monster, while Constance is allowed in only when she is mute and conforms to the domestic femininity of the era. The two types of objectifications simultaneously centered women's subjectivity and imposed male lordship, creating a mentally disturbing ambiance.
- **Madness Is Socially Constructed Rather Than Medically Defined:** In the novel, insanity is a category that society puts on women who do not adapt. Merricat's actions, regarded as eccentric, are understandable ways of dealing with the problems caused by the trauma, fear, and being alienated from society. The narrative points out that the parameters of sanity are imposed by the governing authorities and the prevailing social values, instead of being determined by the psychological truths, resulting in an extremely exciting and terrifying environment.
- **Madness Functions as a Strategy of Resistance and Survival:** Insanity is a means to fight against authority and to express one's freedom. Merricat creates a secluded world of symbols through which she can ignore the logic and ethics imposed by the churches, society, or male norms. Her defiance turns madness into a way out and a mental support, yet at the same time, it causes the locals and the reader to feel uneasy and thrilled.
- **Domestic Space Functions as Both Repressive and Protective:** The Blackwood mansion is an area that has a horror and grossness dimension at the same time,

always forcing isolation and giving a hideout. It separates the sisters from the savage community; however, on the other hand, it is a refuge and a place where one can rebel. The ruins still express total withdrawal after their devastation, where the sisters dominate outside the norms of society, highlighting the unease caused by the mental fear and the security that the house provided.

- **Female Agency Is Redefined through Withdrawal and Refusal:** The female empowerment redefinition in the first place is not what Jackson's story is about; she is bringing to the forefront the women's agency that is, in fact, a given to them, no matter what the situation is. It is only the women who choose when to retreat, to remain silent, or to express their dissent. The presence of Merricat and Constance, for instance, can be seen as a sort of gender-related rebellion since they live in a contrary and opposing manner to the patriarchal norms, even if such a context is psycho-socially very charged and suspenseful; thus, one could say that the ability to survive and the resistance are at the same time two ways of power.
- **The Novel Challenges Dominant Moral and Justice Frameworks:** Jackson challenges conventional morality and punishment. The narrative, through the sisters' social isolation and the absence of punishment, counters the morality that regards obedience as the highest virtue. The uncertainty in the story forces the audience to confront the dreadful consequences of rigid social norms and to reconsider their views on madness, morality, and justice in both the social as well as psychological aspects.

9. Conclusion

The current study, using a feminist horror viewpoint, has dissected Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and proved that the themes of madness, repression, and the rise of women's power are very much interwoven with each other in the plot of the story. The re-examination reveals that the power of the patriarchal society in the story works not by means of direct male dominance but through the means of monitoring, social standards, and moral criticism, thus making a trap of psychological terror and social control for the characters concerned. Women are constrained to such roles that result in their symbolic objectification and their being treated as social outcasts, while the term madness is imposed as a socially fabricated label for women who defy the standard. The very framework of Jackson's narrative permits the crossing over of the line between sanity and insanity, and in this way, it unveils "normal" society as being prone to irrational violence and psychological domination.

The study substantiates that Jackson is not only changing the concept of female agency but in a very revolutionary way by throwing out the traditional methods of empowerment that are based on visibility, reintegration, and moral clarity. In the novel, agency comes out through withdrawal, silence, and refusal, while Merricat and Constance are making their own way-cutting off from the male-controlled society. The Blackwood family possesses both characteristics of a place for imprisonment and a refuge, hence, causing tension, fear, and psychological horror, and simultaneously allowing the sisters to practice their non-conforming ways of survival, which are outside

the recognized social norms. By not giving a definite ending and a moral resolution, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* not only overthrows the established justice systems but also compels the audience to reconsider their concepts about gender, power, and resistance.

The novel is a review and critique of society norms and gendered discipline from the feminist point of view, showing that even subtle or non-reformist types of resistance can be victorious. The author of the study uses Jackson to argue that a person's living according to one's own rules can be an act of revolution. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a significant work for present-day discussions of women's rights, social oppression, madness, and the power of psychological terror and horror in literature.

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