Daughters of Lucifer: Demonic and Transgressive Women in M.G Lewis's *The Monk* and William Beckford's *Vathek*

Ellen Moers in her *Literary Women* (1976) coined the term "Female Gothic" to refer to the female mode of the Gothic fiction. Moers described "Female Gothic" as a female centred genre where "woman is examined with a woman's eye, as sister, as mother, as self" (109). According to Moers, Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and others, who wrote in the female mode, endowed their heroines with some sort of autonomy and power in the face of patriarchal aggression. On the other hand, for some critics, the male mode of writing represented by M.G. Lewis, Charlotte Dacre, and William Beckford only upholds the patriarchal ideologies by portraying women either as demons or as angels. Kari J. Winter describes that Male Gothic represents the subjugation of women by depicting the punishment of the female transgressors. M. G. Lewis, according to her, as a member of parliament, as an agent of the state, propagated the dominant patriarchal ideology of the state.[1] She gives several examples from Lewis's *The Monk* to vindicate her claim, but Winter's explanation seems one-sided as she does not take into account the fact that this novel also does not reward the virtuous and proper women characters according to patriarchal norms. They are too punished and destroyed. Therefore no conscious authorial intention is found to uphold any misogynist patriarchal ideology. Whether these novels are proto-feminist, or they sympathize with feminist causes is a subject of debate, yet one cannot deny that the demonic and dominating women in these novels were looked upon as a threat to patriarchy at that time. Their power causes anxiety in the minds of the male characters. Besides this, they could be fantasy figures with whom the subjugated women could identify themselves to make fantasy about unlimited power and freedom. Per Faxneld in this respect comments, "More rebellious readers might

have identified or sympathized to some extent with the demonic females in the novels, since these are typically the only women in the narrative who have any agency and power to speak of" (213-14).

Mathew Gregory Lewis and William Beckford, both were the members of parliament, and both wrote Gothic novels in the tradition of Horror Gothic genre as opposed to the Radcliffean tradition. Both of them are known to have neither sympathies for feminist causes nor any misogynist grudge against women in their personal lives. Their famous works *The Monk* (1796) and *Vathek* (1786) contain female characters who are powerful, dominant, intelligent and transgressive as well as female characters who are humble, innocent and victims of the corrupt and cruel society. Women are sometimes represented as pornographic figures. However, they are not portrayed, maintaining the status quo and following the virtue-rewarded theory. So, the so-called proper women are not rewarded. Instead, they often become the victims of the cruel system like Antonia in *The Monk.* On the other hand, transgressors like Matilda and Carathis are also punished and destroyed. Thus, both virtuous and sinners are destroyed at the end, thereby rejecting any standard norms for women. In the fictional world of Lewis and Beckford, the conventional paradigm of ethics is turned upside down with the dissolution of the boundary between virtue and vice. Readers might often be tempted to enjoy the darkest crimes with the transgressors until the narrator reminds him or her of the normal world where virtue and vice are clearly distinguished. Sadean philosophy seems to have a considerable influence on both the authors. Their works portray Sadean "unreal" world of counter-ethics. Here the villains do objective harm for subjective pleasure with complete self-knowledge. Timo Airaksinenin in *The Philosophy of Marquis de Sade* (1995) remarks,

> Sade's ultimate anarchist message comes through: there are no real values or religious truths, social life is a veritable hell, and man is, accordingly, a beast by nature. This worldview is coherent enough in its own way, but also subversive. Sade really wants to destroy values as they are known in the tradition of the good life and religious salvation (16)

Like Sade, Lewis and Beckford were libertines and expressed their discontent over various social norms, institutions, and values. The Proclamation society, founded in 1787 to save society from immorality and lewdness and restore its moral status, threatened Lewis with prosecution for the obscenities and immoralities of his *The Monk.* Lewis had to eliminate the lewd and immoral part in it before publishing a second edition with his name (the first book was published anonymously) and designation 'MP' in it. The new book also faced severe criticism from the critics, but it will be discussed later. Beckford, too, had to face many troubles for his homosexual attachment to William Courtenay. Newspapers spread spicy news about this relation, and King George wished him to be hanged. He was not prosecuted (homosexuality was a crime at that time) possibly due to his social status and wealthy background, but he was forced to break the relation and live separately. He was also rumoured to keep a male harem in his Fonthill castle. Montague Summers mentioned that Lewis was also a homosexual though no strong evidence is found to support this. However, their personal lives show that they were libertines and had hardly any regard for conventional values and mores. Their works (*The monk* and *Vathek*) should be studied separately to assess how far the demonic or dominating females in their novels reflect their latent desire for transgression. I am limiting my study to female characters because apart from Caliph Vathek, no other male characters show any boldness and

strength. Though Ambrosio in *The Monk* violates the norms, he seems to be weak, effeminate, and procrastinating before every crime.

"Unfeminine and Cruel" Women in *The Monk*

Nick Groom in the introduction to the 2016 edition of *The Monk* considered the novel as belonging to the genre of political pornography. Groom has explained that pornography as a literary genre emerged comprising strong even subversive political messages under the veil of erotic. The word "pornography," Groom mentions, first appeared in France to refer to the practice of using sexual imagery to criticize the established order. In France, the production of such cheap and illustrated pornography reached its peak targeting Mary Antoinette as a sexualized figure. In the words of Groom, "the queen's body was effectively democratized, which in turn implicitly suggested a future paradise of sexual liberation. Similarly, the aristocracy and the clergy were depicted as debauched, debased, degraded, and usually sodomitical – the source and symptom of public ills" (xvii). Groom considers *The Monk* as an upgrade of such kind of pornographic work that revived the old anti-Catholic motif of "the lecherous monk." Fred Botting in the same tone of Groom remarks:

> It [*The Monk*] uses the conventional anti-Catholicism of Gothic fiction implied in the monastic setting, but it is the tyrannical nature of, and barbaric superstitions inculcated by, all institutions, including aristocracy, Church and family, that forms the general object of criticism. Institutional repression is seen to encourage excess. (5)

Criticism of church in the form of an erotic story had been in fashion since the Middle Ages. Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are some early examples. Since the late sixteenth century, the word "nunnery" began to be used

synonymously with brothel as a slang word. Church and monastic life became a popular setting for erotic literature during the late eighteenth century in England. Some other popular examples are Aphra Behn's *The History of the Nun* (1688), Young Nobleman's *Nunnery Tales* (1727) and Eliza Haywood's *Clementina* (1768). In *The* Monk, Lewis dismantles the religious sanctity of the church at the very beginning of the novel, describing it as a place with very few people with a true religious bent of mind. Most of them come here with different motives. It is described as a place where "the Women came to show themselves, Men to see the Women" (1). Ambrosio's adoration of the painting of the Virgin Mary and his identification of Matilda with this painting subvert the dichotomy between virgin and whore. Ambrosio's spiritual feeling for the Virgin Mary has an incestuous and erotic overtone as he engages in a licentious relationship later with his new Madonna (Matilda) in real life. Ambrosio is described as a naturally virtuous person corrupted by the dehumanizing education in the church. The narrator enumerates various virtues of Ambrosio:

> He was naturally enterprising, firm, and fearless: He had a Warrior's heart…There was no want of generosity in his nature. His abilities were quick and shining, and his judgment vast, solid, and decisive. With such qualifications He would have been an ornament to his country. (182)

But his education in the church repressed all these innate virtues, inculcated in him some false values and awakened the dormant vices of his character to make him a weak, proud and vainglorious person. The narrator says:

> While the Monks were busied in rooting out his virtues, and narrowing his sentiments, they allowed every vice which had fallen to share, to arrive at full

> perfection. He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful: He was jealous of his Equals, and despised all merit but his own: He was implacable when offended, and cruel in his revenge. (182-183)

Thus, Lewis exposes church as a place of corruption and dehumanization of natural human qualities. Ambrosio's degradation clearly shows that sexual inhibition advocated by church never ennobles one rather than results in perverting one's mind. The novel's political message is carefully veiled under an erotic story, but Lewis's language is more refined than the crude language of some writers in this tradition of political pornography. He is more subtle in his erotic description "preferring conventional euphemism and stock terms, describing, for instance, 'breast' as 'orbs'" (Groom xx). In Groom's words, Lewis "dwells on inflamed desire and consuming passion rather than on physical description" (xx). Lewis made church a setting for his erotic story not only to criticize its corruption and hypocrisy but also to rebel against its sexual repression. In *The Monk*, the mob does not punish the sexual deviant (Agnes) but the prioress, the agent of the authority that controls and represses sexuality. Under a veneer of its porno-eroticism, the political message of *The Monk* is double folded. In its first layer, it can be taken as criticism of the corruption and hypocrisy of the church, but on a deeper level, it is also a subversion of the repressive authority that tends to control and repress the human body and sexuality. So, Nick Groom remarks, "The porno-eroticism of *The Monk*, however, is poised between two very different attitudes: on the one hand by disclosing how institutional power relations are exerted over and control the human body, and on the other by being a pretext for personal titillation" (xx). So, the reading of *The Monk* is itself an act of subversion in which the readers can indulge themselves in a violent sexual fantasy where church itself forms the setting. Nick Groom in this respect comments, "Lewis

effectively manipulates the act of reading into an exercise in degradation in which the reader risks endorsing sexual criminality under the pretext of challenging repression. Lewis is in that sense a forerunner of Sade" (xx).

In this tradition of political pornography, both subversion and eroticism appear to be male-centric at the outset as women in these novels are often represented as the objects of male fantasy. In *The Monk*, the bodies of Matilda and Antonia are described in terms of the male gaze as the objects of male fantasy. However, Matilda is also a powerful figure in the novel. She offers herself as an object of voyeurism and the male gaze. She also offers her magic glass to Ambrosio to allow him to watch Antonia secretly while she is preparing for a bath, but she does so only to gain control over him. Groom in this respect remarks, "If seeing, objectifying, and controlling is a characteristic male domain…it also predominantly determined by a woman" (xxix) in this novel. This woman is Matilda who refuses to give in to Ambrosio, who approaches her with lust, saying to him, "I am no Prostitute, Ambrosio…I cannot yield to a request so humiliating to my pride" (292). She dominates Ambrosio and controls his actions throughout the novel. Apart from Matilda, there are other female characters who violate normal gender roles to achieve their goals in life in the novel. All of them are not demonized like Matilda, but they deviate from the standard ideals of feminine virtue to reach their goals in the novel. Marguerites and the Bleeding Nun are the other two women characters who manipulate the male characters to accomplish their missions. The prioress is, to some extent, a dominating character, but her role is short in the novel. Marguerite attains social security and freedom from her bandit husband, and the Bleeding Nun achieves salvation. Each character should be separately studied to see how their empowerment occurs at the cost of the transgression of their accepted gender roles. Matilda and the Bleeding Nun are

demonized, and Marguerites has to shed the feminine traits of their characters to become powerful and masculine. The readers are not certain at the end of the novel whether Matilda is a human being or a demon. This also creates gender confusion. Matilda's sexual identity is far from being transparent. She at first appears as a male novice Rosario. As a young man, she is described with feminine attributes like "sweetness," "docility," "exquisite sensibility," "gentleness," and "submissiveness." As a young man, she is described with some patriarchal stereotypes about femininity. The narrative describes Rosario as mysterious in nature bearing an air of "profound melancholy" with him: "A sort of mystery enveloped this Youth which rendered him at once an object of interest and curiosity" (33). When she reveals herself to be a woman to declare her love for Ambrosio, she gradually grows more masculine eliciting the disgust of Ambrosio. As a woman, she "assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse" (178). Ambrosio contrasts Matilda's manliness and gross sensuality with the innocence and feminine delicacies of Antonina in his mind: "What delicacy in her features! What elegance in her form! How enchanting was the timid innocence of her eyes, and how different from the wanton expression, the wild luxurious fire, which sparkles in Matilda's!" (187). This disturbed and threatened Ambrosio who "grieved that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own" (178). This aroused disgust instead of fondness in Ambrosio's heart. The narrator describes: "…as her passion grew ardent, Ambrosio's grew cold; the very marks of her fondness excited his disgust, and its excess served to extinguish the flame which already burned but feebly in his bosom" (181). D. L. Macdonald in his *Monk Lewis: A Critical Biography* mentions that the cause of Ambrosio's disgust is related to the culture of Lewis's time as "Lewis's culture thought of sexually aggressive women not just as masculine but as hermaphroditic"

(77). Nick Groom describes Matilda as “a mass of contradictions, embodying inexplicable inconsistencies” (xxix). Masculinization or demonization of transgressive women frequently occurs in Romantic literature. In Charlotte Dacre’s works, all the transgressive women like Victoria, Megalena Strozzi, and Appollonia are not deemed as normal women by the male characters. They are either masculinized or demonized or both. Their sexuality is taken as abnormal and threatening to the male characters. According to Adriana Craciun, this identity confusion is common to the *femme fatales* of Romantic literature. This fluidity of their identities may appear a patriarchal fantasy to romanticize and mystify women. But this can also be taken as a subversion of the patriarchal intention of creating a fixed and stable female identity. This reminds us of Judith Butler’s theory of gender identity. According to Butler, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that is performativity constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result” (33). Therefore, identity especially with regard to gender is unstable and always in a process. Ambiguity regarding the identities of the *femme fatales* of romantic literature from Lewis’s Matilda to Keats’s Lamia is actually subversive in the sense that their identities can be never be located or fixed by patriarchal discourse. Their unstable identity is always looked upon as a threat by patriarchy. They often elicit fear as well as disgust in the male characters.

The most important point about Matilda’s character is not the mystery surrounding her character but her power with which she manipulates Ambrosio and controls his action throughout the novel. Though at the beginning, she appears to be feminine and submissive as Rosario, she gradually reveals herself as a powerful figure. Her submissive attitude is actually a means to win Ambrosio’s faith and gain control over him. Matilda’s cross-dressing as Rosario and his intimate relationship has

a homosexual overtone. In the narrative, Rosario's relationship with Ambrosio is described as something deep and intimate:

> To him He (Matilda as Rosario) looked up with a respect approaching idolatry: He sought his company with the most attentive assiduity, and eagerly seized every means to ingratiate himself in his favour…Ambrosio on his side did not feel less attracted towards the Youth; With him alone did He lay aside habitual severity. When He spoke to him, He insensibly assumed a tone milder than was usual to him; and no voice sounded so sweet to him as did Rosario's. (34)

The narrator also mentions that Ambrosio loves Rosario "with all the affection of a father" (34). Therefore their relationship also bears an incestuous overtone too. Macdonald in this respect remarks, "…since incest and homosexuality are both conventionally considered narcissistic, the tradition from one to the other is smooth. Ambrosio's affair with Matilda has explicitly homosexual overtones, despite her sex, because of her masculine character" (79). At the beginning, Ambrosio with his "fiery and penetrating" (15) eye and thundering voice seems overtly masculine. According to Macdonald, he with his erect posture and lofty stature becomes not only masculine but also a phallic symbol of the patriarchal church, "the uncorrupted pillar of the church" (32). However, Ambrosio's gradual transformation from masculine to feminine takes place after he has been seduced by Matilda. With the progress of the narrative, Matilda assumes the masculine traits in her character while Ambrosio becomes more feminine with the stereotypical feminine traits like hypocrisy, curiosity, instability of mind, indecisiveness, etc. Matilda remarks observing the change in his character, "That mind which I esteemed so great and valiant, proves to be feeble, puerile, and groveling, a slave to vulgar errors, and weaker than a woman"

(206). This comment of Matilda at once reinforces as well as challenges the existing prevalent patriarchal ideologies. It endorses the *status quo* as it represents women with gendered stereotypes, but on the other hand, by attributing those stereotypical feminine features on a male character who represents the strength and pride of a patriarchal institution church, it also subverts the binary between masculine and feminine. On another level, this remark also refers to the defeat of patriarchy, the fall of its erect and uncorrupted pillar. Thus, *The Monk* remains a complex text and can hardly be reduced to a 'masculine' form of Gothic. In this context, Nick Groom remarks, "…the novel both endorses and challenges gendered power relations: *The Monk* is not simply 'a masculine' form of Gothic that can be contrasted to Radcliffe's educated, sentimental, and enlightened 'female' Gothic" (xxix).

Matilda's seduction of Ambrosio is an interesting part of the main plot. This slow process of seduction was praised by Mary Wollstonecraft who said that "the whole temptation is so artfully contrived, that a man, it should seem, were he made as other men are, would deserve to d—ned who could resist even devilish spells, conducted with such address, and assuming such a heavenly form" (Groom xxviii). This temptation bears some resemblance to the biblical temptation scene where Eve falls prey to Satan's design. Here the temptation which is mainly erotic in nature begins when Matilda reveals herself to Ambrosio as a woman. It continues through her attempt to kill herself pointing a dagger on her half exposed breast and reaches its pivot in the cloister's garden where Ambrosio is bitten by a serpent and is saved later by Matilda. Thus, the Church garden is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, and like Satan, Matilda wins the faith of Ambrosio with the help of the serpent. The serpent might be Satan's agent, or it may also suggest suppressed darkest desire of Ambrosio. The incident of the serpent's biting of Ambrosio is also suggestive of the arousal of the suppressed desire of Ambrosio, and Matilda being an impetus for it. Thus, Matilda

can also be taken as a Promethean rebel who revolts against church and its repression of natural human instincts. The repressive and dehumanizing education of church that has turned Ambrosio into a pervert, selfish, and proud man has been explicitly criticized by the narrator who remarks:

> Had his Youth been passed in the world, He would have shown himself possessed of many brilliant and manly qualities…His Instructors carefully repressed those virtues whose grandeur and disinterestedness were ill-suited to the Cloister. Instead of universal benevolence He adopted a selfish partiality for his own particular establishment. (182)

Therefore, Matilda's seduction of Ambrosio might be also interpreted as an attempt to liberate his mind from the church's prohibition and give him a taste of the forbidden pleasure. She, like Satan, who encouraged man to taste the forbidden Fruit of Knowledge, appears to be a humanist in this sense. She criticizes cloistered life and questions the validity of celibacy: "Unnatural were your vows of Celibacy; Man was not created for such a state; And were Love a crime, God never would have made it so sweet, so irresistible!" (172). She urges Ambrosio to clear all doubts from his mind and freely indulge in the pleasure that comes to him:

> Then banish those doubts from your brow, my Ambrosio! Indulge in those pleasures freely, without which life is worthless gift: Cease to reproach me with having taught you, what is bliss, and feel equal transports with the Woman who adores you. (172-73)

In this sense, Matilda's transgression becomes humanist like that of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Ambrosio's fall echoing the Great Fall of mankind signifies the human freedom and liberation of human mind from all sorts of bondage.

Matilda is portrayed as a powerful figure who uses black art to empower herself. She can summon the Devil anytime and make him do anything for her. She claims, “The Enemy of Mankind is my Slave, not my Soverign” (206). She further claims, “I saw the Daemon obedient to my orders: I saw him trembling at my frown, and found, that instead of selling my soul to a Master, my courage had purchased for me a Slave” (206). Per Faxneld, a contemporary scholar of the history of religion, in this context mentions, “The ability to command demons was typically viewed as something reserved for male magicians employing God’s power to make the demons kneel, whereas witches were slaves to Satan” (232). According to Faxneld, this “represents a reversal of how the relationship between witches and Satan was commonly perceived” (232). Matilda summons Lucifer to aid Ambrosio to fulfill his desire. Lucifer appears in the form of a beautiful and humble youth. At first when it seemed that he refused to accept Matilda’s order, Matilda “spoke in a loud and commanding tone, and her gestures declared, that She was threatening him with her vengeance” (213). This had its desired effect. The demon yielded to Matilda sinking upon his knees and gave the “branch of Myrtle” (213) that would help Ambrosio to fulfill his wish. Lewis describes Matilda’s violent and frenzied appearance at the time of performing rituals to summon the devil:

> …She uttered a loud and piercing shriek. She appeared to be seized with an access of delirium; She tore her hair, beat her bosom, used the most frantic gestures, and drawing the poignard from her girdle plunged it into her left arm. The blood gushed out plentifully, and as she stood on the brink of the circle, She took care that it should fall on the outside. (212)

Matilda’s violent ritual is a contrast to the calm prayer of the monks. It can be also taken as a “Satanic parody of the famous ecstasies of the female saints” (Faxneld

232). Above all, her violent behavior violates the codes for "proper" women and transgresses the limit of feminine delicacies, but several facts revealed at the end of the novel puts Matilda's supreme power and dominance over the Devil under doubt. Satan, at the end, reveals to Ambrosio that he sent Matilda, "a subordinate crafty spirit" for the destruction of Ambrosio (337). This revelation not only renders the character of Matilda inconsistent but also makes the main plot to some extent incoherent. According to Nick Groom, "it completely capsizes the dynamics of the plot" (xxx), but he also mentions that "the reader may not believe the Devil, Prince of Lies: the claim that Matilda is a succubus could, like the suggestion that gaolers were coming to free Ambrosio rather than execution, be a fiendish deception designed to shatter any of the monk's remaining hope and faith" (xxx). Devil may tell lies about Matilda, but the narrator at different times in the novel reveals a different side of this sorceress. When she was arrested and taken to torture, she broke down seeing the horrible sight of Ambrosio's suffering and confessed everything. This is hardly expected from a demon to yield to human forces in fear of torture. There are several instances where this demon reveals the human side of her character. When Ambrosio grew tired of Matilda who was growing more masculine and dominating, he became indifferent to her: "He no longer gazed upon her with affection, or applauded her sentiments with a Lover's partiality" (181). Then she strove to restore his attraction towards her: "This Matilda well perceived, and redoubled her efforts to revive those sentiments" (181). However, when her attempts failed, she became melancholic and resumed her old role as submissive Rosario to regain his favour:

> She had resumed the character of the gentle interesting Rosario: She taxed him not with ingratitude; But her eyes filled with involuntary tears, and the soft

> melancholy of her countenance and voice uttered complaints far more touching than words could have conveyed" (198).

The narrator, too, seems to sympathize with her and remarks, "Unfortunate Matilda! Her Paramour forgot, that for his sake alone She had forfeited her claim to virtue; and his only reason for despising her was, that She had loved him much too well" (188). When Ambrosio was kept in prison and tortured to make confession, she came to pain-ridden Ambrosio to offer help. She declared to him that still she loved her and could save him from impending death: "Ambrosio, I still love you: Our mutual guilt and danger have rendered you dearer to me, than ever and I would fain save you from impending destruction" (329). Thus, sometimes Matilda appears human, and her love for Ambrosio seems very genuine. Byron was fascinated by the character of Matilda in this novel and suggested that Lewis should present a real love story of a man and a demon:

> *The Monk* is perhaps one of the best in any language, not excepting the German. It only wanted one thing, as I told Lewis, to have rendered it perfect. He should have made the dæmon really in love with Ambrosio: this would have given it a human interest (Groom xxx).

Joseph Andriano in his book *Our Ladies of Darkness: Feminine Daemonology in Male Gothic Fiction* (1993) observes, "…Matilda is clearly a real woman, so much in love with Ambrosio that she will do anything to have him" (36). Andriano again mentions, "Lewis forgets or deliberately ignores several earlier passages that unequivocally evince Matilda's humanity" (35). Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* opines that Matilda throughout the major part of the novel "enlists the sympathy of the reader for the humanity of her passion" (192). Matilda's humanity may attract the

sympathy of the readers, but it often makes her a weak and submissive character who moulds herself to fit into the shape of "proper woman" like Antonia. The ending of the novel that reveals Matilda as a "subordinate but crafty spirit" (337) acting according to the design of the Devil might have disappointed the female readers of the time as she acts as a feminist icon who revolts against the patriarchal religion and its attempt to control human body and desire. Her choosing of Ambrosio as her beloved and expressing her passion for him explicitly might have been a fantasy for the women readers of the time. The question whether Matilda is a demon or a human is less important than the fact that in the major part of the novel she has acted as a powerful and independent woman. Her collusion with Satan and practice of black magic help her to transgress the limitations patriarchy imposes upon women. Per Faxneld in this context remarks,

> Whether or not Matilda is really female, male, or androgynous, is perhaps ultimately somewhat beside the point. The interesting thing is that for all but a few pages of the novel she is portrayed as a woman, and a much emancipated one that, who gains her authority and power by consorting with the power of darkness. (234)

Bleeding Nun is another transgressive female in *The Monk*. Sometimes, she is viewed as merely an apparition, a stock character in the Gothic genre of fiction. She does not have anything significant to contribute to the main plot. She appears as a stock figure in the Raymond-Agnes subplot. Raymond plans to elope with his beloved Agnes who lives in a convent. Agnes plans to disguise herself as the Bleeding Nun, a ghost that haunts the castle. They flee from the castle by a horse-drawn carriage, but the carriage crashes leaving Raymond injured and unconscious. When Raymond is awakened by the peasants, he cannot find Agnes. After several searches for Agnes, he

discovers that it was not Agnes, but the real Bleeding Nun accompanied him in the carriage. Since then, the Bleeding Nun continues to haunt Raymond as a succubus and draws his life-energy making him weaker though he was recovering from his injuries. With the help of the stranger Great Mogul, he learns that the Bleeding Nun is his ancestor, and he is responsible for burying her bones to help her to attain salvation. Raymond does so, and her haunting stops. Structurally, the character of the Bleeding Nun contributes a little to the main action of the novel. However, thematically she is an important figure, for her restless haunting signifies a warning against engaging in unbridled sexual passions. Her transgression echoes the transgressions of some principal characters like Ambrosio, Matilda, and Agnes. Besides this, like Matilda, she acts as a threat to the patriarchal system represented both by the Catholic Church and feudal family. Her murder by the Baron's younger brother Otto and her continuous haunting are sometimes seen as the punishment of her transgression, but the way she attains her salvation by manipulating a male character Raymond is suggestive of her triumph over oppressive patriarchy.

Transgression of the Bleeding Nun parallels the transgression of some main characters. Firstly, like Ambrosio and Agnes, she breaks the vows of monastic life. Like Ambrosio, she, too, was thrust into a life of abstinence at an early age by her parents:

> Beatrice de las Cisternas took the veil at an early age, not by her own choice, but at the express command of her Parents. She was then too young to regret the pleasures, of which her profession deprived her. (134)

When she grows up enough to feel its pleasure, "(s)he abandoned herself freely to the impulse of her passions, and seized the first opportunity to procure their gratification"

(134). She flees to Germany with the Baron Lindenberg and lives with him as his concubine, breaking her vows. Thus she poses a threat to the patriarchal system represented by the church by making a relationship outside marriage. Her violation of vows as a nun shows the futility of Catholic austerity and abstinence. Her voracious sexual appetite quickly changes its object from the Baron to his brother Otto: "…the Baron's younger Brother attracted her notice by her strong-marked features, gigantic Stature, and Herculean limbs" (134). Otto agrees to reciprocate her love only on the condition that she must kill the Baron, and "(t)he Wretched consented to this agreement" (135). She kills the Baron in his bed with a dagger and flees from his castle with the bloody dagger in one hand and a lamp in the other. In her murdering of the Duke with her own hands, she transgresses the limit of feminine delicacy in a patriarchal system. In addition to this, she also breaks the patriarchal line of inheritance by murdering the rightful heir, the Baron. Up to this, her transgression parallels that of Ambrosio (Both of them break their vows and commit the murder of innocents) to some extent. Now she exceeds Ambrosio in transgression when she professes herself an atheist. Her playful transgression of the religious vows and profanation of the sacred ceremonies of religion attain the stature of satanic rebellion, but, unlike Ambrosio, she never procrastinates or regrets in her paths of crimes: "She took every opportunity to scoff at her monastic vows, and loaded with ridicule the most sacred ceremonies of Religion" (134). Sometimes, her breaking of the religious vows seems to result more from her intention to rebel against the church's repression than from the urge of her passion. In her Satanic rebellion against the Catholic church, she comes close to Matilda. Bleeding Nun's murder by Otto is often taken as a punishment of her transgression, but her continuous haunting after her death suggests that this punishment could hardly debilitate her undaunted spirit of mind. After her

death, her restless spirit continues to haunt the castle dressed as a nun holding a lamp in one hand and a bloody dagger in the other: “Drest in her religious habit in memory of her vows broken to heaven, furnished with the dagger which had drank the blood of her paramour, and holding the lamp which had guided her flying steps” (135-136). She utters “an incoherent mixture of prayers and blasphemies” (136). The lamp which is suggestive of spiritual illumination is contrasted with the bloody dagger symbolic of violence and debauchery. Her holy prayer is subverted by the blasphemies uttered at the same time from the same lips. These apparent contradictions in her attire and her speech are shocking and evocative of gothic grotesque. Thus the grotesque form of the Bleeding Nun has a carnivalesque effect of profaning the sacred and the authority. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the contraries within the same person suggests that the sacred and the profane are both sides of the same coin. The church carries within itself the seeds (like the Bleeding Nun, Agnes, and Ambrosio) of its own subversion. These contraries within self also create identity confusion. Adriana Craciun in her study of the *femme fatales* of the Romantic period of literature has mentioned that such type identity confusion is common to the *femme fatales* in the literature of the Romantic period.[2] Such confusion resists any patriarchal intention of fixing female identity and dominating them.

Grotesque appearance of the spirit of the Bleeding Nun causes panic among the inhabitants of the castle. Otto could not withstand its increasing horror and died of fear. Thus, she takes the revenge of betrayal and her murder by Otto. She continues to haunt the castle until she meets Raymond. Their encounter takes place during Raymond’s elopement with his beloved Agnes who plans to take the disguise of the Bleeding Nun. The real Bleeding Nun who comes in place of Agnes is taken by

Raymond as Agnes. Raymond says to her the following words which are almost tantamount to marriage vow:

> Agnes! Agnes! Thou art mine!
>
> Agnes! Agnes! I am thine!
>
> In thy veins while blood shall roll
>
> I am thine!
>
> Thine my body! Thine my soul! (121)

These words are the reflection of the typical patriarchal desire to possess and dominate the female body and mind. The female body, as well as the mind, becomes the object of male desire. However, these words are subversively returned to Raymond by the Bleeding Nun who haunts Raymond as his succubus at night, drawing his life-energy slowly. The Bleeding Nun during her regular nocturnal visit to Raymond utters the same words, only replacing Agnes's name with that of Raymond:

> Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine!
>
> Raymond! Raymond! I am thine!
>
> In thy veins while blood shall roll
>
> I am thine!
>
> Mine my body! Mine my soul! (124)

Raymond becomes numb and motionless at her powerful presence. He seems to yield to her power and aggressive sexuality as he says,

> My (Raymond's) eyes were fascinated, and I had not the power of withdrawing them from the Spectre's…The Apparition rose from her seat, and

> approached the side of the bed. She grasped with her icy fingers my hand which hung lifeless upon the Coverture, and pressing her lips to mine… (125)

The Bleeding Nun ends her nightly vows with "Mine thy body! Mine thy soul!" to remind Raymond of his pledge. In the poem, Raymond's original refrain, which puts emphasis on "I am thine," is switched so that the stress of the rhyme falls on "thou art mine". When the Bleeding Nun is asked about their relationship by the wandering Jew, she replies: "His own lips have made over to me his body and his soul: Never will I give back his promise" (133). Here the female seems to possess the male. Thus the conventional gender roles are reversed with the Bleeding Nun taking the dominant and active role while Raymond the subservient one. Thus, the patriarchal marriage vows uttered by Raymond become subversive, reversing the conventional gender roles. Their encounter also has an incestuous undertone as the Bleeding Nun was the great aunt of Raymond's grandfather. From this perspective, she is transgressive in continuing a relationship forbidden by the church. The exorcism of the wandering Jew stops the Bleeding Nun's haunting of Raymond. She finally submits to the burning Cross on his brow saying: "I tremble at that mark! I respect it! – I obey you!" (133). This may appear to be symbolic of the subjugation of transgressive femininity by patriarchal religion, but this might be a one-sided inference if one fails to observe the other aspects of this incident. She negotiates with patriarchy to achieve her goal – salvation. She promises to stop haunting on the condition that Raymond must bury her bones so that she may attain salvation. Thus, she manipulates a male character and uses him to serve her own purpose. The Bleeding Nun's aggressive sexuality, unfeminine nature, cruelty, blasphemy, and above all her dominance over the male characters of the novel represent her as a threat to patriarchy. Probably, the people of Lewis's time were not comfortable with this character as various attempts were made

to normalize her character and mould it into traditional shape sanctioned by patriarchy. In 1797, Henry William Grossette in his melodrama *Raymond and Agnes*, an adaptation of Lewis's novel, removed all the transgressive aspects of her character to make her a benevolent motherly figure. The play became very popular at that time. Lewis was so impressed with this that he himself wrote a play named *The Castle of Spectre* with the Bleeding Nun as the central character in the same year. Here the Bleeding Nun is represented as the benevolent spirit of the mother of Agnes killed by her husband. Though all the grotesque and transgressive aspects were removed from her character, the appearance of her spirit as nun testifies to the fact that she broke her vows to heaven and escaped from her monastic life. James Boaden in his dramatic adaptation, *Aurelio and Miranda* (1798) completely removed the character of the Bleeding Nun because he sought to "dramatise the leading incident of the Romance, without recourse to supernatural agency" (Gadsby-Mace) . In spite of having famous actors like Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, the play was a failure. The failure of Boaden's play testifies to the popularity the Bleeding Nun's character. Most of the dramatic adaptations, poems, ballads, and chapbooks, which were based on *The Monk*, focused on the Bleeding Nun's character, and the rest of the story revolved around her character. Thus, the Bleeding Nun became a popular character, and the "lasting fascination with the Bleeding Nun," according to Catherine Gadsby-Mace, "stems from her controversial representation of female rebellion against the boundaries of patriarchal society. She embodies the danger of excessive passion, untempered by reason or restraint, allowed to consume the female body and transform its malleable substance into something unnatural and unfemale."[3]

Another transgressive female character is Marguerite. Raymond-Marguerite's episode has almost nothing to contribute to the main plot. The critics have neglected

the character of Marguerite for this reason. The character of Marguerite is significant in the sense that she belongs to the category of transgressive women with Matilda and the Bleeding nun, but she differs from them in lacking the demonic aspects of their characters. Rather, she comes close to Radcliffean heroines who were usually portrayed as the proper women conforming to the patriarchal ideology. The heroines in Radcliffe's novels are usually vulnerable women who have lost their parents and are separated from their lovers and husbands. She often lives under the guardianship of villains who wants to imprison and rape her, and rob her of her wealth. She must defeat the villain, protect herself from him, and win her freedom. She is plucky, adventurous, and intelligent. Avril Horner remarks that she "demonstrates a passive courage in the face of such dangers" [4] (116). She often tries to escape her confinement by undertaking a hazardous journey, but her attempts to escape should not be taken as her weakness. Instead, it can be viewed as the outcome of her longing for subversion. Though she embodies the ideals of femininity prescribed by patriarchy, she secretly cherishes a wish to undermine them. In this context, Kate Ferguson Ellis remarks, "The heroine's attempts to escape [...] indicate a desire to subvert a domestic ideology which was beginning to tyrannise the lives of middle class women within a capitalist, newly-industrialised society"[5] (Horner 116). The character of Marguerite belongs to this category. Born into a noble family, she fell in love with a villain disguised as a gentleman. This young man was born of noble parents and squandered away all his inherited wealth and had to live on beggary. Later, he joined a group of robbers who lived in a forest, but she did not forsake him and went to live with him in the forest against her parents' will. Her decision to stay with her husband testifies to her feminine virtues that make her a proper woman according to the patriarchal standard of values. Though she lived with her husband, she was unaware of the horrible nature

of his profession. She knew that he earned by plundering, she was unaware that plundering was followed by the assassination of the travellers. Her husband concealed the truth from her as it might hurt her delicate mind. The proper women, according to the patriarchal standard of ideologies, were believed to have delicate minds that could hardly withstand such things as murder and bloodshed. Marguerite also behaved in a particularly feminine way expected from a proper woman as she says:

> …I was aware that our existence was supported by plunder, I knew not all the horrible circumstances attached to my Lover's profession. These He concealed from me with utmost care; He was conscious, that my sentiments were not sufficiently depraved to look without horror upon assassination. (95)

Once her husband was severely injured in a fight with an English traveller and died, leaving Marguerite with her two children. Then, though she decided to return to the mainstream of life after her husband's death, Baptiste, the infamous robber, took her possession. This villain raped and forcefully married her. Here Baptiste took the role of the villain of Radcliffean Gothic novels. Likes them, he held the heroine of the subplot of this novel captive and tortured her. Marguerite too tried to find a way to escape from his clutch to win her freedom, but she could not do it alone. Upon the arrival of Raymond in their cottage, a hope dawns upon her mind. She leaves no stone unturned to save the life of Raymond and his companions. She, with her sharp intelligence and presence of mind, reveals the real nature of Baptiste to Raymond without arousing suspicion in Baptiste's mind. She draws Raymond's attention to Baptiste's real nature by asking him to look at the bed sheet red with the blood of the victims in the past. She not only saves his life but also carefully makes the plan of escape and executes it. Without her help, Raymond would never have been able to escape from the clutches of the robbers. Her heroic horse riding along with Raymond

to escape from the robbers reminds us of "travelling heroinism"[6] of Radcliffe's heroines (Moers 122). According to Ellen Moers, heroines of Radcliffe enjoy some sorts of autonomy and power through the hazardous journey they undertake to escape from their captivity. Besides this, Marguerite like the Bleeding Nun, uses a male character (Raymond) and dominates his action to some extents to achieve her goal. Raymond depends highly on Marguerite and blindly follows her advice in Baptiste's cottage. Thus, the character of Marguerite is represented as an apparently submissive figure who moulds herself according to the patriarchal ideals of a proper woman. She is shown as weak and helpless against patriarchal aggression, but she secretly nourishes a desire to transgress the barrier patriarchy imposes on her. Though she needs the help of a male character to escape from her captivity, she takes an active role here and dictates the action of the male character. Her apparent weakness and feminine virtues hide the powerful and subversive character within her. Under a veneer of delicate and submissive woman, Marguerite is a powerful and potentially subversive character, but unlike Matilda and the Bleeding Nun, she lacks the demonic aspect in her character.

Caliph of the Fonthill and His Demonic Women Characters in *Vathek*

William Beckford, the author of the famous Gothic novel *Vathek* (1786), is often identified with the central character of the novel caliph Vathek. Rictor Norton describes this novel as his "thinly veiled fantasy-autobiography."[7] According to Norton, Beckford expresses his suppressed fantasy through this novel. "Beckford," Norton says, "portrayed himself in his most wicked colours as the villainous Vathek." Even Harold Alfred Nelson Brockman wrote the biography of Beckford with a title named after the central character of his novel: *The Caliph of the Fonthill* (1956). The novel has strong autobiographical elements within it. Its characters and places closely

reflect Beckford's own life and surrounding. What Beckford comments on his description of the Hall of Eblis clearly testifies to this:

> It (the Hall of Eblis) was the creation of my own fancy. Old Fonthill house had one of the largest halls in the kingdom, lofty and loud echoing, whilst numerous doors led from it into different parts of the building, through dim, long, winding passages. It was from that I formed my imaginary hall – the Hall of Eblis being generated out of that in my own house. (Redding 244)

The characters of the novel also have a close resemblance to the characters (especially females) in Beckfords' own life. Beckford remarks, "All the females mentioned in Vathek, were portraits of those in the domestic establishments at Old Fonthill, their imaginary good or ill qualities exaggerated to suit my purpose" (Redding 244). Rictor Norton goes to the extent of describing Vathek, Prince Gulchenrouz, Nournihar, and Carathis as Beckford, Courtenay (with whom Beckford had homosexual attachment), Courtenay's aunt Lady Loughborough and Beckford's mother respectively. Norton remarks:

> Beckford portrayed himself in his most wicked colours as the villainous Vathek, the caliph who is satiated with sensual pleasures and builds a tower so he can penetrate the forbidden secrets of heaven itself. Prince Gulchenrouz is modelled upon Courtenay, "the most delicate and lovely creature in the world" who occasionally puts on the dresses of Princess Nouronihar (modelled upon Courtenay's aunt Lady Loughborough). Princess Carathis, based upon Beckford's mother, is a witch who is always mixing the powder of Egyptian mummies with frogs' warts, and running up and down the palace casting evil spells, much as she did in real life.

Norton's autobiographical interpretation of *Vathek* may appear gross oversimplification, but it contains some truth in it. A complete understanding of the novel requires a true understanding of Beckford's life. Proper knowledge of Beckford's life holds key to the proper understanding of not only the character of Vathek but also the hidden message of the novel. The novel recounts the story of the overreachers (Vathek, Carathis) who transgress or try to transgress their limitations. It ends with a moral warning for the transgressors who were condemned to hell:

> Such was and such should be, the punishments of unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds! Such shall be the chastisement of that blind curiosity, which would transgress those bounds of wisdom of the creator has prescribed for human knowledge. (254)

Punishment of the transgressors and such moral warning at the end raise several questions: Whether is the novel didactic? Whether does it discourage transgression? Whether does it uphold the *status quo* by propagating the dominant ideology of its time? Replying to these questions in the affirmative would lead to the misunderstanding of its hidden message. Despite its didacticism and conventional moralizing, the novel is subversive in tone. Actually, the moral warning functions to create "the forbidden fruit effect"[8] upon the readers' mind. What is forbidden and dangerous becomes more desirable to human being. This is a psychological game the author plays with the readers, warning them against the dangers of transgression while giving them the details of such joyful transgression. Though it criticizes the overreachers, the narrator seems to take pleasures in depicting how Vathek blasphemies the symbols of morality and religion. The pious and moral characters are depicted with sardonic humour. In *The Monk* and *Zofloya*, the narrators give the same kind of warning against the dangers of transgressions to the readers. On the one hand,

they forbid them to commit evil; on the other, they provoke them to indulge in it. This reminds one of the Sadean techniques in the treatment of evil in his book. He asks his readers to turn away from evil but directing them towards it in a disguised manner. Timo Airaksinen in his *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* remarks, "According to the principles of perverse action, an attempt to turn people away from evil is more apt to attract them towards its acceptance than any direct recommendation" (10). Besides this, Beckford's own personal life with his clandestine affair with Mr. Courtenay, extravagant lifestyle and above all his aloofness from the polite society show that he was free from the narrow bounds of social dogmas.

William Beckford's father, twice Lord Mayor of London, was the richest man in England of his time. Cloth industry, inherited property, government bonds, and sugar plantations, etc. contributed to his immense wealth. As a result, Beckford was brought up with the best resources available in his time. He received the best education in French, Greek, Latin, literature, law, science, and music. For example, his private piano teacher was the legend, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. However, his father died, leaving ten years old Beckford with enormous wealth. As a result, despite his excellent education, he grew without any political ambition. Cyrus Redding in *Memoirs of William Beckford of Fonthill, Author of Vathek* (1859) wrote: "His principal fault was, that he grew to be too desultory, notwithstanding he made great way" (81), but this never became a barrier before his taste for pleasure and hedonism. According to Redding, his awareness of immense inherited wealth made him proud or somewhat of a spoiled child. Redding wrote that Beckford's tutor was concerned with this flaw of the character of his pupil: "…in his pupil's mind there lurked a species of pride, which belonged rather to one conscious of good fortune, than based upon the conviction of having earned it. He was somewhat of a spoiled child, too" (82). Lewis

Melville in his *Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (1910) also pointed out the role of Beckford's mother in spoiling him: "A boy of thirteen who is all 'air and fire' is certain to be spoilt by a doting mother" (21). His mother's extreme love and care for the fatherless boy turned into possessiveness. Her dominance over his life resulted in his home confinement and ostracism from the rest of society. This was one of the reasons for his home education. In this context, Melville remarks, "When Beckford was in his seventeenth year, the question arose where he should finish his education, for his mother was strongly prejudiced against sending him to a university" (25). At last, it was decided that he would stay with his relatives Colonel and Miss. Hamilton in Geneva, and Lettice, his tutor, would accompany him to superintend his studies. To Beckford, it was a great relief of freedom from the clutches of his mother. Melville writes, "This was the first time Beckford had been emancipated from maternal control, and, though devoted to his mother, like all high-spirited lads, he found much enjoyment in being to some extent his own master" (25). This desire to be own master was rooted deep in his mind to make the adult Beckford crave for unbounded freedom beyond the surveillance of society. That is why he built the loftiest domestic residence in the world - Fonthill Abbey. It was fortified by six mile long and twelve foot high wall topped by iron spikes. He had his own army of soldiers to protect it. However, the lofty wall of his castle could not stop the mouth of the gossipmongers. When he was nineteen years old, he fell in a homosexual relationship with William Courtenay, a beautiful and effeminate boy of ten years. In 1784, Courtenay's uncle Alexander Lord Lougborough accused Beckford of having an affair with Courtenay. In the same year, "a visitor to Powderham", Rictor Norton writes, "claimed to have heard some 'strange goings on' in Courtenay's bedroom, with Beckford apparently in bed with the lad." Though the charge against him was not

proved, newspapers started spreading spicy stories about their relationship. Finally, they were forced to get separated. Beckford took refuge to his fortified villa to avoid public gossips and criticism. Very few people were allowed to enter Beckford's house. Hence various rumours about his male harem and wild orgies inside the castle quickly spread outside. Some of them might be exaggerated, but all of them can never be rejected as mere public gossips. Rictor Norton remarks, "Where there was so much smoke there were bound to be a few flames flickering." Norton in his informative but thought-provoking essay mentions that Beckford used to keep a male harem inside the Fonthill estate and appointed different persons to assist him in running it:

> He imported a dwarf to be his doorkeeper (and with whom he shared the pornography occasionally sent by Franchi from London), an abbé from France as spiritual advisor (and also as tolerant confidant concerning boy-troubles), a physician from Italy, and a harem of boy-servants for diversion, some picked up in England.

The servants were given male nicknames. Some of them were willing partners, and some were not. Norton writes:

> His household of young male servants were all given revealing gay nicknames: 'there is pale Ambrose, infamous Poupee, horrid Ghoul, insipid Mme Bion, cadaverous Nicobuse, the portentous dwarf, frigid Silence,' Miss Long, Miss Butterfly (slang for catamite), Countess Pox, Mr. Prudent Well-Sealed-up, The Monkey, The Turk (Ali-dru, an Albanian with whom Beckford travelled and bathed), and others…Not all of them were willing partners.

Besides this, he frequently wrote to Mr. Gregorio Franchi, a young musician, who actually acted as a pimp for Beckford. He helped Beckford in his search for new youths. He helped to arrange a secret meeting between Beckford and Master Saunders, the famous equestrian and tightrope walker, whom Beckford desired earnestly. Norton also informs us that "his (Beckford's) letters to Franchi suggest that he sometimes ventured into the homosexual subculture of London." He frequented areas like Upper Harley Street, Louis Jacquier's Clarendon Hotel at New Bond Street and The Seven Dials neighbourhood in St Giles' Parish. He used codes like "holy land," "paradise" for these gay-cruising areas. Beckford's love adventure made him always a favorite topic of the gossipmongers. Scandals of his life ostracized him from the polite society and made him live a secluded life as an outcast at Fonthill, but he hardly cared for it. His immense wealth helped him evade the curious and critical eyes of the polite society. Due to his secretive and secluded lifestyle, he remains an enigmatic personality even to his most modern biographer. Norton remarks on the contrary aspects of his character, "He was immensely intelligent as well as a hedonist, a serious artist as well as a social rebel, and more honest than eccentric."

Beckford's personal life shows that he hardly cared for society, social values, and morality. Even if we reject the possibility of Beckford's portrayal of Vathek's character in his own image, it is hard to accept the novel as a didactic text. Instead, under the cover of a moral story, it is a subversive text with many transgressive characters like Vathek, Carathis, and Nouronihar. Among these transgressors, Carathis stands supreme. She is a Greek woman who is adept in science, occult, and astrology. Cyrus Redding ecstatically remarks upon the character of Carathis: "What a portrait, or rather, what a character is Carathis! What unquenchable energy does she unite with revolting passions and monstrous vices" (260). Redding continues, "The

character of Carathis is unique; nothing more energetic, more fiercely determined has ever been sketched by any writer. It is wrought out as well as conceived with vividness, and fraught with that plenitude of gorgeousness in description" (263). Redding even compares her with Lady Macbeth for her bold ambition and cruel determination. In her fierceness and boldness of action, she even exceeds Vathek. Vathek procrastinates like Macbeth before a deed, but she stays firm in her purpose. Redding says, "Vathek may forget his ambition in temporary debauchery; he may lose it for a moment in some fiercer desire; but Carathis never" (261). Thus though the story is centred upon the character of Vathek, Carathis remains a dominant and powerful character in the novel. She is portrayed with the most unfeminine characteristics. She fears nothing. When she is brought to hell on the back of horrible demon afrit, she finds Vathek and Nouronihar destined to be damned forever, but she does not pay heed to it. With her dauntless soul, she faces the infernal majesty of Eblis, who appears with his horrible grandeur, but she stays firm: "…Eblis stood forth to her view; but notwithstanding he displayed the full effulgence of his infernal majesty, she preserved her countenance unaltered, and even paid her compliments with considerable firmness" (253). She fearlessly passes through the "the icy wind of death" (253) in the Hall of Eblis. She tries to grasp the talismans even at the cost of eternal torment. She tends to overthrow one of the Solimans to usurp his throne in the Hall of Eblis. The narrator aptly remarks, "Nothing appalled her dauntless soul" (253). She is a sorceress whose main objective is "to obtain favour with the power of darkness" (183). She keeps Negro slave girls to assist her in performing terrible rituals of black art. She enjoys those horrible rituals what "filled others with dread" (228). Unlike Vathek, who likes to spend times in indolence and luxury, she always keeps herself busy in improving her skill in the black art. She often uses innocents as a tool

to improve her skill. She arranges parties inviting the fair and beautiful ladies of the town. She then conspires to keep poisonous scorpions in a pot under the table and breaks it to release them. When the ladies were injured by their biting, “she now and then amused herself in curing their wounds with an excellent anodyne of her own invention: for this good Princess abhorred being indolent” (183-184). Her incessant effort to aggrandize herself stems from a desire to glorify Vathek, but he must be loyal and submissive to her. Throughout the novel, she dominates him and dictates his actions.

She has been described as “chastity in the abstract, and an implacable enemy to love intrigues” (230-231). She considers sex as a barrier before her progress in sorcery and also warns her son against the danger of it, but her apparent sexual abstinence should not be taken proof to consider her chaste. Her repetitive intrusion into the sexual life of her son gestures towards her incestuous attachment to her son. Jenny DiPlacidi in her book *Gothic Incest* (2018) opines that Carathis has been portrayed ambiguously with her word and actions with sexual and incestuous hints in a nonsexual framework, but she points out, “Part of this nonsexual frame-work is built upon descriptions of Carathis as ‘chaste’, although these foundations are destabilized by their conjunction with her deliberate self-insertion into her son’s sexual life” (261). She broke through the muslin awnings and veils to intrude upon his son’s most private moments with Nouronihar, her teenage lover. Her penetration of the veil and foaming with indignation after seeing her son and his lover together have sexual connotations associated with masculinity. DiPlacidi remarks,

> Carathis performs a traditionally male act as she not only penetrates the veils but then ‘foams’ with indignation on viewing her son and his lover together… It is her self- insertion that denies Vathek’s insertion, rendering him impotent

> rather than virile and positions the mother as more masculine than the son. Much like the Countess in Walpole's play, Carathis's aggressive agency, usually only wielded by men, makes her monstrous. (261)

The voracious sexual appetite of Carathis has been implicated metaphorically in various places in the text. Carathis is often described as a sexual demon performing evil rites with wild frenzy in the naked body. When Carathis ascends to the top of the tower to light up a fire for performing the magical rite on behalf of her son, she and her strange rite are described in the following manner:

> The oil gushed forth in a plenitude of streams; and the negresses, who supplied it without intermission, united their cries to those of the Princess. At last, the fire became so violent, and the flames reflected from the polished marble so dazzling, that the Caliph, unable to withstand the heat and the blaze, effected his escape; and took shelter under the imperial standard. (178)

According to Max Fincher, "(t)his event is a metaphor for masturbation: the fire and the 'cries' of Carathis can be interpreted as sexual passion." (85). Fincher in his book *Queering Gothic* (2007) argues that Vathek escapes from the scene for possibly two reasons. First, he cannot watch the ecstasy of his mother as he feels "sublimated incestuous desire for her" (85). He becomes engrossed and passive before it. Secondly, he escapes as he cannot watch this public expression of female desire that threatens patriarchy, which cannot control it. In another instance, Carathis inserts herself between two men, Vathek and Giaour, to prevent the possibility of any homoerotic relationship. When Giaour cures Vathek of his insatiable thirst with his magic potion, Vathek being overjoyed begins to kiss Giaour:

> In the transports of his joy, Vathek leaped upon the neck of the frightful Indian, and kissed his horrid mouth and hollow cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips and the lilies and roses of his most of his most beautiful wives. Nor would these transports have ceased had not the eloquence of Carathis repressed them. (163).

Carathis's transgression lies not only in her incestuous desire but also in her deviation from the standard norms of femininity. She also fails to conform to the image of ideal motherhood. Instead of nurturing and protecting her son, she leads him to eternal damnation. Hearing the frightening story of the damnation of Soliman, Vathek regrets his own impending damnation and blames her for this at the end of the novel: "…the principles by which Carathis perverted my youth have been the sole cause of my perdition" (250). Later, when he meets her, he says to her, "Execrable woman! Cursed be the day thou gavest me birth!...how much I ought to abhor the impious knowledge thou hast taught me" (252). Perversion of youth and "impious knowledge" have sexual implications suggesting the sexual abuse of the son by the mother. In fact, Carathis's initiation's of Vathek into evil-doings and her role in leading Vathek to Hall of Eblis to acquire forbidden knowledge are symbolic of the mother's initiation of the son into the forbidden pleasure. Carathis's dominance over Vathek's life and her corrupting influence on his life remind one of the role of Beckford's mother in spoiling her son. Lewis Melville in *Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (1910) pointed out the role of Beckford's mother in spoiling him from childhood: "A boy of thirteen who is all 'air and fire' is certain to be spoilt by a doting mother" (21). Rictor Norton has put forward more candidly: "Princess Carathis, based upon Beckford's mother, is a witch who is always mixing the powder of Egyptian mummies with frogs' warts, and running up and down the palace casting evil spells, much as she

did in real life." Representation of Carathis as a bad mother with incestuous desire, aggressive sexuality, and vigorous masculinity not only makes her a transgressive character but also makes Vathek, the patriarchal king, weak and submissive before her power. According to DiPlacidi, the Gothic novel written by writers such as Beckford, Lewis and Horace Walpole often represents mother as "the sexual centre of the text as victim or perpetrator, making the chaste maternal monstrous through mother– son incest"(249-50). This representation of the mother as powerful and sexually aggressive subverts patriarchal ideology of dominant male and submissive female. DiPlacidi remarks:

> Representing mothers as capable of sexual aggression and holding positions of power, male bodies are revealed as vulnerable to aggression and capable of submission. This use of the sexually aggressive incestuous mother radically destabilises the tradition of heteronormativity and conventional power dynamics that demand and naturalise male dominance and female submission. (252)

Apart from Carathis, Nouronihar is a woman who shows some courage in the Hall of Eblis. Nouronihar, who is the daughter of Emir Fakreddin, is stolen from her betrothed Gulchenrouz by Vathek. Later, she becomes Vathek's favorite among his wives. Though in the beginning, she remains an innocent, beautiful girl devoted to her betrothed, she changes to a woman driven by a desire for power and lust. Often she exceeds Vathek in her lust for power and pleasure and goads Vathek towards Hall of Eblis: "Nouronihar, whose impatience, if possible, exceeded his (Vathek's) own, importuned him to hasten his march…She fancied herself already more potent than Balkis, and pictured to her imagination the Genii falling prostrate at the foot of her throne" (242). Per Faxneld in *Satanic Feminism* (2015) aptly remarks "…Vathek's

consort Nouronihar evolves from a sensual creature to one more hungry for self-deification than even the Caliph himself, urging him on in their march to the Prince of Darkness' subterranean palace. She is the first to descend the steps leading down to it, much like Eve led the way in man's fall from the grace of God" (224). In the Hall of Eblis, when Eblis appears before them with his full effulgence, "the heart of the Caliph sunk within him," but Nouronihar "could not help admiring the person of Eblis" (247). According to Per Faxneld, "thus the special bond between woman and Satan in the novel is emphasised" (224). Per Faxneld has shown that the cultural representation of women as the ally of Satan can be interpreted as the transgression by women and their empowerment in the patriarchal framework. That the transgressive women (Carathis and Nouronihar) in *Vathek* are punished for their transgression at the end may contradict Faxneld' claim. However, there are some points that can strengthen Faxneld's argument. Firstly, besides women, Vathek, the patriarchal king, was also punished. Secondly, Faxneld argues that "no significant good characters are present to balance their (the transgressors) cheerful evil" (226). Yet, Faxneld to some extent hesitates to claim that the novel celebrates the transgression by women as he comments, "This is not say that their actual deeds, for example child sacrifice, could be read as praiseworthy" (226), but he concludes that "*Vathek* might also be read as a tribute to a transgressive 'evil' lifestyle, where woman as the Devil's helper leads men into a realm of freedom where the rule of patriarchal religion (here Islam) are discarded" (226). The Satanic cult of Eblis is non-patriarchal. Carathis' wild and frenzied act (that signifies the unbounded expressions of passion of woman) of Devil worship is different from the calm and reserved prayer of male figures representing Islamic faith. Whether the novel celebrates or discourages the transgression by women might still be a question of debate as it neither directly celebrates nor

denounces it. However, it has already been substantiated in the present chapter that the novel does not have any serious moral intention to preach the readers. Hence, the transgression by these women might be subversive enough for the contemporary domestic female readers who could make fantasy and identify themselves with these powerful anti-heroines.