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“A Dark Room”: Politics and Symbolisms of Enclosed
Spaces in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*

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In the context of the nineteenth century, enclosed spaces were generally considered to be exclusively feminine spaces. Women in keeping to Victorian etiquettes and decorum, were expected to stay within confined spaces such as houses and convents. Their travel also, in most cases, took place through closed spaces of horse carriages or railway wagons. However, the enclosed space was not merely an area to accommodate the women in its simplistic sense. It, rather, contained multiple layers of symbolisms. First, it served as an exclusive feminine space for homosexual relationships between women. Enclosed spaces denoted some kind of secrecy and hence became sites of concealed homosexual relations, both male and female, which were almost sinful taboos in the nineteenth century. Second, an enclosed private space often helped women recognize and nurture their individuality and power which could not be proclaimed in an open public space; third, in opposition to cultivating individual power, the enclosed spaces also often became tools in the hands of patriarchy to curb female desires and passions. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000) points out that enclosure is a penalty for passions. Victorian literature abounds in motifs of claustrophobic enclosures where the women are confined as a punishment for their passions. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) portrays numerous confinements for its female characters. While Jane Eyre is literally imprisoned in the red-room for her passionate rage against her cousin John Reed, the entire Gateshead itself is a “claustrophobic, fiery” (Gilbert and Gubar 339) space. Her next metaphorical confinement is in Lowood, a space which once again prevents the nurturing of her own self, but at the same time offers her “a valley of refuge” and “a chance to govern her anger while learning to become a governess in the company of a few women she admires” (Gilbert and Gubar 344). The enclosed space, therefore, apart from

providing an appropriate platform for homosexual relationship, is also a site of dual politics. On one hand, it aids in a secret flourishing of female individuality; on the other hand, it is used as a repressive space to domesticate the potentially rebellious women. The classic example in the second case would be Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, the famous “madwoman in the attic.” The attic which also symbolizes the asylum is a space of confinement where women can be literally imprisoned so as to prevent them from upsetting the social, cultural, and patriarchal set up of the family and society at large.

A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) plays with these various symbolisms of the enclosed space. Byatt’s novel is all the more complex in its treatment of the enclosed space for it traverses two different centuries. The novel contains two distinct plots overlapping each other. The subplot plot is the undiscovered story of two nineteenth century Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte set in the 1860s. The first plot, set in the late twentieth century, encircles the subplot and is the story of two Victorian scholars Roland Michell and Maud Bailey – Roland is a researcher working on Ash and Bailey is a LaMotte scholar. Roland and Maud coincidentally embark upon a journey to discover the relation that existed between the two nineteenth century poets and traces it down to Maud Bailey being the descendent of Maia, the illegitimate child of Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, brought up by the latter’s sister Lady Sophie Bailey. The novel engages with multiple genres ranging from myths to folk tales to ancient legends. Byatt dexterously weaves these fictitious tales with the events of daily life in such a way that while the fiction mirrors the real and fills in the gaps, each also complements the other. The novel is replete with the motifs of enclosed spaces which exist in numerous forms – houses, caskets, turrets, towers, chambers, castles, baths etc. The enclosed space in Byatt is a setting for lesbian relationships manifested in the LaMotte-Blanche relation of the 1860s and the Bailey-Stern relation in the late twentieth century. The confined space is a setting for the revealing of the true self of the woman, where she can assume her own distinct identity, thus, granting her a kind of agency and power within that space. Finally, the concealed spaces in Byatt, though unlike Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* do not literally imprison actual female figures, hide the female passions and desires in the form of the letters that were exchanged between LaMotte and Ash. While the former carefully hid many of the letters in a doll’s cot in Seal Court and left a clue about them in one of her poems, the final letter from LaMotte to an aged Ash was buried in a casket by Ash’s wife along with his remains. The next section of the paper analyses in detail each of these symbolisms of the enclosed space and their implications in Byatt’s novel.

Homosexual desires, in the nineteenth century, were kept under cover and enclosed within confining spaces. There are a number of spatial metaphors to denote the politics of homosexual confinement. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her seminal text *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) reads nineteenth century narratives via metaphors of the closet. The closet is “the den or lair of a wild beast” or “a private concealed trouble in one’s house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view” (Sedgwick 66). Studying Victorian texts through the interior and exterior dynamics of the closet, Sedgwick spatially reassesses conceptions of Victorian sexuality. The closet can be read as a microcosmic representation of a house, a space enclosed on all the four sides. Byatt’s *Possession* conjures up the picture of two houses separated by over a century both of which accommodate undertones of sexual relations. In the late 1980s it is the pristine apartment of Maud Bailey which she shares with Leonora Stern. The spatial metaphor of closet spoken about by Sedgwick transforms into a bed inside Bailey’s house:

Leonara came to the bed and folded Maud into her bosom. Maud fought to get her nose free. Loose hands met Leonara’s majestic belly and heavy breasts. She couldn’t push, that was as bad as submitting. (Byatt 317)

This space is broken when the male figure of Roland Michell ventures into it. The rhythm of the relation shared between Maud and Leonora is broken and the former feels relieved when she manages to deceive the latter in disappearing from that confined apartment with Roland. The intrusion of a male figure into the private feminine enclosure, therefore, in a sense distorts its pristine sanctity. In the late twentieth century, the implication of this intrusion is not that great since both Maud and Leonora in being modern feminist scholars have some degrees of mobility and freedom. While Maud can still be located majorly inside the towers of Women’s Studies and her apartment before the advent of Roland, Leonora is a character who is much invested with freedom of mobility. In the context of the nineteenth century, however, where mobility is almost nil in two single women residing together and nurturing their artistic skills, such an intrusion creates a gulf with multiple meanings which can then never be mended.

The nineteenth century house is in Richmond inhabited by the poet Christabel LaMotte and her painter friend Blanche Glover. This is a house from which the two women rarely emerge. They set up the house together in 1858 and within the confinements of the house create a self-sufficient microcosm. Both these two houses distanced by a period of over hundred years have striking similarities and differences. While Leonora Stern, the feminist scholar, possess a strange sort of

freedom that none of the other female characters of Byatt's novel has, and Maud Bailey in pursuit of her research moves out on Stern, the inhabitants of the Bethany House rarely go out. Their house is strikingly reminiscent of the lovers' den in the love poems of Donne where the two lovers find fulfillment in each other with each one's eyes reflecting the world to the other, and can, thus, reject the outer world and its activities. Byatt's novel represents such a self-sufficient microcosm in the Richmond home of LaMotte and Glover. Glover notes in her journal what their little house means to them. Not fond of either large company or moving out, she and LaMotte are relieved on being able to return from a breakfast with Mr. Robinson and glad "to close [their] own dear front door behind [them], and be gathered in to the silence of [their] little parlour" (45). Ironically, their movement out of their enclosed house to visit Mr. Robinson for breakfast creates an opening which lets in the male intruder in the form of Randolph Ash who disrupts the feminine balance of the Richmond house. Christabel LaMotte first meets and interacts with Ash at the breakfast table at Robinson's home and impresses the latter with her intellect and philosophies. What began as a mere literary correspondence soon develops into a secret relationship of passion and desire. With Ash's stepping over the threshold of the Richmond house the space loses its all-female quality and ultimately results in Blanche Glover's suicide. Ash visits LaMotte's house on her invitation but a feminine enclosed space does not welcome him. He later writes to LaMotte: "I think your house did not love me, and I should not have come" (198). However, he nevertheless, urges her to come out of her enclosed tower comparing her to Tennyson's Lady of Shalott who is imprisoned within a building made of "four gray walls, and four gray towers" (Tennyson 41) and stating that she could never "have written Melusina in her barred and moated tower" (Byatt 188). In other words, enclosed spaces, according to Ash, have an adverse effect on LaMotte's free flowing poetic creations. However, what he does not consider is that when, tired with shadows, the Lady of Shalott leaves her loom and weaving and embarks upon a journey into the world, it proves poisonous to her. As she floats "down to Camelot" (Tennyson 43) the Lady dies. Her death speaks what might happen to the angel in the house if she decides to spread her wings. LaMotte dares to spread her wings and come out of her tower. However, like a conventional Victorian tale of daring women she is punished for her transgression and her movement out of the safe enclosures by being turned into a fallen woman. She is punished for her defiance of the spatial enclosures by having "To Drag a Long Life out/In a Dark Room" (Byatt 112). Christabel saw her enclosure as an imprisonment, but in an endeavour to escape it, she finds herself in a greater imprisonment living on the fortunes of her sister. Her

status of an unwed mother compels her to drag out her long life in a dark room where her poetic creations can no longer see the light of publication. She writes to Ash: "And if we had time and space to be together – as we have allowed ourselves to wish to be – then we would be free together – whereas now – caged" (200). Ironically Randolph Ash's notion of freedom is radically different from that of LaMotte: "The true exercise of freedom is [...] to move inside what space confines – and not seek to know what lies beyond and cannot be touched or tasted" (ibid). As is evident from the turn of events, Ash, however, failed to abide by his notions of freedom. He along with LaMotte travels to Yorkshire to seek to know what lies beyond. Their travel is both a physical and a symbolical one. It is a quest to know the unknown world of insects as well as to explore a world of passionate desires in secrecy away from the eyes of societal conventions. LaMotte breaks away from the confined space of her house to taste and touch the unknown but pays a heavy price for it. Byatt offers a contrasting view of the enclosed space of the house in this regard. LaMotte's epic poem could only be conceived and composed after her escapade from the enclosed space of the house. So, in a way, her creative capability attains complete maturation only when she embraces the open space, but this maturation is short-lived for due to her pregnancy she soon goes into hiding and spends the rest of her life away from public light. Though LaMotte moves out with Ash, there is always a lingering fear in her, a fear of having to remain confined in a more strict sense for savouring a few days of nomadic existence in the unrestricted, unconfined Yorkshire. From the beginning she fears what she perceives as an intrusion into her carefully established solitude. She writes: "Oh, sir, you must not seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to fear – oh the terrible tower, oh the thickets round it – no companionable Nest – but a donjon" (137). Her fears turn true. An encroachment by a man destroys the purity of the feminine enclosure of the house and results in one woman becoming a fallen woman and the other committing suicide.

Blanche Glover, unable to accept the intrusion of the "Peeping Tom" who "put(s) his eye to the nick or cranny in [their] walls and peers shamelessly in" (47), loads her coat pocket with stones and drowns herself. Glover records their feminine display of affection within the four walls of their home in her journal:

She kissed me and called me dear Blanche, and said I knew she was a good girl and very strong and not foolish [...] (she) said we *must never quarrel* and that she would never, ever, give me cause to doubt her, and I just not suppose

she should [...] She was agitated; there were a few tears. We were quite together, in our special ways, for a long time. (47)

Glover is the only female character in *Possession* for whom the enclosed space held a special power and agency. She desired to live a self-sufficient life with a woman and without the external aid of any men. However, the 'Peeping Tom', that is, Randolph Ash, contaminates her pure enclosure and she, realizing that given her financial status she cannot occupy a house on her own without the help of LaMotte, decides to adopt the path of self-annihilation. Of the three reasons that she puts in her suicide-note the third reason is the most poignant. Understanding that the home that she had set up with LaMotte has been infected by the entry of an external man, her beliefs and ideals of female symbiotic existence fails. Unwilling to conform to a society whose dominant ideology is heterosexual relation she decides to control her own life by ending it. In her suicide-note she writes:

I have tried, initially with Miss LaMotte, and also alone in this little house, to live according to certain beliefs about the possibility, for independent single women, of living useful and fully human lives, in each other's company, and without recourse to help from the outside world, or men. We believed it was possible to live...in harmony with each other and Nature. Regrettably, it was not...Independent women must expect more of themselves, since neither men nor other more conventionally domesticated women will hope for anything, or expect any result other than utter failure. (307)

Glover wanted to live life in an enclosed space unaffected by men, but when that private space is encroached upon, she drowns herself. In Byatt's novel, myths and legends intertwine with real lives. The myth of the drowned city of Is is repeatedly mentioned in the novel. This city of women, ruled by the sorceress Dahud, sinks beneath the waves to punish "its wickedness" (133) and Dahud's "perversions" (134). Christabel's working of the Breton mythology into a poem is a premonition of her friend Blanche Glover's drowning herself. If the city of Is was sent under water as a punishment for wickedness and perversion, Glover's suicide, though an act committed on her own, can be read as a punishment for her homosexual trait which was considered perverse in the nineteenth century. LaMotte writes in her poem "This drowned world lies beneath a skin/ Of moving water" (135). The city of Is, in its drowning, has been enclosed by water, therefore turning into a space confined by water. Byatt makes her feminist American scholar, Leonora Stern, comment on this poem: "The women's world of this underwater city is the obverse of the male dominated technological world of Paris or Par-is, as the Bretons have it. They say

that Is will come to the surface when Paris is drowned for its sins" (134). Two observations are significant here: first, the city of Is is enclosed by water; and second, the women in that drowned city, from within their watery enclosure, overthrow the hierarchical structure of the male dominated world on the surface. Therefore, it can be said that any kind of confined space is necessary to create a marked boundary within which can be subverted the dominant codes that exist beyond the boundary. Glover attempted to make Bethany House such an enclosed space within which she can defy the codes of hetero-normativity, failing which, she, like the city of Is, immerses herself in water. Her suicide becomes an act of locating an alternative space of enclosure where she can rebel against Victorian conventions, even if that rebellion came in death.

There is also a striking parallelism between Blanche Glover's fate and the myth of Melusina. Melusina is a water nymph who is cursed to take the form of a serpent from the waist down each Saturday. The curse can only be lifted if Melusina marries a mortal who has to swear never to visit her on Saturdays. Melusina marries the knight Raimondin who eventually does not keep his word and spies on her in her bath, thus witnessing her transformation and fulfilling her curse. Turning into a dragon, Melusina has to abandon her husband and her children. The bath in which Melusina's weekly transformation takes place plays a significant role in this myth. It is only within the safe confines of this bath that Melusina can reconcile the two parts of her being by taking the form of a serpent-woman. The bath, therefore, offers a space in which Melusina is free to live out her true self and her true identity without any restraints and is a space of female power. When Raimondin peeps through the bath's keyhole, his actual crime does not simply lie in breaking his oath, but rather in violating his wife's space of freedom and autonomy. Having robbed Melusina of her space of power, society also robs her of her only possibility to live out her true identity. While the solitude of the bath is Melusina's exclusive space to project her power and individuality, the solitude of Bethany House is Blanche Glover's intimate space to nurture her artistic skills as well as proclaim her individuality. The Raimondin in her life is Randolph Ash who, in spite of having no direct relation or interaction with her, peeps into her life through LaMotte and shatters her enclosed safe shell of Bethany House. Once her private space is spied and contaminated by an external man, Glover could no longer reconcile her own self within that space and drowns herself in a symbolic act of constructing an alternative space of concealment. Many literary scholars have previously commented on Christabel being an embodiment of Melusina. This becomes more significant in the light of LaMotte's own proclamation in her last letter to Ash, "I have been Melusina these thirty years"

(501). Like Melusina, Christabel fights all her life with herself to reconcile her fragmented self. On the one hand, she is a woman living in the strictly patriarchal and heavily moralized society of Victorian England. On the other hand, she is a poet trying to find a way to live her art. In a time when the entire Victorian England reverberates the Patmorian notion of the angel in the house, Christabel renounces the traditionally “female virtues” and chooses to dedicate her life to poetry. Like Melusina, she is only free to live her “otherness” in seclusion from society. The Bethany House is the Melusinian bath for both LaMotte and Glover. It is the space where they can be what they truly are, the former a poet and the latter a painter. This enclosed space of the house provides them with a solitude which they treasure. Christabel aptly compares her own situation with an egg offering a place of safety within its fragile shell. When the enclosing shell is shattered by the intrusion of Ash, she is forced to forgo her artistic life and live the rest of it as “a hanger-on [...] [her] sister’s good fortune” (500). Randolph Ash is, therefore, the Raimondin, who causes both LaMotte and Glover to lose their autonomy, freedom and individuality by breaking into their carefully preserved enclosure.

Enclosures are also spaces to conceal potentially harmful desires and passions. Bertha Mason was kept enclosed since she posed a threat to the Jane-Rochester marriage in *Jane Eyre*. In *Possession* though none of the female figures are forcefully imprisoned in person for their passionate desires, the letters exchanged between Ash and LaMotte are carefully hidden away in enclosed spaces. These letters carry the proof of the intensity and extent of their relationship and, hence, can be potentially harmful to their respective public image. LaMotte requests Ash to return her letters to him and she conceals them together within the enclosed space of a doll’s cot. What is significant is that the letters are not destroyed. Moreover, she leaves the clue for finding the letters in one of her own poems. Her final sealed letter to an ailing Ash, where she discloses the truth about their illegitimate daughter being brought up by her sister Sophie Bailey and a respectable wife of a squire, is concealed by Ellen Ash in a casket and buried with Randolph Ash’s body. Ash’s grave, then, becomes a space enclosing the biggest secret of his life, the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle that Roland, Maud, Blackadder, Cropper, Nest and others are fervently trying to put together. Just as the biggest secret of Rochester’s life, Bertha Mason, was enclosed in a dark room, Ash’s grave becomes that dark room suppressing within its bosom the story of his marital and sexual transgression and its results. Ellen Ash in spite of knowing her husband’s transgression is unable to destroy the final letter. While she burns her husband’s last unfinished letter to LaMotte, she “took the sealed letter and turned it over, thinking of adding it, but allowed the

flames to die down" (457). Both Christabel LaMotte and Ellen Ash's inability to destroy the letters, which bear on their pages the mark of an illicit alliance, is symbolic of society's inability to destroy desires and passions. However much threatening those desires might be, they can only be captivated and concealed, but never be destructed. Like a strong undercurrent they stay beneath the surface forever ready to spring up and unstable an entire establishment at the slightest opportunity. The LaMotte-Ash affair that was safely buried in order to maintain their respective positions as an independent single woman and a famous poet, springs up after over a hundred years from their enclosures to change the face of the entire LaMotte-Ash scholarship.

Byatt variously and skillfully uses the motifs of enclosed space to bring out the politics surrounding spaces of enclosure. She makes them, on one hand, sites of radical lesbian relationships and settings where women could unearth their true selves and live a bare existence away from the veil of conventional norms; on the other hand, she shows how the enclosed spaces can be secret hideouts for a passionate affinity that survives even after hundred years of the death of the persons concerned and erupts to change the established ideologies radically. In this last sense, it strikes a chord of similarity with the Breton legend of the drowned city of Is where the women under water create a world that defies the male dominant society above and would "come to the surface when Paris is drowned for its sins" (134). The inability of Ellen Ash and LaMotte to destroy the letters was a premonition that in future they would come to the surface which comes true when Roland accidentally hits upon two torn pieces of letter in Ash's handwriting, and sets out with others to discover things that eventually changes the entire scholarship of Ash and LaMotte along with Maud's identity who turns out to be a descendant of the illegitimate daughter of Ash and LaMotte.

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