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A feminist re-reading of Lady Macbeth's character in Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*

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Abstract

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth plays a crucial role. The moment she learns from Macbeth, the prophecies of three witches, she immediately begins to dream that Macbeth would become the king of Scotland. She couldn't kill Duncan as his face resembled his father. It is true that whatever she did, she did for Macbeth. She wanted to see Macbeth as the king. She is fully aware of her feminine virtues. That's why she wants to ripped off those virtues before committing any heinous crime. The guilt that torments her till the last day of her life shows that she is not a cool-blooded criminal. This paper seeks to attempt a gender critique of Lady Macbeth's character.

Keywords: Prophecies, ambition, guilt, feminine, gender

Introductions

Of all the attempts at a literary critique of the women characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, attempting an appraisal of the character of Lady Macbeth from a feminist point of view very interesting and revealing. As soon as lady Macbeth is informed by her husband of all that the witches had predicted about him, that he "shall be king here after", she gears up herself to stand by Macbeth in his murderous mission, knowing fully about his moral feebleness, about how eager he is for the crown, and how timid he is to perpetrate the bloody business himself to gain the crown. So lady Macbeth comes up employing verbal instigations, now bullying him, now coaxing him or gloomily reproaching him with want of love. She thus screws up his courage and eggs him on to accomplish his devious campaign---murder of King Duncan. She lays out the means of committing the crime. In this part of the play, the image that we get of Lady Macbeth, is that of a formidably desperate, firm and determined, grand, heroic woman encompassed by a lurid halo of fierceness. It is this terrifying image of Lady Macbeth that inspires the Italian poet Carducci to write the beautiful lines:

"Lo! With the Scottish queen, on the shore
In the light of the moon
Stands Clytemnestra: they plunge white arms
In the wave of the sea.
Turbid and fervid with blood the sea rushes back
And the cry
Of their anguish rings and rebounds from the craggy,
Precipitous shore". (Carducci 14)

Yet, Lady Macbeth is not really the Aeschylean Clytemnestra. Lady Macbeth is not roused into crime by a cold calculating energy; she bears no such ruthless disdain for her victim as Clytemnestra had for Agamemnon; she is not a remorseless criminal who jubilates over the success of his murderous machination; nor is she an unsexed to woman of devilish passion. There is superfluity in Goethe's delineation of Lady Macbeth as the "super- witch".

If we scan Lady Macbeth's role from the feminist stand point, we should not fail to explore that Lady Macbeth went in a collaboration with her husband with a view to advancing patrilineage and her position within the patriarchal political structure of Scotland. However, it is as a wife that is emphatically brought out in the role she plays as Macbeth's co-conspirator in the sordid race for power. She whips up his flagging ardor, and marshalled by courage and confidence, she extends to him the exhortation:

"We fail!

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But screw your courage to its sticking- place
And we will not fail.” (Shakespeare 43)

It is she who drafts the entire plan of murder, sides with Macbeth in its perpetration; whenever Macbeth flounders in a maze of misgivings, and fear, she “chastises him with the valour of her tongue”, and plays the part of a tragic queen with a fiery grandeur.

Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits of darkness to “unsex” her. And why does she utter such an invocation? Because however verbally violent she is, whatever virulent masculinity she assumes, streaks of femininity with all its tenderness shimmers through her personality from time to time. When she invokes the spirits of darkness, appealing: “come to my woman’s breasts. And take my milk to gall.....”, (Shakespeare 46) it is a very woman speaking, a woman who is fully aware of her milk of human kindness which she is anxious to get transformed into gall out of the realization that as long as there is milk in her breast, the surest evidence of her motherhood, she cannot bring herself to the infernal deed of murder.

We find in Lady Macbeth a flash of ruthless masculinity in the last scene of the first Act where she compels her recalcitrant husband to commit the crime. She says: “I have given and know

How tender it’s to love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face.

Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash’d the brains out, had I sworn as you
Have done to this.” (Shakespeare 49)

She intends to be at her cruellest, yet a close scrutiny of this speech of Lady Macbeth conveys to us that here she is inescapably reminiscent of the time she had been a mother and given suck to the babe that milked her. It is a very delicate touch which emphasizes her humanity and refutes allegation against her being a fiend. It is where she is positively distinguished from and superior to Goneril and Regan who have never known the tenderness of a mother’s love and affections. Here we find not only a woman, but the mother, the incipient potential mother, as well as the actual frustrated mother (she has had a child and “the sweet dove died”. She recalls it) (Macbeth: introduction: pg-1, S.C. Sengupta).

If Lady Macbeth is imbued with the soul-chastening virtue of motherhood, immured deep within herself, she has a daughter also lying beneath the ruthless exterior in which we find Lady Macbeth armored till the enactment of Duncan’s murder. Her daughterhood manifests itself so delicately through her words in the murder scene: “Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done it”. (Shakespeare 56)

She had gone into the Kings chamber in order to exterminate him, but the very sight of his face as he slept called to her memory her own father. The thought of her father having haunted her mind, she found herself unable to “screw courage to the sticking place”

A psycho- analysis of Lady Macbeth’s character unravels a very important point. It is a pathetic foible in the network of Lady Macbeth’s thought and assessment of the job of regicide. She considered the murder in the abstract, in consequence of which she failed to see through its dreadfulness, the horrifying chain of events to be forged thereafter. As the whole thing has always been in abstraction in her mind, she could not fathom how stupendously disastrous its fall out would be in the field of

reality. She cannot even bring herself to utter the word ‘murder’; --- “it is always “this night’s great dispatch”, or a bare impersonal, non- descriptive ‘it” (Macbeth: introduction: page-xliiii, D.N. Ghosh)

The demoniacal monstrosity with which he associates herself with her husband in the crime is indeed a forced attempt by her to suppress the essence of her womanhood. Terrifying is her act of gilding the faces of the murdered king’s grooms with blood. However, the somber and pitiable state in which we see Lady Macbeth in her sleep walk, her stunned utterance, “yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”---- leads us to think that in smearing her hands with the royal blood, she simply trampled over her womanhood which forms the very basis of her character, and not a virulent masculinity which she assumes, not for her sake but for the sake of the fulfilment of her husband most unlawful ambition for the height of power. Indeed, most of the violence that is found to have been manifested by Lady Macbeth, is wielded by her tongue. Before she meets Macbeth, anticipating his recoil in the face of a daunting mission, she decides to “chastise with the valour of her tongue”. Her valor is a valour of the tongue, not of the nerve. Lady Macbeth seeks to act in disregard of her essential femininity, thereby imposing on herself colossal pressure that ultimately crushes her, body and soul.

The problem with Lady Macbeth is that she is not rich in imagination as her husband is. She is blind to consequences, and is hardly capable of seeing through the dangerous results of the terrible deed of regicide. Because of her sheer lack of foresight, because of her vehement desire to help Macbeth ascend the topmost rung of the ladder of power, she must have coaxed herself into thinking that the game would be finished with the first bloody act, and then the way to power would be paved for them. Little did she realize in her frenzy of trying and accelerating Macbeth’s progress that it was not as easy as all that. Little did she comprehend that her husband’s act of regicide would unavoidably lead him into one crime after than other, impelling him into wading through blood of the innocents until his own vices cast on him a most acrid feeling of disgust and sickness.

Lady Macbeth presence as Macbeth’s companion and collaborator begins blurring soon after Duncan’s murder. The last flicker of her heroic grandeur dazzles rather feebly only twice before the sleep- walking scene – once in Act III, scene I-immediately before the Banquet scene and then in the Banquet scene (Act III, scene IV)-- here we find Lady Macbeth trying utmost to shield Macbeth from being discovered, and later when the situation grows worse with Macbeth continuing to rave madly at Banquo’s ghost, we find how she seeks to invent excuses for Macbeth’s abnormal conduct. Lady Macbeth is undoubtedly at her best in the role of a wife who is prepared for any personal sacrifice and perils for her husband’s political escalation. She did not want him to be steeped deep into the dungeon of crimes. The thought of his having become a blood thirsty-tyrant appalls her. In her sleep walk, she wonders about the butchery of Macduff’s wife by Macbeth’s henchmen. She who unscrupulously thought that just a little water could wipe away the blood in her hand, repines over the inconsolable fact, in her sleep walk, that all the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten her gored little hand. The more Macbeth gets involved in crimes, the lesser human he is and the more isolated he becomes. However, Lady Macbeth’s

loneliness and desolation is simply overpowering; it casts her away into a dark corner. A ghost of herself, she stalks about the castle at night with a candle in her hand, reminiscing in her alive sleep their sins that have cursed her and her husband. She wails disconsolately, "Naught's had, all's spent". This unfathomable feeling of void and insipidity engulfs Lady Macbeth's whole entity not only because of the heinous business in which she involved herself with her husband's, but mainly because of her husband's withdrawal from her, his casting her out of the domain of his life. When he is informed of her death, Macbeth betrays a shockingly cold and insensitive reaction: "she should have died hereafter: there would have been a time for such a word."

Macbeth may not have time to mourn the death of Lady Macbeth, who gave her everything including her priceless jewel (her soul) for him; we have pity for her.

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