

The Lady in the Black Couch

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Sigmund Freud in his all time famous *Interpretation of Dreams* and his several other works such as *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, *Dream Psychology*, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* has spoken volumes about how personality traits are developed in human beings. His 'structural theory' of personality places great importance on how conflicts among the parts of the mind shape behavior and personality. In Shakespeare's pivotal drama *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's character turns out to be extremely interesting, whose personality gradually grows out of several psychological conflicts that she undergoes. According to the 'feminine' code of conduct, she is expected to be caring, nurturing and emotional but she 'chooses' to be different. Lady Macbeth, eventually goes into severe delusion and commits suicide. This paper tries to explore how an ambitious woman attains her share of 'tragic fall' under the Shakespearean lens, and analyze whether it simply was a consequence of the famous character's 'tragic flaw' or does it give an inkling towards a circumstance where deliberate refutation of the gendered guidelines had led Lady Macbeth to meet such a detrimental sexist end created by a very 'patriarchal' Shakespeare.

Keywords: gender, hysteria, psychosexual development, transgression, patriarchal, phallus lack

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Introduction

Simon de Beauvoir, in her well known work '*The Second Sex*' has made a pivotal statement that '*a woman is not born but made*'. When we delve deep into this statement, we actually land up in a situation where we meet a division of the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. Ann Oakley in her celebrated work '*Sex, Gender and Society*'(1972) argues that '*sex is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia.... 'gender' however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'*'. Legendary characters become perfect examples of analysis that makes our understanding of feminist theories comprehensive. One such famous character is Lady Macbeth from Shakespeare's major work *Macbeth* or *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, to be precise. Each of his tragedies illustrates the ruin of a character or characters through submitting to the evil. His dramas are faithful to life and the passions with a universal tone of appeal. It transcends the boundaries of space and time and also age.

Shakespeare's conception of tragedy in a true ethical standard resembles to that of Aristotle. According to Aristotle a tragedy is a piece of dramatic composition that purges the human heart of the passions of 'pity' and 'fear' by exhibiting them on stage. The tragic hero character due to his 'tragic flaw' with the evil turns of 'fate' brings upon his own ruin and incurs a 'tragic fall'. *Macbeth* similarly is a tragedy of ambition. It's the darkest of all Shakespearian

tragedies as in it the ruin of a character through this ‘tragic flaw’ is very clearly and vividly portrayed. The ambition of the hero, Macbeth, is beyond question which when aided by his wife Lady Macbeth(who’s is in fact more ambitious) gets amplified to multitudes. As a devoted follower of Aristotle, Shakespeare’s all tragic heroes are precisely men of great virtue, holding high position in life comes to a sad end, owing to certain character flaws and he is marred with ill fated end and thus we have a tragedy. Macbeth, is practically the power behind the throne of Scotland king Duncan. He is fortune’s favourite and capable of fighting alone, he is a man of extreme loyalty to his king, noted for his urbanity kindness. Macbeth is related to the king and in some way, has slight claim over the throne. Such a man, unfortunately gets consumed by ambition, greed and overt desire, like a burning, fever, under the situations of fate and supernatural forces that instigate the tragedy. It is his, this extreme proneness to power and vices of ambition that leads to the degenerative fall of this otherwise benevolent and noble character. As Germaine Greer in her reading of ‘*Shakespeare*’ argues “*he is tempted, he falls and is eventually destroyed. The temptation comes from without, not as in this case as Vice but in the form of Witches*” The vices of the criminal mind, the evils of the great crime, the murder of Duncan, could be argued as a result instigated by the ‘witchcraft’, whose implication could be noticed right from the opening scene on the hearth where the three witches make a premonition “*Fair is foul and foul is fair*” (Shakespeare ‘Macbeth’ Act1,scene 1) hinting at a dubious prediction that Macbeth should be the king of Scotland. This, therefore, makes the sinner inevitable for his nemesis. In this context, it would be unjustified to completely forget the most enigmatic and inscrutable character of Lady Macbeth, who deserves more mention. Owing to her manipulations, the constant motivation to her husband Macbeth in committing Duncan’s murder, she is the ‘*Fourth witch*’. Nonetheless she also appears to be the unsung tragic hero who suffers a tragic fall and fatalistic end, often to some extent more intense than what Macbeth himself faces. Therefore, it would be wrong to just claim Macbeth as the hero of the drama, Lady Macbeth, as well, is the uncrowned hero of Shakespeare. What this paper aims to do is analyze Lady Macbeth’s ‘fall’ as a Shakespearean tragic character and also look at how women like her, who breaks the sanctity of Christian households are received in our society.

ANALYSIS OF LADY MACBETH

Lady Macbeth is indeed one of the most wonderful creations of Shakespeare's dramatic genius, combining in her character two antithetical features. It's because of this double layered nature of Lady Macbeth that injustice has been done to her character as a whole. Some regard her as the she wolf, northern fury, persuading her otherwise virtuous husband Macbeth, to commit a diabolical deed. Others take her as a fragile, beautiful, highly intellectual woman who is the Lady of the house, pertaining to the very typified nuances of a married, upper class, elite Christian woman, supplementing her husband's so-called weakness by her moral strength and doing everything in the capacity of an 'ideal wife', having no ambition of her own but dedicating herself to the sole elevation of her beloved husband. The veracity lies between these two extremes and it is exactly where the complications 'personal' and 'social' starts to play against each other, along with other tropes such as 'sex' and 'gender'. Lady Macbeth stands aloof in respect of her character from all other creations of Shakespeare: she is a class apart. Coleridge states that "*Of high rank, left much alone, and feeding herself with dreams of ambition, she mistakes the courage of fantasy for the power of bearing the consequences of realities of guilt....she shames her husband with super-human audacity of fancy which she cannot support but sinks in the season of remorse, and dies a suicidal tragedy*"².

Her characterial journey from a woman of extreme determination, unmoved by petty distractions, providing continuous support and push Macbeth to commit the devilish murder, makes her lofty character so unwomanly, rather so 'manly'. Women of 16th -17th centuries were not expected to be so dramatic. The patriarchal society of England, epitomized the motherly, caring, nurturing, the 'essential' feminine portraits of a lady of the house. Thus Lady Macbeth appears to us as the ultimate exception who rips off her 'essential' motherhood i.e. the milk of her breasts to be replaced with gall, in order to carry out her determinations, thus she states:

" Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, **unsex me here,**

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! **make thick my blood;**
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! **Come to my woman's breasts,**
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, (I.V.41-48)

It is at this very moment of the fiery speech, Lady Macbeth, urges the natural forces to 'unsex' her and invokes nature to make her a neuter and free her from the burdens of womanhood. She pleads to the spirits of evil to engross her and squeeze every ounce of her motherhood (the essentialism) only to be replaced with 'dirtiest cruelty' and poison. It becomes very difficult for us to imagine such a woman who willfully steps out and transgresses the social morality and notions of womanly ethics. As we try and look back at the characterisation of Lady

Macbeth, we understand that she is a childless woman, who might have given birth but somehow that child is no more alive now. Shakespeare, uses a strong element of this social inability of Lady Macbeth i.e. her childlessness as the undercutting agent of strength that possesses her so abundantly. Childlessness has created a void in her life, making her incomplete as a woman especially in a Christian society, where such women whose conscious mind is devoid of biological essentialism and is rather filled with devilish ideas, are regarded as Witch.

Ironically, Lady Macbeth shows no remorse and states:

How tender 'tis 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 so sworn as you

Have done to this. **(I.VII. 54-58)**

Such strong aversion towards motherhood at such an intricate moment when a mother suckles her baby, prominently strikes out, we find her voice rising to a height of a hysterical scream. It's not just in these lines that Lady Macbeth's unimaginable masculinity is evoked, many other scenes she is found to denounce and question Macbeth's so called 'Masculinity', that seems to mock the so-called Patriarchal machismo. She retorts to Macbeth:

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily—wouldst not play false

And yet wouldst wrongly win. **[I. v. 17-22]**

Though Macbeth and Lady Macbeth resemble each other to a large extent in the intensity of feeling, vehemence of temper and above all dominance of ambition, both being vigorous, strong and determined, there happens to be some startling differences as well between the two characters. Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth as the one who doesn't have sense of honour that troubles Macbeth to the core. To slay one who is kinsman, his guest, Duncan, under the very shelter of his own roof, he is troubled by the consequences that will follow and even also by the spirit of pity and ethics. Lady Macbeth is unmarred by any of these disputes; she in the whirls of

her impulse sees no harm in executing the murder. She possesses the resourcefulness and readiness of wit which Macbeth lacks at large. All of these examples amplify the 'masculinity' of Lady Macbeth and to some extent the 'femininity' of Macbeth himself.

It is quite evident that Shakespeare won't allow such a magnanimous presentation of reverse sexuality as for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to hover for long. It would be unlikely for him as a writer and the patriarchal social structure he adheres to, witnessing such a woman such as her take the center stage, become the main protagonist even after transgressing the utopian femininity at large by mocking and taunting the masculinity of her own husband. She, as Germaine Greer argues "*has transcended that identity, which is transitory*"² and has developed a free spirit of her own by dismissing what was essentially feminine to her. Figuring that this extensive role reversal could be unfathomable in the long run, Lady Macbeth's character is finally struck hard by the inevitable womanhood when she looks at Duncan while attempting to kill him. She states:

Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't. (II.ii. – 15-16)

Lady Macbeth, here, while trying to uphold her collapsing husband, herself reveals and cracks in the surface of her unsexed hardness. The woman in her is awake, wide, she is herself now afraid to be driven to madness. Shakespeare makes it her lack of futuristic understanding of terrible consequences, a reckless naïve mind of a woman, unaware and ignorant of the worldly redemption, the sole cause of her nervousness, fury and horror of nature. We see a gradual ascendancy of the feminine in her while her 'masculine' nature fades away.

FREUD ON LADY MACBETH

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis developed the concepts of psychosexual evolution. This development involved a gradual shift to psychological analysis of the human

mind and can be seen in his famous '*Studies in Hysteria*' (1895) along with his other works such as '*Interpretation of dreams*' (1899), '*Three Essays on Theory of Sexuality*' (1905) and many more such milestone creations that has definitely shed light in the field of psychoanalytic work. He has significantly contributed to his understanding of conscious and the unconscious parts of the mind. Freud, during the course of time, has established a structural model of psychic analysis that is known as the '*The Ego and the Id*' (1923). This contributory work put forward new terms known as the *Id*, *Ego* and the *Superego*. The *Id* is known to comprise of the repressed unconscious while the *Super ego* is associated with our conscience which is formulated by the internalized rules created by parents of society. These two extreme figments of the mind are unconscious projections that govern the central *Ego*, which inevitably deals with the conscious, rational mind, shaping it up to a large extent. Lady Macbeth is created out of an amalgamation of the *Id* and the *Superego*. She is motivated initially by her *Id* that makes her 'unsex' her womanhood and succumb to a devilish deed but then towards the end of the drama it is her *Superego* that provides maximum contribution in creating her *Ego* or the consciousness as she starts to sleepwalk and utters:

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why,

The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?--

What, will these hands ne'er be clean?

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the

perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand (V.II. 47-56)

Lady Macbeth is absolutely marred by the imaginative blood stains that she imagines to be permanent in her hand, making it foul smelling. Her famous sleepwalking scene is a result of her deeds and sets the culmination of a heroic Lady Macbeth. Her doctor describes her mind as 'infected' and her speeches as 'foul whisperings'. She commits suicide in her frenzy and disillusionment thus leading to her tragic fall.

Freud in his *Some Character-types Met With In Psycho-analytical Work (1916)* puts up a similar stand point with Shakespeare where he states that “Ask ourselves what it was that broke this character which had seemed forged from the toughest metal? It is only disillusionment”. Freud artistically traces the historical root of Lady Macbeth that comes out that is clear resemblance with Queen Elizabeth herself. She was rumored to be devoid of child-bearing capabilities and claims that she had once described herself as ‘barren stock’. Freud craftily also places Macbeth, as the slayer of Macduff’s children, robber of a father off their children in a smooth stroke as he intends that it was only easy for Macbeth to kill children and their fathers so easily was because “He has no children” (*Act iv scene iii*) of his own.

Therefore the barrenness of Lady Macbeth led to the inevitable childlessness of Macbeth himself and therefore it was impossible for him to understand what it feels to lose a child or father.

In “*Those Wrecked by Success*,” the second paper of this character study, Freud draws heavily on Macbeth. This is his favorite Shakespeare play next to Hamlet, both being among his list of “the ten most magnificent works of world literature”. In this essay, Freud first points out the bewildering phenomenon that “people occasionally fall ill precisely when a deeply-rooted and long-cherished wish has come to fulfillment” (1916: 317). Freud goes further to suggest that :

it is not at all unusual for the ego to tolerate a wish as harmless so long as it exists in phantasy alone and seems remote from fulfillment, whereas the ego will defend itself hotly against such a wish as soon as it approaches fulfillment and threatens to become a reality. (1916: 317-318)

Freud concludes ‘*Some Character-types Met With In Psycho-analytical Work*’ by stating that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are actually opposite sides of the same coin. They are two fused in one single personality. Freud goes on to summarize:

It is he who has the hallucination of the dagger before the crime; but it is she who afterwards falls ill of a mental disorder. It is he who after the murder hears the cry in the house: "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep . . ." and so "Macbeth shall sleep no more"; but we never hear that he slept no more, while the Queen, as we see, rises from her bed and, talking in her sleep, betrays her guilt. . . . Thus what he feared in his pangs of conscience is fulfilled in her .

Freud's severe patriarchal standpoint thus creates a big stir amidst the feminist scholars especially when he describes in his essay 'Femininity' that, "*Suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially, favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed, as we know in binding erotically the destructive trends.*" (Femininity, 1933) For Freud, the women, who have been suffering since birth with the lack of the phallus, long for masculinity to take over them. Lady Macbeth was no exception, her psychosexual development is also tuned in this format and thus we can interpret her longing cry for the 'spirits' to 'unsex' her. Freud goes on to argue on the notion of castration complex for which he holds 'lack of penis' responsible. He further argues "*the castration complex of the of girls is also started by the sight of the genitals of the other sex. They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too. They feel seriously wronged, and often declare 'they want to have something like that too' and fall a victim to 'envy for the penis'*" (Femininity, 1933). For Freud, it is this penis envy that motivates a woman to do anything 'masculine' and intellectual, absurd as per her nature (asserted by the society), as a mere substitution for the phallic lacuna. This jealousy for Freud would be carried on throughout by the woman and contribute to a major extent in the structuring of their later adult

life. He goes on to argue that "*The discovery that she is castrated is a turning point... Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis; the second change of character in the sense of masculinity complex, the third, finally to normal femininity*" (Femininity, 1933). Lady Macbeth on this note tries to somewhat fit in the second option, by accessing the 'masculine' in order to compensate from what she has been denied so far.

CHILDLESS WITCH AND SOCIETY:—UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL

Societies at large is governed by patriarchy, state and religious fundamentalism that prophases morals, virtues and rules. For a woman it is essential that she abides by them. Any refutation of the same would be considered as anti-social and thus it would be punishable. Christian society at large considers killing of a child or abortion as against the religious sanctity.

Christian society expects this quintessential motherhood from women like Lady Macbeth, who is the wife of a Thane of Cawdor, the care- provider, the benevolent wife, devoted to her husband's betterment through her life by carrying out the 'ethical' virtues of self-sacrifice. Reluctance towards motherhood is one of the potential causes as it threatens to the child who is entrusted under the care of such a woman³. Thus when Lady Macbeth utters:

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 so sworn as you (I.VII.50-53)

She clearly would be termed a vicious woman who is unacceptable in a Christian society, unethical and regarded as witch. Her milk is 'gall' as it is devoid of the 'ethics of care' and she is a monstrous being leading to infanticide. She is therefore an imminent threat on the patrilineal order. She breaks the gender boundaries even to the extent of shedding motherhood just to be able to follow her political aspirations. Early English society upheld a difficult concept in regards with the notion of motherhood. It hailed praise for the self-sacrificing mother and condemned those who hurt innocents entrusted to their care.

Women who didn't abide by motherhood norms could only termed as witches⁴. Lady Macbeth therefore gets tagged as the Fourth Witch. Freudian analysis of psychosexual development, posits as a victim of 'penis envy'. Therefore it could be interpreted that since Lady Macbeth did not have a child on whom she could exercise her power and control, the royal throne becomes her object of desire for which she can go any miles, to get her 'lacuna' was fulfilled by the object

‘throne’ sitting on which her husband would be the king of Scotland and thus she would be the queen, consequently. Society that highlights motherhood also elates the ‘father’ who is the protector. My question here comes for Macbeth as well, if Lady Macbeth was an ‘unsuccessful’ mother, was Macbeth successful either? Even after hearing such strong denial of motherhood his only petty response to it was :

If we should fail?----- (I.VII.59)

Shakespeare goes on to construct Macduff as someone who is ‘unborn’ i.e. a caesarean baby, which again according to Christianity is looked upon as a last resort for birth. By this he again craftily holds the power of the feminine as responsible for all the fatalistic ends one can imagine, even though it Macbeth who goes on committing murder after murder towards the end of the play, quiet unlike how he was shown at the start.

Conclusion

As try to conclude this paper, I am baffled by some interjections that cross my mind when I try to interpret Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth. I find several ambiguous spaces unresolved or were forcefully resolved just in order to save the face of the social and its overarching control over the feminine.

It is unfortunate and otherwise relevant not just to England but to all societies that renders over-ambitious, focused, determined and unwavering women like Lady Macbeth, as ‘witch’. Motherhood as understood is one of the strongest tool of patriarchal society they deploy on women, especially those who are married to respectable households. They act as the ultimate trump cards to check the over-ambitious Lady and burden her with ethics of care and her biological essentialism. The society makes her a woman, asserts upon her the burden of ‘gender’ rules that she has to execute. When a woman like that of Lady Macbeth, dares to step out of the boundary, rejects motherhood, aims for high ambitions she is regarded as detrimental and apocalyptic that summons destruction over humanity. What then becomes absolutely necessary for these institutions is to ‘tame’ the otherwise wild ‘feminine’ by transforming her

from a Lady to a Witch, creating a severe antithetical standpoint. Even though Macbeth was the one who actually was first to be disturbed by the premonitions made by the witches upon the heath, that made him write a letter and explain his anxiety, even though it is he who first harbored the quest for power, it was Lady Macbeth who was to be blamed for her constant 'evil manipulations'. Even though Macbeth would be the one killing Macduff's 'children' rampantly, it would be Lady Macbeth who would be coined as witch just because she prophesies to dash the brains out of a suckling baby .

How does Justice (again a masculine entity) then act for women who are as vile as Lady Macbeth? In my opinion society simply regards them as 'hysteric' and she is ultimately forced to suicide out of 'madness'. Recasting Lady Macbeth, to an ultimate resolution of hysteria and madness is actually the ploy of Patriarchy executed by Shakespeare by which she could be portrayed as absolute 'irrational' judging future on meager terms of intuition. Even though

Macbeth becomes a serial killer, it would be Lady Macbeth who will be deliberately forced to die a horrific death, lost in oblivion for 'good', while Macbeth himself dies a 'Man's death' per se. It is how these women could be 'tamed' within the power structure of the State, the Fundamentalists and the Patriarchy by crushing them to meager objects of 'pity' which in return invokes 'fear' in the hearts of women in general, like a clandestine threat. Shakespeare therefore, the representative of a male dominated society, deliberately chooses this political standpoint through the enactment of his tragedy.

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