

Can the Witches Speak? Decoding the Mysterious Saga of Witchcraft in *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT

Elizabethan Era the age of time William Shakespeare belonged to; was dominated by patriarchal forces. The Elizabethans' unquestioned faith in supernatural, superstitions, sorcery and witchcraft came to worsen the position of women in the society. My paper deals with an analysis of the identity of the witches and witchcraft in the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. The three weird sisters are omnipresent throughout the play through their prophecies getting translated into reality one after another. It is the witches who play a potential role in inducing the elements of death and numerous murders throughout the play. My paper also answers the question as what was Shakespeare's purpose of introducing the element of supernatural in a historical play like *Macbeth*. The sexual identity of the witches baffles the audience as well as the readers. They do not have well-defined gender distinctiveness. In a world where gender is being defined in black and white, the witches reside in the grey zone. Every time their appearance in the play is induced by a natural turmoil. The witches also represent a dismantled state of the socio-political condition of Scotland which is quite contrary to the bond or camaraderie existing between the three sisters. My paper opens up multiple perspectives to look into the character of the witches where they manifest the misfits of the society, not abiding by the accepted norms or social code of conduct. They reside in their own dark world and bear more wisdom than the common characters of the play. Sterility or banality that they exhibit negates the possibility of femininity in them as viewed by the Elizabethan social order. They are responsible for the complexities in the actions of the characters so as to prove each of their prophecy to be true. On the whole, my paper aims at interpreting the witches to be the marginalized or the subaltern in the play *Macbeth* for which they are often being associated with immorality and sinfulness than being entities possessing knowledge and wisdom beyond human understanding.

Keywords: Witches, Witchcraft, Identity, Gender, Society

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Elizabethan Age in England stands as a significant period of time in the English history. It was marked by the ascension of throne by Queen Elizabeth in the year 1558. Under the regime of Queen Elizabeth there were far reaching advancements in the domain of knowledge. It included scientific advancements as well as geographical exploration. Under the patronage of the Queen, England aspired the exploration and expansion of its might into the New World. Both the culture and territorial peculiarities of the new World was nothing less than a wonder to England. In spite of such intellectual advancements England rested an intense faith upon witchcraft, black magic and several other superstitions. The term 'Witch' is being derived from the Old English 'Wicca' or 'Wicce'. For any natural disaster including any kind of epidemic was being considered to be the handiwork of the witches. The outbreak of the Black Death or the Bubonic Plague was considered to be designed by the witches. It is an instance of the general human instinct to resort faith upon the supernatural powers when no scientific explanation was being sought upon. The lack of medical knowledge leading to a huge loss of human lives was all being imposed upon the witches that stand quite contrary to the rationalism of the Elizabethan era. On highlighting upon the question as to who the Elizabethan witches were and why were they condemned of witchcraft. Such questions can be answered in simple terms where the witches were mostly women who were widowed, old, childless and there by helpless in their own conditions. They were the vulnerable lot of the society. They were unprotected and in need of support. The witches were believed to be possessing magical power of foretelling the future and its consequences. The witches employed animals for invoking the evil and most of the times they used to keep multiple pets as their companions. They were believed to be adept with the knowledge of using several consciousness alternating herbs and psychedelic herbs like cannabis in treating their cases. In a Catholic backdrop of England, witches practicing sorcery were non-believers or in a more relevantly acceptable terms "Pagan". They were well acquainted with the natural forces and could manipulate them for their own advantage. Witchcraft as a cult emerged on the premises of such popular believes without being based on any strong or well- proven facts. Witchcraft was more a part of the Elizabethan fiction where the powerless were being essentially victimized. Such victimization was indeed state supported where Queen Elizabeth herself passed a law for the persecution of the witches widely known as 'An Act against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts'. The witch hunting got formally acclaimed by the state authority. Witch hunting was thereby succeeded by the trials and finally persecution of the witches. Witchcraft as a cult of faith got further consolidated with the publication of the book *Daemonologie* by King James VI in 1597 where witches were referred as the slaves of the Devil. To King James VI, "...the Necromancers command the Devil" (*Daemonologie* Book I) Again he goes on to tell that the sorceress and the magicians possess greater merits that draw them nearer to sin against the Holy Ghost. The witches and magicians were clearly positioned against the Christian faith of England and were believed to challenge the same in their own ways. In Book I itself King James proposes the punishment that the "Instruments of Sathan" (*Daemonologie* Book I) deserve for practicing witchcraft in a Catholic England. The most significant of the

witch hunting endeavors was The Salem Witchcraft Trial where two hundred were being arrested and nineteen witches were being persecuted.

William Shakespeare residing in the Elizabethan era exhibited widespread influences of black magic and witchcraft on his writings. Supernatural plays an important role in Shakespearean plays. Of all his plays *Macbeth* significantly portrays the evil forces operational throughout the actions of the play. The weird sisters or the three witches in *Macbeth* are being essentially considered to be evil and are held responsible for incorporating all immoral criminal activities throughout the play. The negativity that they bring in with their very presence has baffled the Elizabethan audience. The identity of the witches is being intricately associated with immorality according to the accepted Elizabethan norms. The identity of the witches stay incomprehensible for no one has ever intended to find out the truth behind such a taboo. Shakespeare often sought the assistance of the supernatural as the guiding force in his tragedies and *Macbeth* being the most significant one. During the age of doubt and speculation and further discoveries where the world order was gradually started to being governed by anthropocentrism, Shakespeare used these supernatural elements in the form of witches in a rather subtle manner without questioning the order of the day.

The three witches in *Macbeth* facilitates establishing it into a cosmic tragedy where both the good and evil not only reside in an individual soul and body but due to the omnipresence of the witches good and evil reside in the totality of events. The three weird sisters play a role of the balancing entities between the psychological as well as the metaphysical. As G.Wilson Knight points out, "In *Macbeth*... the evil is not relative, but absolute" (Knight 140). A world that is defined in black and white, the witches reside in the grey zone thus characterized by an ambiguity. This blurriness of the "absolute" terror of evil and its suffocating and appalling consequences make the witches invariably negative. The profundity of wicked thoughts residing in the psychological as well as the metaphysical realm of the human characters like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is being impended upon the witches. The "demonic illusions and phantasms" (Reginone 2) of Macbeth are being physically manifested in the forms of the witches. Shakespeare subtly tries to liberate himself from the guilt of condemning the would-be King of Denmark being responsible of murder and the plan being the product of his ambition. The witches are being placed in between Macbeth and his evil ambition thereby mirroring the seeds of brutality being already sowed in Macbeth even before the appearance of the witches. The play opens with the exchange of dialogues between the three witches. The linguistic pattern that the witches employ in their speech foresees the several structural oppositions that the play is about to unfold through the deeds of Macbeth. The legend of the witches having its origin in the traditional folk culture and folklores restricts their identity to the rustic class of peasantry. It is their very origin in a way challenging the so-called elite strata of the society impend them with the responsibility of more evil power than they actually bear. This is quite similar to what George Gifford mentions about in his *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft* (1593) where he believes that devil provides common human being with an illusory notion that the witches bear power but in actuality they are powerless. It is their wisdom and foresight that produce their prophecies and not by virtue of supernatural power. They are more perspective about the real life situations than other characters in the play *Macbeth*.

The witches being both women and diabolical agents reside in the margin of the society. They are being intensely disempowered for they are excluded from every walk of a normal life. They are the outcast, the misfits. In *Macbeth*, the witches project the feminine ambition that is

hard to be fulfilled in a patriarchal social system. Moreover they are being addressed as the weird sisters where they project a kind of camaraderie by referring each other by their kin. Such a sensibility of togetherness can be found when every time three of them appear together. Moreover they remain faithful to their Queen Hecate quite contrary to the deeds of human Macbeth who misuses his power and manipulates Duncan's faith on him. Being a human and being in a respectable position Macbeth subverts and denies that what the witches have respect for. When Denmark was being torn apart and was plagued by socio-political disorder, the world of the witches never goes out of order. They exhibit the ethos of women desiring power and sovereignty in a male dominated society. The witches subvert the order not only through their love for power but also being in the margins. They project the fact that power should be in the hand of one who deserves it and not determined by his social position. The witches with their sovereign Satan challenge the King of Denmark in Macbeth who according to the Divine theory of Kingship is the representation of God on the earth. They are believed to be the agents inducing confusion in the mind of Macbeth but in reality it is the spiritual weakness of Macbeth that leads into his hallucinatory visions found again and again throughout the play. The witches are again being tabooed for they do not participate in the domestic activities. According to the accepted Elizabethan social norms of domesticity, the witches cannot be accommodated into the domestic circle. The social exclusion also drives them to the verge of the margin. The three witches of *Macbeth*, again represent de-naturalization through their sterility. According to the established code of womanhood, motherhood and child bearing facet of woman is that what is believed to deliver the completeness to her womanhood. The witches being the sterile forces negate such a possibility which is later manifested through Lady Macbeth's childlessness and the gruesome psyche where she exclaims:

Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn (Mac.1.7.135)

Terry Eagleton observes the witches to be "the most fertile force in the play, the witches inhabit an anarchic, richly, ambiguous zone" (Eagleton 1-3) Their anarchic zone comes across with Macbeth's when the desire for the Royal throne that resided in Macbeth's subconscious was ignited by them. The witches appear as "cosmic apparatus" (Adelman 42) for Macbeth. It is their intelligence that stands as a counter aspect of Macbeth's heroism and manhood.

Identity of an individual is intricately associated with his sexuality. The obscure as well as ambiguous projection of the witches' sexuality confuses the readers as well as the audience. During the Elizabethan era it was the female who was victimized as a witch and more than often she lacks any form of social support to rescue her from such victimization. Again in a society where the gender roles are defined in terms of male and female the weird sisters in *Macbeth* exhibit a combination of both. The binaries get merged in the androgynous sexual identity of the witches. It gets reflected in the utterance of Banquo where he says:

Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,
And yet your beard forbids me to interpret
That you are so. (Mac.1.3.38)

The witches are always accompanied by pets especially cat what is believed to be used as a medium in their witchcraft. The truth behind that is that most of the women who were either widowed or childless are in need of a companion which they find in keeping such pets which are mistaken by common faith to be evil medium. When the three witches first time appear in the

play the binary that resides in their identity is being extended to the natural condition itself where the wood was dominated by thunder and lightning and Macbeth exclaims:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen (Mac.1.3.37)

The witches in *Macbeth* symbolizes fragmentation that “may evoke primitive fears of dismemberment” (Adelman 42) hinting upon the cannibalistic aspect of Continental witchcraft. A natural whole is being dismantled into its fragmentary elements and similar can be viewed when they use body parts of several animals and human indiscriminately in brewing up the diabolical potion. To common Elizabethan audience it may appear to be an integral part of witchcraft but quite contrary to that if viewed from a different perspective, the witches provides with the real face of the illusory projection of the state of Denmark. The state of Denmark was soon to be fragmented into pieces with the heinous crime of killing the king or the father of the state being committed. The apparitions that the witches invoked appeared only to warn Macbeth about his end which he denied to accept. According to Stephen Greenblatt the very existence of the witches in the play is meant for questioning the “sacredness of royal authority” (Greenblatt 20) which in a way is being governed by the patriarchal forces. The world of the witches exists almost as an alternative civilization that challenges human civilization in every way. They reside both within and outside the periphery of the official world where they are only looked down upon as the ‘other’ by the civilized entities. The relationship between the evil and witchcraft can also be traced back to the fact that witchcraft has its roots in Pagan culture of Africa and Asia. Paganism obviously came to be associated with heresy or sin in a contemporary Catholic backdrop.

The society stipulates the behavioral pattern for women that even include the appetite for sexual pleasure. A female is expected to be reserved and controlled in the expression of her desire. This stands quite contrary to that of the appetite of the witches in their expression. Often women with excessive sexual appetite verging towards hysteria were condemned to be witches during the Elizabethan time. *Malleus Maleficarum*(1486) informs that according to the Continental beliefs of witchcraft, the witches are involved in ritualistic murders that incorporates eating the flesh of infant and even fragmenting the body parts of human and animals for devouring upon them. All these are symptomatic of their sexual perverseness that ultimate gets fulfilled in their sexual relationship with the demonic forces. The freedom to express one’s own sexual instinct devoid of being a male or female was thus being looked upon as ‘perverse’ as in the case of the witches. According to Janet Adelman, “We may hear an echo of some of the continental beliefs in their quasi-sexual attack on the sailor with uncooperative wife...” (Adelman 41-42).

The gender ambiguity of the witches extends itself to their psychological ambiguity. The self-identity of the weird sisters in *Macbeth* has so long been mistaken to be evil, to be immoral, to be agents inducing bloody events throughout the play. As a matter of fact, the witches resonates the desire of power, position and respect of the unsubordinated women in an Elizabethan male dominated society. They break free the shackles of prescribed code of conduct which may appear as a deviant behavioral pattern to the common place humans. The witches subvert the norms and thus be no longer considered as the ‘unofficial other’. Throughout the play they reflects their possibility of acquiring the centre by virtue of their wisdom, intelligence and camaraderie that can very well challenge a male authoritative socio-political construct. In spite of

bearing restricted power to take part in the socio-political proceeding the witches are the most vital forces behind manipulating the psyche of the major characters like Macbeth and Lady

Macbeth. They can no longer be dismissed as the hallucinatory visions of Macbeth or an extension of his evil psyche and thereby their identity remains no longer mistaken or mysterious. The witches are the voices of the subaltern, the marginalized, the hysteric and the socially powerless that bear immense wisdom and aspiration for challenging a well-established socio-political regime governed by human intelligence and thereby liberate themselves from a cursed and tabooed livelihood of being the 'other'.

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