

# Lady Macbeth's Patriarchal Consciousness: An Overview

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**Abstract--Macbeth or The Tragedy of Macbeth is one of the shorter tragic plays written by William Shakespeare and was most likely composed between 1599 and 1606. One of the most prominent and diverse character of the play is Lady Macbeth. She exceeds all other heroines in the Shakespearean world by her grandeur, strength of will and determination. She has been revered as the pioneer of feminism due to these qualities which tends to depart from the portrayal of women characters during 16th century Elizabethan England. However, a closer examination also establishes her as an extension of the role given to her by the patriarchal society i.e., to fulfill her responsibility as a wife. She blindly worships her husband due to which she finally succumbs to madness at the end of the play. During the course of the tragedy, she does violence to her nature as she represses all her feminine instincts on the sheer force of will to support her husband. This paper aims to study and analyze her role as the extension of patriarchy during the course of the tragedy.**

**Index Terms: Feminism, Lady Macbeth, Patriarchal, Violence**

## INTRODUCTION

The common concept associated with Lady Macbeth's character is ruthlessness and ambition. She is seen as a symbol of evil and called the fourth witch. Goethe, the great German poet also regards her as a super witch. However, critics in favor of Lady Macbeth attributes her willingness to do violence to her feminine nature as an indirect way of securing patrilineage in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan England. Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar stated that Lady Macbeth is far more than the manly and heartless woman portrayed throughout the ages. They hold the point that Lady Macbeth is just a woman who helps her husband, but her help is evil. According to Tian Junwu and Tong Xindan, the traditional Marxist view holds that Lady Macbeth is a vicious, cruel and heartless poisonous woman. However, they also state that she has both the demonic character as well as human nature. The former makes her a virago while the latter sheds light to her feminine sensitivity. She is well aware

that violence is the only way to assure her husband's kingship so she uses hypothetical violence of infanticide fantasies further rejecting the image associated with a traditional mother and strengthening the role of a responsible and dutiful wife. Her instruments to help includes rhetorical violence as she targets his manhood and therefore displays her willingness to go to the extreme ends to help him. She challenges socially restricted boundaries of gender norms as she works as a 'man' in the conventional garb of a woman to contribute to the patriarchal society of Elizabethan England.

She stands as one of the strongest women in Shakespeare's plays. But she eventually breaks down due to the cruelty that she exerted on herself as a human being completely unaware that her desire to see him on the throne already opened the door to damnation for both of them.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Lady Macbeth's determination to solidify her husband's position as the king of Scotland begins when she receives a letter from him informing her the predictions made by the three witches. This makes her aware about Macbeth's weakness and her fear heightens due to which she resolves to seize the crown for him and hence plans regicide. Though, Macbeth is the central protagonist of the play, she is one who persuades him to act on his desires, keeps a close watch on him, supports him whenever he is faltering and keeps him on track both through her encouragements as well as her taunts for the sole purpose that he accomplishes what he planned to execute. This often leads her to attacking him with mockery, insults, etc. until he eventually gives in. She verbally emasculates and attacks his manhood to achieve her desires of bringing the "golden crown" for him.

In this process, she also wishes to be a man so that she can cultivate the thoughts of murder and bloodshed. This also seems to link masculinity to

violence and ambition. These are some of the instances present in the play which throws light to the patriarchal consciousness of Lady Macbeth rather than feminist consciousness as commonly believed.

The link between masculinity to violence and ambition in the play is further justified as she is unable to take the help of physical violence to kill the sleeping King Duncan. It highlights not only her moral consciousness but also her vulnerability. Lady Macbeth's famous words in the play "unsex me" is her conscious rejection of this vulnerability. Throughout the play it increases with each act and finally heightens in the last act where her soliloquy sheds light to the disintegration of her mind much like her husband.

The characteristic attributes that further establishes her as a woman who rejects her own self for the sole purpose of supporting her husband thus being a contributor to the patriarchal dominion during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan England can be discussed as under:

#### LADY MACBETH AS AN "OTHER"

In the play, Lady Macbeth is undoubtedly the "Other" in *Macbeth*. This is seen when she is given the task to plan the banquet by her husband. She is unaware that he has sent servants to kill Banquo and he deliberately hides it from his wife. Instead of informing her about his plan she is ordered to flatter Banquo when he arrives at the banquet. Also, her first lines are not of her own but her husband as she enters the play with his letter. This already establishes Lady Macbeth as a part of Macbeth and not a person of her own and simultaneously signals that her primary motivations lie towards him. After reading the letter Macbeth has sent she is seen questioning his capacity for violence as she states,

*"Yet do I fear thy nature,  
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way."*

She further says,  
*"Thou wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it,"*

(1.5.30)  
[21]

She expands on the idea that Macbeth possess ambition, but he needs cruelty or the "illness" to make his ambitions a reality. She is aware about the confusions of Macbeth's mind and is worried that his hesitancy will stand in the way of his desires. Ultimately, she decides to aid him in her own way as she would "*pour my spirits in thine ear / And chastise with the valour of my tongue*" demonstrating her willingness to goad him through her words as she would use "the valour" of her tongue to manifest his goals into reality.

#### VULNERABILITY

Lady Macbeth's inner vulnerability is presented throughout the play. On the night of Duncan's murder, her words, "*That which hath made me drunk, hath made me bold; / What hath quenched them, hath given me fire*" (2.2) [34] indicates her fragile mind as she needs to drink to gain courage to execute the plan. She also says, "*Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't*" which further establishes her as a vulnerable character as she is not able to kill the king because he resembles her father.

Her madness is also a sign of her inner vulnerability. In Act II, scene 2, she advises her husband to wash "this filthy witness" from his hand and humiliates him as she says, "*I shame / To wear a heart so white.*" She then assures him with the words, "*A little water clears us of this deed*" (2.2) [38] However, in Act 5, scene 1, she is seen constantly washing her hands which also reflects her tortured mind because she blames herself for participating in the murder and also for forcing her husband to commit treason. It leads her to insanity as she is seen sleepwalking and hallucinating in the last act. She also prepares herself when she hears about King Duncan's arrival into their mansion by asking spirits to diverse herself from woman to man with the words, "unsex me here," "make thick my blood," to fill her with "direst cruelty," "*Stop up th'access and passage to remorse*", "*That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose*", (1.5) [22] Through these words, she requests her body to be filled with cruelty and according to her this can only be done when she gets rid of her feminine sensibilities. Her willingness to alter her own bodily functions so that she can support her husband demonstrates the lengths that she will go through for him.

### USE OF RHETORICAL VIOLENCE

Lady Macbeth pivots from playing the role of a conventional wife of supporting her husband by complimenting him and instead resorts to use of rhetorical violence to insult and emasculate him. In act 1, scene 7, she says,

*“Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting ‘I dare not’, wait upon ‘I would’,  
Like the poor cat i’t h adage?”*

(1.7)  
[28]

She compares Macbeth to a cat that is afraid to jump into the water to catch the fish because it is afraid to wet its feet similar to him who desires kingship but does not have the courage to risk anything for it. She calls him a coward while attacking his manhood which finally leads Macbeth to demonstrate his masculinity to his wife through his action of committing violence. She encourages him with the words,

*“When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man”*

She eggs him by appealing to his precarious masculinity which she just questioned portraying the link between masculinity and violence. Macbeth’s insecurity regarding his masculinity allows him to be manipulated by Lady Macbeth. She uses her feminine role of supporting her husband to remind him of his masculine aspirations. Thus, she successfully uses rhetoric violence and also infanticidal fantasies so that she can plot the future of her husband as a king. The use of infanticidal fantasies again highlights her lack of inhibitions.

### PATRIARCHAL WOMAN

Lady Macbeth enters the play with a letter in her hand after which she decides to make her husband achieve his desire of the “golden crown”. This letter reflects Macbeth’s absolute control. Though the letter is a forewarning to the power Macbeth was promised by the witches, the phrase “Lay it to thy heart,” (1.5.21) at the end of the letter is a clear indication to his acceptance of the prophecies as well as an order to his wife to assist him in obtaining

the throne. Thus, establishing the subservient role in the unnatural deed of regicide.

The title “Lady Macbeth” suggests the innate association with her husband as she has no name of her own throughout the play. It also suggests that she had no stand outside of her family which included only Macbeth. Therefore, her intentions seem perfectly fine and might even be welcomed naturally by herself. The title ‘Lady Macbeth’ is a confirmation of the fact that she is a subordinate part of Macbeth and exists only in the dependence of her husband.

### LACK OF IMAGINATION

Lady Macbeth lacks imagination as she sees only the surface of life and has no idea about the hidden forces. Her lack of knowledge and awareness about the political scenario of Scotland is represented through the plan she made to kill the King. She does not consider the consequences of her actions nor takes into consideration the fact that the King has two successors who might hamper her plans. Her sole purpose is to make the throne available for her husband and her lack of foresight leads her to devise a plan that is simple and flawed. Practically, she was to play the perfect hostess for King Duncan as well as the nobles as assigned by her husband.

### A TRAGIC HEROINE

Lady Macbeth has an immense amount of courage and willpower in which the greatness of her character lies. She is not at all deterred by scruples and is more impulsive than her husband. For her the king stands between her husband and the crown. She wants the cherished desire of her husband accomplished and for that she goes to the extent of going against her feminine sensitiveness. It is the sleepwalking scene that lets us into the inner turmoil of her mind and brings the pathos of her life. Though she speaks to her husband with indifference about cleaning the witness of the deed with “A little water” but her mind is effected and overwhelmed with the realization of her crimes as she cries out in the sleepwalking scene, “*All the / perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand*” (5.1) [93] It is the natural reaction of her unnatural deeds. Though her guilt conscience is focused on in the last act of the play yet it still evokes pity in the minds of the audience portraying her as a tragic heroine.

## CONCLUSION

Lady Macbeth serves the patriarchal system of power and simultaneously rejects the notions of a traditional women often characterized as silent and meek. She has a strong voice throughout the play but she uses it to advance the position of her husband. The violence perpetuated by her in service of the patriarchal system of power in Elizabethan England makes her a significant character in the course of the tragedy. She becomes the nurturer who nurtures Macbeth's avowed goal of reigning the country fulfilling the responsibilities of a wife. Thus, the original intention of Lady Macbeth is still the expectation and ardor of an ordinary woman during the process of which she acts as Macbeth's friend, philosopher and guide throughout the play. Therefore she is a more complex character than the "scheming, vicious woman" as popularly portrayed.

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