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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY:DUALITIES IN LADY MACBETH'S CHARACTER

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Abstract:

Lady Macbeth, the wife of Macbeth and later the queen of Scotland has been referred to as 'the fiend like woman' who seems to be so ruthless monster who would go to any extremes and use all possible means to achieve her end. But this is only an appearance for she is basically a woman with feminine weakness. The realization of the hideousness of her crime comes to her late and it brings her ultimate doom . With many dualities in her character, her tragedy is born out of a kind of contrast / bi-polarities which mark the uniqueness of this great Shakespearean tragedy.

KEY WORDS:

Ambition, Feminity, Imagination, Contrast, Disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION:

Generally a Shakespeare tragedy is pre eminently the story of one person – the hero. It is only in his love tragedies like Roman & Juliet & Antony & Cleopatra that the heroine is as much the centre of the action as the hero. It will be, however, a/no mistake in our part to establish a similarity between Macbeth on one hand & the two tragedies on the other- simply because there are two central characters in Macbeth also. But it should be noticed that Shakespeare is himself partly responsible for such a tendency on the part of his readers. This is because the first half of Macbeth is greater than the second & in the first half Lady Macbeth not only appears more than she does in the second, but also exerts the ultimate deciding influence in the action.

In the first half of the play Lady Macbeth clearly dominates and her courage & imperious will rouses her husband's indomitable spirit. She plays the decisive role & is more commanding than her husband whom she impels to the deed with her passionate courage & imperious will. Her heroics are fully revealed in the last scene in the first act where she has to compel her reluctant & recalcitrant husband in the commission of the crime. She wins him over by picturing the crime as something heroic by representing it as something grand & magnificent & demanding the best in a man. She rouses him with a sarcastic comment, a taunt that no man can bear & best of all a soldier. The word 'coward' inflames Macbeth; she appeals even his love for her; "From this time / such I account thy love!". She presents before her husband a prepared seemingly practicable scheme for the murder & by sheer determination inflexible force of will elicits from Macbeth the ecstasy of admiration: "Bringing forth men children only / for thy undaunted mettle should compose / nothing but males."

Throughout the first act she is the very picture of grandeur. Her will is indomitable, her courage invincible. She remains supreme even in the murder scene. Macbeth brings a dagger "from the place" & can not be prevailed upon to put them back; he will go no more; he is afraid to think of what he has done. Thus, it is she who does it for him & says boldly "Give me the daggers" & taking the daggers from the feeble grasp

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of her husband she finishes the deed. Her plan of laying the guilt upon the Chamberline's is invented in the spur of the moment "her's is an inventing brain". She cannot even in her mildest dream imagine that their attempt may fail, "we fail / but screw your courage to the sticking place/ and we will not fail." Thus, her indomitable strength of will & masculine firmness give her the ascendancy over the husband's faltering nature. She at once seizes the opportunity that offers for the accomplishment of all their coveted greatness & never flinches from her objects till all is over. For all these she seems not only invincible but also inhuman. A.C Bradley perceives:

We find no trace of pity for the kind old king; no consciousness of the treachery and baseness of the murder; no sense of the value of the lives of the wretched men on whom the guilt is to be laid; no shrinking even from the condemnation or hatred of the world.¹

She seems to us as an embodiment of evil – absolute & extreme. Indeed, Prof G. Wilson in *The Wheel of Fire* says "Macbeth is Shakespeare's most profound & nature vision of evil"² & the evil of atmospheric effect interprets the evil of individual persons and so too with Lady Macbeth. She is not merely a woman of strong will; she is a woman possessed – possessed of evil passion . No 'will power' on earth world account for her dread invocation:

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.

But it is at this point interesting to note what Jenijoy La Belle in her article, "A Strange Infirmity: Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhoea" states on Lady Macbeth's invocation for 'unsexing her'. She perceives that in doing this Lady Macbeth does not wish for just a move away from femininity; but she is asking the spirits to eliminate the basic biological characteristics of womanhood. The main biological characteristic that La Belle focuses on is menstruation. La Belle argues that by asking to be "unsex[ed]" and crying out to spirits to "make thick [her] blood / Stop up th' access and passage to remorse," Lady Macbeth asks for her menstrual cycle to stop. By having her menstrual cycle stop, Lady Macbeth hopes to stop any feelings of sensitivity and caring that is associated with females. She hopes to become like a man to stop any sense of remorse for the regicide.³ Carolyn Asp explains in her article, "'Be bloody, bold and resolute': Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in Macbeth" that Lady Macbeth openly attempts to reject her feminine traits and adopt a male mentality because she perceives that her society associates feminine qualities with weakness.⁴ Likewise, Robert Kimbrough argues in his article "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender" that in Elizabethan literature, especially Macbeth, there is the idea that to be "manly" is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death and to be "womanly" is to be gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft, a condition signified by tears.⁵ He also argues that Lady Macbeth wants to become cruel, which she considers to be a masculine trait. However, in order for her to become cruel she must cut off the flow of blood to her heart, which is the seat of love, the source of "remorse," pity and compassion which are all attributes of human nature.

But the play shows us another picture of Lady Macbeth: the pale woman creeping from bed mumbling feebly. "Yet here is a spot" who walks in sleep whispering: "The Thane of fife had a wife. Where is she now?", the woman that smells the odor of blood in her hand & sighs that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten her little hand," the scared woman that hurries back to bed with: "To bed, to bed: there is knocking at the gate." How can this Lady Macbeth be reconciled with the previous one, this bundle of nerves with that "impersonation of ruthless & undaunted ambition?". Is there any sign of the pathetic woman that sighs, "oh! Oh! Oh! in the terrible Lady, invoking the spirits to unsex her here & fill her from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty?"

When we meticulously analyze the play we find out the two dissimilar pictures of Lady Macbeth & feel tempted to look for a connecting link. In fact, an artistic analysis reveals that there is a hidden link between two dissimilar pictures of Lady Macbeth. Analysis corporate that the first anticipates the later and we feel a sort of totality in this two contrasted pictures.

With the departure of the messenger announcing the king's forth coming visits Lady Macbeth appeals to the "murdering ministers" to unsex her & if she is so much unwomanly, if all her womanliness is so much stifled in her, then why this invocation at all? If she had been normally as cruel as she wanted to be there have been no need for such an appeal? We can understand that this invocation has been a must for her because she is basically a woman subject to feminine weaknesses and although this speech addressed to the "murdering ministers" is demonic in intensity & passion yet Wilson knight thinks that "it leaves her a pure woman with a woman's frailty".⁶ As soon as its horrible is done she faints at Macbeth's description of Duncan's body. Christina León Alfar claims that even though scholars argue that Lady Macbeth's desire for

spirits to "unsex" her violates gender norms, she has been falsely accused of being the source of violence in the play. Alfar contends that while it is commonly held that Lady Macbeth is the driving force of Macbeth's "bloody desire," she also falls victim to the tendency to attack strong female characters. She argues that Lady Macbeth never asserts her own desires or ambitions; she merely encourages her husband's desire to be king.⁷ As her husband grows rich in crime, her significance dwindles: she is left shattered, a human wreck who mutters over again in sleeps the hideous memories of her former satanic hour of pride. Again when she says, "come to my woman's breasts & take my milk for gall", the mother in her speaks out. She is fully conscious of her "milk of human kindness" which she is anxious to transform into gall. She is unsexed for the time being, the 'murdering ministers' seen to have granted her prayer but that is absolutely a temporary phase & even then she is not entirely unsexed. Nature takes revenge on her. Her stifled womanliness & strangled feminine weaknesses reassert themselves in her. But as she has already alienated herself from the normal stream of womanliness, this feminine characteristics reveal themselves in a rather abnormal course – "unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural problems". Lady Macbeth's sleep walking scene is therefore symbolic of the extent to which she has cut herself off from the natural hiding process. When she says:

I have given suck & know
How tender it is to love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you
Have done to this -

she seems to talk like a fiend. Coleridge, however, says that this passage though usually thought to prove a merciless & unwomanly nature, proves the direct opposite, she brings it as the most solemn enforcement to Macbeth of the solemnity at his promise to undertake the plot against Duncan.⁸ Though intentionally she alludes to the destruction of her infant while in the act of sucking of her breast, her very allusion to it, & her purpose in this solution shows that she considered no tie so tender as that which connected her with her babe. It reveals the fact that she is essentially a woman, no monster like Goneril or Regan who are absolutely alien to the tenderness of a mother's affection. Thus, Kenneth Muir comments: The woman damning herself by unnatural acts, was of course, not new in Macbeth: Lady Macbeth performs in ritual a rejection of womanhood which Goneril & Regan had acted out in their deeds... Yet the unwomanliness of Goneril & Regan differs from Lady Macbeth's not only because they literally reject their father where as Lady Macbeth symbolically rejects her children; it differs too, because it is existential... In Lady Macbeth it is essential; it is – as in Media - the deliberate & rhetorically articulated point from which on her first appearance in the play, all her acts proceed.⁹

If she has a mother latent in her, like wise has she a daughter concealed under that heart, that hard relentless exterior, as these memorable words in the murder scene demonstrate: "Had he not scrambled/My father as he slept, I had done it".

All these weaknesses in her becoming a mother, a daughter help us to understand the fact that there is no unbridgeable gap between the two appearances.

We also notice that the Lady Macbeth who is offered to assume control & asked her husband to put that "night's great business" into her despatch" can not even accompany her husband to the performance of the deed. She has to fly away from the chamber & the face of Duncan resembles her father's! And to that the fact that she has to brace her nerves with wine! Macbeth, however, needs no stimulant, & he can somehow do the deed which she fails even to face. Her facile comments after the deed has been done are an intriguing contrast to the perturbed gesticulations that break forth from her husband. Apparently, she is unruffled but these are chinks in her armour which the smooth surface cannot wholly conceal. When in a matter of fact manner she admonishes her husband, "consider it not so deeply" we get a fleeting gleams of the cauldron in her arm soul. She asks her husband not to be unbalanced – "these deeds must not be thought/ after these ways", - but when she adds "so, it will make us mad" we wonder if her admonition hurled at her husband is not also a confession of the turmoil raging in her submerged self. She has fainted ultimately even in the murder scene; Macbeth does not faint. It after the murder she boastfully goes to deposit the daggers in their place making a ghastly gesture on gilding the faces of the glooms with blood & grief – she has to rue her conduct later on. How much the sight of blood repulses her, how it plays havoc with her mind is revealed in the grim lines she utters in her sleep walking sense, "yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?". Significantly though the final doom of this Lady takes place in the sleep walking sense nonetheless even after Duncan's murder she gradually begins to fade out of the lay. Before the sleep walking scene she appears only twice, once in Act III, sc II & next in the Banquet scene (Act III, sc IV). In Act III sc II she speaks but little, - "Naught's had all's spent", which reveals the depth of her isolation.

Now her solitude is greater for her husband than for herself: "come on; gentle my lord". She craves for companionship & has none come. In the Banquet scene also she looks exhausted & her energies in this scene are but the last flicker of the embers that are already dead. After this when the sleep walking scene comes it is no surprise. The end of the Banquet already shows the beginning of her end. The sleep-walking Lady is the ghost of herself, stalking at the dead hour of the night, throwing up dead wreckage memory.

But still the question remains why Lady Mac with such a woman's soft heart should be so keen about murdering the aged Duncan? The fact may be that she is possessed by much ambition, that she wants to see her husband on a high – hierarchy in the state structure. It is also a fact that she is possessed by her crazy love for her husband. Indeed, we can perceive no note of selfishness of her ambition – her whole heart is wrapt up in his schemes to his own advancement & the part she assigns herself is to further these schemes. It is for him that she has cast away her priceless jewel. In many ways, she is a good wife; but she has not enough understanding about her husband's character. Her lack of imagination makes her totally insensible to the consequence of the crime that has been committed. Her want of imagination makes her exclaim, "A little water clears us of this deed" and it is again owing to the dullness of her imagination that she does not understand the real nature of her husband. The realization of the hideousness of their crime comes to her soon after the murder with the shock of a sudden disclosure & at once she begins to sink. The glory of her dream soon fades away, & exhausted & sleepless she exclaims:

Naught is had, all is spent
Where our desire is got without content.

Her nature breaks down & we get the pathetic spectacle of the sleep-walking scene – the culmination of a long process of decay & dissolution. That Wilson Knight, however, thinks to interpret the figure of Lady Macbeth in terms of 'ambition' & 'indomitable will' is, indeed, a futile commentary. Her constant effort through out the play was to bully the conscience & it is true that Lady Macbeth is not perhaps morally deprived by nature but still we have to assert that she deliberately chooses evil, her choice being more deliberate than her husband's.

CONCLUSION :

Lady Macbeth is not thoroughly hateful, not impelled by revenge. Shakespeare could have displayed her crime in a more complex & accountable light by associating some feudal grudge to her cruelty to Duncan but then she would have vulgarized the features of the splendid character. By the entire absence of pity & vice & virulence & by concentrating all the springs into one determination, the dramatist has given her character a statue like simplicity which, though cold, excites the stirring wonder. Shakespeare makes her character great by calming down all the pettiness of vice & giving her only passion which is ambition. Indeed, William Hazlitt is right when he says:

The magnitude of her resolution almost covers the magnitude of her guilt. She is a great bad woman whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. She does not excite but loathing & abhorrence like Regan or Goneril in Lear. 10

But it should be noticed that in her most heroic scenes her valour is more in her tongue than in her heart "to chastise with the valour of my tongue." Actually, the woman herself still remains a woman to the last – still linked with her sex & with humanity. After Duncan's murder Lady Macbeth gradually fails into oblivion because she has already applied a strange pressure on herself than she can bear & her deterioration follows so swiftly. Thus, ultimately Lady Macbeth appears to do something more than the merely 'fiend like queen.'

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