

## **Patriarchal Dominance in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Viewing from A Feminist Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

*Feminism is the most common term nowadays as since the 19th century women have been struggling for their rights and for banishing the patriarchal dominance. Women are more united and aware to establish the equity and equality in society, but men in the name of social and religious behaviour always try to enchain women and use how they wish. For these, they change their strategies frequently. As feminism is a discourse and academic discipline, people have attempted to know why and how men have started dominating women. Consequently, reading Shakespeare is important as he creates a lot of women characters in his tragedies. And a deep reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from a feminist perspective shows how technically Shakespeare introduces Lady Macbeth as a criminal and the so-called fourth witch. Even nowhere does Shakespeare mention what Lady Macbeth's real identity is. That's why, the paper aims at reading the text from a feminist perspective to search the treatment of Shakespeare towards Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and to know why Lady Macbeth's identity is ignored here. To fulfil these, the paper briefly describes the nature of patriarchy and feminism, then the textual analysis critically with these features. Finally, it shows its findings and proves that Shakespeare is not also free from patriarchal tendency.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Dominance, Lady Macbeth, Woman's Identity

### **Introduction**

*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is a renowned tragedy in the history of literature. The play has been read in different perspectives, but how women are presented and what roles they play are ignored. “Women in Shakespearean tragedies are portrayed and presented as lesser and negative stereotypes” (Jajja 228), and the play *Macbeth* has reinforced and strengthened male dominance and patriarchal values. Martine Lings (90) believes “Lady Macbeth wins him (Macbeth) back to his criminal intention betrays the extreme superficiality of the few moral scruples that he has left.” But Shakespeare does not give “any indication that Macbeth fears that Lady Macbeth will strike him, nor does she make physical threats against him. She only uses words” (Adele n.pag.). Lady Macbeth is justified in the context of patriarchy. “Patriarchy structure has been a major feature of the traditional society. It is a structure of a set of social

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relations with material base which enables men to dominate women” (Stacey, 1993; Kramarae, 1992; Lerner, 1986; Humm, 1989; & Aina, 1998; cited in Asiyanbola n.pag.).

The paper aims at showing how patriarchal society treats Lady Macbeth as a criminal and shows Macbeth as a hero. To fulfil it, the paper has a literature review section where relevant points of *Macbeth* are focused. Then, the discussion shows a theoretical framework of feminism and patriarchy so that it would be clear how women are dominated in the name of culture and tradition. The critical analysis section shows how the text is read from feminist perspective. Finally, it ends with observations, conclusion and works cited section.

### Literature Review

*Macbeth* starts “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.ii.10) told by the three witches and next echoed by Macbeth, the protagonist of the play. The first appearance of the witches prepares the audience for the atmosphere of fear and bloodshed which diffuses the whole play. The three witches are given masculinity as we see they have beards. Stallybrass (26) argues that “Witchcraft in *Macbeth* is not simply a reflection of a pre-given order of things: rather, it is a particular working upon, and legitimation of the hegemony of patriarchy.” In patriarchy “witchcraft is associated with female role” (Stallybrass 34), and to them women are the causes of down fall of human being from the Paradise. Lady Macbeth in this play is such a character. Shakespeare presents her as Macbeth’s collaborator to reach his destiny. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are highly ambitious to gain what the witches make Macbeth understand. It is noticeable that Lady Macbeth has done the evil task not only for her prosperity but also for her husband’s establishment. Though she is “ambitious”, she never thinks about “what it will be like to be queen” (Gill 280). Perhaps the society which she belongs to does not allow her to be so as it is nothing but patriarchy. In accordance with male hegemony, she welcomes manliness and calls the supernatural to take away her feminine quality as she “understands that in the society she lives in, she must transform herself from woman to man to go ahead” (Kathryn buckk n.pag.). She is able to convince her husband to commit the murder of King Duncan by questioning his manhood. “These standards force the societal idea that the more masculine somebody is, the better and stronger they are” (Kathryn buckk n.pag.). Moreover, “she encourages and supports her husband in good wifely fashion; she does not undermine him; she sees, knows and understands the terms of the world she lives in, and she accepts them” (French 16).

### Research Objectives

This paper aims to analyse how women are treated in a male dominated society and become subordinate and subaltern. The paper also shows both men and women are responsible for women's degradation, and women take it without questioning. Women are suppressed because men keep them being ‘women’ which shows the inferiority. At first, we should understand the co-concept like ‘patriarchy’, ‘inferiority’, ‘feminism’ and the movement of a woman’s development. It also shows how a woman is mapped to be ‘a woman’ and why they lose their self-identity.

## Research Methodology

For a successful and profound research, here we have used both primary and secondary sources. The main text of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the primary and the critical interpretation of feminism, patriarchy and *Macbeth* are the secondary sources. The paper has depended on printed and online research journal articles and sometimes online books for our secondary sources. After reading the collected sources, the paper has tried to compile the relevant information to support the research goal.

## Patriarchal Dominance in *Macbeth*

*Macbeth* opens with "Thunder and lightning," as three witches step to meet with Macbeth, who at that moment comes back with Banquo from the battlefield after winning. "The witches are exaggerated and distorted form of woman, turned into monsters, with special supernatural powers" (Jajja 234). The weird sisters are presented with masculinity as we see in the play, when Banquo says:

You should be woman,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so. (I.iii.45-47)

Macbeth, then, becomes excited for the prophecies of the weird sisters and he passes the information to Lady Macbeth immediately so that she can proceed to fulfil his desire. Hearing the prophecy, Lady Macbeth becomes highly ambitious. She gets the indication of Macbeth's hidden desire to be a king and Macbeth in his letter manipulates her to help him to achieve his goal. He states:

Thou wouldst be great  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it. (I.v.17-19)

Here Macbeth indicates her to give up her womanliness which is compared with 'illness' to think how to fulfil his desire. So, Lady Macbeth tries to apply it in her character by wishing as Macbeth maps the structure to be a king. As a result, Lady Macbeth wishes to give her womanly attitude and wants to be a common gender one. Thus, she dreams:

Unsex me here  
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty. (I.v.40-42)

She also then wishes to be more severe.

Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall (I.v.46-47)

When Macbeth attempts to murder King Duncan, he feels nervous and hesitates whether he should kill the king or not. This happens because of his lack of 'self-trust' and hypocritical mentality as he wants to prove himself innocent. Lady Macbeth provokes Macbeth, but Macbeth does not show any reaction. Rather, she suggests "those who lack the self-trust to speak out are often made to listen" (Gearline-Tosh 11).

I have given suck, and know  
 How tender 'tis 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 so sworn as you  
 Have done to this. (I.vii.54-59)

Lady Macbeth says this because of stimulating her husband to kill Duncan which Macbeth has vowed. Though she is passionate in her ambition, we notice that “she denies the values that she shares –whether she likes it or not –with the rest of her society” (Wilson 38). Later she puts down her murderous impulse for her devoutness for the family.

Had he not resembled  
 My father as he slept, I had done't. (II.ii.12-13)

In Act 1, Scene 7, Macbeth expresses his future requirement from his wife to bring forth a male child, which clearly indicates that only male child is allowed to hold the power and being a ruler. The only function of a woman is to give birth the children and nurse them. They are not allowed to set up individually, let alone to hold the authoritative power. Even women do not get the opportunity to express their own feelings until men do not tell them about their activities, after exposing Duncan's death when Lady Macbeth asks Macduff to tell her what is going on in the house, Macduff replies:

O gently lady,  
 'tis not for you to hear what I can speak:  
 The repetition in a woman's ear  
 Would murder as it fell. (II.iii. 85-88)

There is no doubt that she is confined by sexism here and belittled by Macduff's words. Donalbain and Malcolm flee from Scotland; one is in Ireland and the other in England. “The shift from Scotland to England is strikingly the shift from the mother's to the father's terrain” (Adelman 66). To them their motherland is nothing but grave as Rosse depicts:

It cannot  
 Be called our mother, but our grave; (IV.iii.165-166)

Becoming the king of Scotland, Macbeth's first attempt is to kill Banquo and his son Fleance because a feeling of insecurity has arisen in his mind as Banquo's descendants will also be kings. Perhaps his mind is “full of scorpions” that he tells his wife. Lady Macbeth does not support Macbeth's wish to kill Banquo and Fleance and she consoles him by saying that nature has not made them immortal and they must die one day. But Macbeth does not listen to her. At one banquet, when Banquo's ghost appears Lady Macbeth tries to cover up Macbeth's odd behaviour as he becomes abnormal. But when Lady Macbeth becomes mentally disorder, we see no consolation from Macbeth to his wife. Even it is also absent how Lady Macbeth leads her life after becoming the queen of Scotland. We do not find her desire to be a queen also but when she gets the opportunity to lead her life better than before, she is imbalanced and also considered as

the fourth witch for her evil doings. Though Macbeth has the hallucination of the danger, Lady Macbeth falls ill of a mental disorder. Macbeth murders 'sleep' but Lady Macbeth suffers from it. We see the repentance in Lady Macbeth, but it is absent in Macbeth. Tragic flaw is presented only in Lady Macbeth's role. Till the end, Macbeth tries to hold the power and never bows down his head instead of dying. "At the conclusion of this tragedy, we accept without demur the judgment that Macbeth is a butcher" (French 15). In the final scene, Macduff, who claims that he is not born of woman, but untimely ripped from his mother's womb, kills Macbeth. This indicates the masculine value and "throughout the play manhood is equated with the ability to kill" (French 15).

In this play, Macbeth's crime does not introduce him as a murderer, rather he is rewarded for it and his murderous activities are compared with the 'heroic deed'. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth's crime is compared with the evil though she repents. So, a question arises why is she compared frequently with a witch and who does it? The male dominant society does it. It is Macbeth, who commits the crimes.

In *Macbeth*, we find how patriarchy treats women and makes them subordinate. The male always keeps the authoritative power and dominates over the female as they want. Perhaps "patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men and to some extent limits women's human rights also" (Sultana 1). It refers to male domination and feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to relate "the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women's subordination" (Sultana 1).

Simultaneously, Connell (184) remarks that:

The play clearly gender stereotypes on one level, associating certain virtues with masculinity and others with femininity. But it is hegemonic masculinity that comes across as a clear villain, due to its merciless demands for dominance and the self-abnegation that results from it (cited in Moongazer n.pag.).

Janet Adelman (53) in her essay, "Born of woman": Fantasies of Maternal Power in 'Macbeth' argues that "the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed." She also states:

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female (67).

Furthermore, "the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as objects of exchange between father-dominated families" (Ryan 101). And Levy (2008) suggests "Gender violence has been recognized as a violation of human rights. Literature highlights that violence against women inflicts tremendous costs and consequences in all countries and societies" (cited in Tarar and Pulla 57).

Like all male writers, Shakespeare reflects the world as he knows. And “*Macbeth* draws images from everyday experience, and from the customs and preoccupations of Jacobean England” (Shiddall 69). It happens because “the age of Shakespeare was an era of male hegemony and patriarchal supremacy-women were isolated under the forceful version of law, religion, dress-code and professionalism” (Azam 60). Azmi Azam (59) also remarks “it is true that Shakespearean female characters display the then conventional England of patriarchal domination, but it is also evident that they deliver the vital and universal female features.”

In *Macbeth*, women are presented more evil than men and by doing their evil sorts of activities they become a witch as Lady Macbeth is labelled. But this is strikingly a misogynistic work, implying that:

Women are inherently more susceptible to evil than men, as shown when Satan, disguised as a serpent, first tempted Eve, who then tempted Adam. Shakespeare recalls this original sin when Lady Macbeth uses her sexual power over her husband, and persuades him to evil (Shiddall 73).

In that case, Macbeth is not a wise person as Callie Joubert (186) remarks that “a perfectly wise person cannot be deceived, and a very good person will choose to do good.” If Macbeth considers as a wise person then he is not deceived and he is perfectly aware of what Lady Macbeth does and could therefore have chosen not to be an ‘evil’. Macbeth himself is responsible for his evil activities. Katherynbuckk (n.pag.) points out that “sometimes through a female character comes along that shows strength in herself and isn’t simply a pawn to push around to move the plot forward”, and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* is such a character.

To seek the identity of Lady Macbeth, it becomes clear that she has no opportunity to oppose herself and to do what she wishes, but she is capable of doing, how she is instructed and guided by Macbeth and patriarchal society. As “manliness is the highest standard of behaviour” (French 18) in patriarchal society, everything is judged in this context and Lady Macbeth is not an exception. Sigmund Freud (39) points:

She is ready to sacrifice even her womanliness to her murderous intention without reflecting on the decisive part which this womanliness must play when the question afterwards arises of preserving the aim of her ambition, which has been attained through a crime.

Macbeth wants to “eliminate women from the life process to create a world comprised exclusively of males” (Adelman n.pag.). Many critics like A. C. Bradley state that Lady Macbeth’s constant harassment pushed Macbeth and made him commit all this evil, but it is easily noticed that Macbeth makes her understand about his intention. “It is often said that she understands him well” (Bradley 329).

Macbeth’s first attempt to murder is stimulated by Lady Macbeth, but Macbeth himself kills Banquo, Lady Macduff and Lady Macduff’s son. Macbeth believes the witches because he “already has ambitions and desires that alarm him” (Moseley 29). Though Macbeth’s activities are heinous, he is considered a hero. According to John Cunningham (112), “Other major roles show flawed characters, perhaps Hamlet with his warped depressive’s view of the world, Othello

with his hypersensitive jealousy- but none pursues a deliberate course of evil as Macbeth does. Richard III does so, but he is a villain."

To be a tragic hero, according to Aristotle (48), "This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error." But the character of Macbeth is full of error and evil activities. And we do not find any repentance mode in his character, but we find it in Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth commits an error and suffers. Her suffering makes the readers feel pity for her and fear in her evil doings. Aristotle (48) says that a tragedy must show the sudden downfall and "the change in fortune will be, not from misery to prosperity, but the reverse, from prosperity to misery" which we see in Lady Macbeth's character as she becomes mentally deranged but it is totally absent in Macbeth. Further, Aristotle (48) suggests that the hero should have some kind of human weakness "who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error." This statement also finds in Lady Macbeth's character when she feels Duncan as her father. We do not find any human kind attitude in Macbeth. By all these it is clear that Lady Macbeth possesses the qualities of being a tragic hero, but she is not considered because Shakespearean society does not allow a woman to be a tragic hero. In spite of having lots of difficulties, Shakespeare treats Macbeth a tragic hero who is given "a character may possess manly qualities" (Aristotle 51), but "it is not appropriate that a female character should be given manliness or cleverness" (Aristotle 51) and "a woman or slave may be good, though the one is possible an inferior being and the other in general an insignificant one" (Aristotle 51).

*Macbeth* breaks the laws of a tragic character, though Graham Holderness (64) argues "the tragedy of *Macbeth* does not exemplify the Aristotelian theory: the play does not end in catharsis, and does not work to moderate and pacify the emotions it arouses."

Richard Gill (275) also opines that "Macbeth does great evil, but his acts can hardly be blamed on the sister's", and "it's natural for him to want to be the leader"(274). So, it conveys that Macbeth's crime is natural, but unnatural to Lady Macbeth. We see that "masculine brutality is celebrated in Macbeth's character, readers today find the similar passionate drive in Lady Macbeth to be vile and horrible" (Kathryn buckk n.pag.). Marilyn French (17) notices "Lady Macbeth is not so judged; she is seen as supernaturally evil. Her crime is heinous because it violates her social role, which has been erected into a principle of experience: She fails to uphold the feminine principle."

Patriarchal society degrades Lady Macbeth and controls her such a way which they want and make her insignificant. In *The Second Sex*, Simon De Beauvoir (267) puts that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one." Men hold the dominate position and women subordinate because men think "this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man" (Genesis, cited in Joubert 192). Though "women are measured by the standard of men and found inferior" (Nayar 88), and "a woman becomes a woman, or 'possesses' a woman's identity because she plays the role of women repeatedly" (Nayar 91), Lady Macbeth shows her intellect to achieve the goal and becomes evil because the society doesn't tolerate her

intellect and work by which she can succeed. The society treats her as female and to them “the female is always nothing more than a deviation from the norm which is male”(Nayar 102).

Another point is noted that lady Macbeth comes to the readers without her own name. In fact, her own identity is absent in the play. Azmi Azam (63) states, “ In the then England women were not allowed to participate in universities or the judiciary, therefore, Shakespeare follows the convention”, and makes Lady Macbeth as an unfortunate individual. Consequently, Marking that not a single work of Shakespeare has a woman’s name as the entire title and always suggesting matrimonial allowance as the ultimate aim of womanhood, we can mark Shakespeare having anti-feminist impulses, though it is arguable that Shakespeare does show the frailties of men as well (Azam 68).

Though both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth appear in the earlier part of the play as of equal importance if indeed she does not overshadow Macbeth, afterwards “ she retires more and more into the background, and he becomes unmistakably the leading figure” (Bradley 307). Though Macbeth commits most of the crimes, Lady Macbeth suffers only. Sigmund Freud (44) says, “she becomes all remorse and he all defiance.”

“A traditional view of *Macbeth* raises few questions about a male dominated society in which females are subordinate to the warlike culture” (Shiddall 100). And, the imagery of *Macbeth* is divided into two categories, masculine and feminine. “Blood and royal robes, symbolic of male prowess, authority, and legitimacy are opposed to procreative and nourishing images of babies, children, the female breast, and milk” (French 17). So, the play shows the gender stereotype. Lady Macbeth is the victim of this gender stereotype. Bomber (91) believes, “Lady Macbeth’s problem lies in that she has an unhealthy focus on the world of men” (cited in Pancoast, n.pag.). Many feminist interpreters of literature examine the play for “its presentation of characters displaying their unconventional thoughts on gender” (Pancoast n.pag.).

The evil doing of Macbeth is considered as a heroic ‘deed’; on the other hand, the evil doing of Lady Macbeth is “portrayed as the fourth witch and a monster” (Jajja 234). Shakespeare creates a monster out of the human being. In fact, she is portrayed as a very bitter female, “frequently referring to her role as a woman, both physically and emotionally in negative ways. “This is a strikingly misogynistic work” (Shiddall 73) in which women are doughty evil than men. It is obvious that women are presented as negative stereotypes” (Jajja 234) in *Macbeth*. It is a great wonder that in time of prosperity Lady Macbeth appears to us with imbalance condition. She has lost her dignity and leads a miserable life. In *Macbeth*, her role is to stimulate the hero to reach his aim, nothing else. Nayar (100) opines that “the male becomes the standard model of all things human. The woman is never seen as anything other than that an object, a secondary figure to the primacy of the male.”



## Conclusion

Taralyn Adele (13) argues that "Lady Macbeth is fixated on masculinity, finds femininity a flaw." In the social status, Lady Macbeth needs the masculine power to achieve the goal and she does not become the tragic hero though she possesses the quality. Her femininity is considered as a flaw in patriarchal society. Lady Macbeth when re-enters in the play we see that she has lost her mind and becomes a victim. Feminism believes the inequalities of men and women and shows "how such representations of women reflect, and are continued to actual life and social conditions" (Nayar 83). Thus, in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is a victim of that culture and social system, the system which is formed by patriarchy.

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