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SUBVERSION AND DEMYSTIFICATION OF SEXUALITY, GENDER AND POWER IN MACBETH

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"As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which sexed nature or a natural sex is produced and established as prediscursive, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts". Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* Problems of gender and sexuality are not alien issues in the plays of Shakespeare.

Most of his romantic comedies witnessed the reversal of the gender role in order to create either a comical situation or to criticize the follies of the society. Rosalind in *As you like it*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* and many more are the examples of reversal of gender role employed by Shakespeare to create a dramatic situation but what always have arrested our minds is the continuous question against the gender and sex. Shakespeare never seems to believe in the conventional gender role in the society. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare totally changed the archetypal symbols of masculinity and femininity as we witness the continuous conflict between feminine and masculine qualities in the character of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth which clearly put the traditional cultural norms under threat. Like Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth becomes a Jungian Animus for her conscious rejection of feminine instincts like empathy, compassion, motherhood, and tenderness (archetypal symbols of femininity) in favour of ambition, ruthlessness, and power and which clearly showcases the antithetical picture of the Elizabethan society.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare deconstructs gender through the language and bodies of both Lady Macbeth and the witches. Macbeth's long for power is easily seen by the critics as natural and obvious, whereas Lady Macbeth's lust for power is a response to the oppressive gender roles sanctified by patriarchal society in early

modern England. Lady Macbeth's incessant struggle to achieve manliness through her words and actions throughout the play are a means of freeing herself from a constricting gender role. Ambiguity of gender becomes a clear in the very opening of the play as the witches start chanting: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". Words and the gender of the witches are ambiguous. They are female yet are aggressive and authoritative like male. They are defeminised, androgynous figures; they are bearded which makes even Banquo's rational mind puzzled. Banquo asks: "you should be women/and yet your beards forbid me to interpret/that you are so"(1.3.41). Witches are seen as an extreme type of anti-mother, even considered capable of cooking and eating their own children and sometimes the character of Lady Macbeth becomes one with the witches because of her grotesque sense of brutality when she states that she would crash the babe's head. Lady Macbeth appears to rebuff her gender entirely in her prayer to the spirits to unsex her and praying to revoke all that makes her a woman in exchange for *masculine* characteristics: "come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/come to my woman's breasts,/and take my milk for gall" (1.5.45). This passage draws a relationship between all that is seen as feminine and all that is seen as weak, as Lady Macbeth feels that if she is to succeed in executing the murder of Duncan, she must disavow her sexuality in favour of more typically virile characteristics. This passage shows several other things related to gender and sexuality as well as the gender discrimination which is deeply rooted in the human psyche. Question is why should Lady Macbeth think for disavowing her gender? Why should she hate her sex? Perhaps she knew (made to know) that the violence, murder, brutality are appropriate for MAN not for a WOMAN. And thus, the

change of gender role causes us a feeling of disgust for Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth tries to take all the responsibility to carry out the plan to kill Duncan as she believes that Macbeth is too full of milk of human kindness.

Lady Macbeth's confident assertion of Macbeth's identity or character shows the reversal of gender. Even though Shakespeare does not give any name to Lady Macbeth as her name and identity both is established only by referring to Macbeth, yet she like Derrida's trace, disrupts the presence of Macbeth and finally destroys the binary. Lady Macbeth's assessment of Macbeth showcases Lady Macbeth's desires to become a person of power and ability to fulfil these desires as a female. Lady Macbeth's identity is constituted by the expectation of the society and the allowances given to her which causes her powerless. It is this self-denigration that gives Lady Macbeth's character an inspiration to be brutal and ruthless in her manipulation of the only source of power which she can possess i.e. her husband, Macbeth. She justifies herself a rebel, insolent, and empowered figure and pose an explicit threat to a patriarchal system of governance. And through challenging his masculinity and the society's, norms, she manipulates Macbeth into murdering King Duncan. She taunts the manhood of Macbeth who is the epitome of manliness. She asks: What beast wasn't, then, that made you break this enterprise to me? / 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 (1.7.62). Thus, Lady Macbeth enforces a masculine conception of power after pleading to be unsexed, or defeminized. And by doing so, Lady Macbeth equates manliness with masculine power. As the witches possess both masculine and feminine gender just like their paradoxical language, lady Macbeth also walks in the same path by imitating this paradox in her desire to not by attaining a solely masculine identity, but rather accepting an ambiguous gender- both masculine and feminine constructions as the witches do and probably for this reason Lady Macbeth often is considered to be fourth witch.

It is important to Macbeth to be seen as a strong, powerful man but when Lady Macbeth taunts him and mocks his sexuality to get the courage of killing Duncan, Macbeth asserts boldly that "I dare do all that may become a man, who dares do more is none"(1.7.30). The more Lady Macbeth takes the responsibility on behalf of Macbeth, the more he (Macbeth) loses his manhood. He has lost his previous manliness of being a warrior by trying too hard to be stronger than he should be, and ultimately failing. In this context of continuous power struggle between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, it apparently shows us that Lady Macbeth is trying to change the entire power structure which is centred round with the idea of masculinity and domination of the patriarchy, but if we see it meticulously, we can see that Lady Macbeth is bringing a new understanding to the whole concept of power. Lady Macbeth sees power from women's perspective. She is enhancing her power not merely by dominating Macbeth rather by diminishing the power of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth especially chastises her husband for displaying her power over him and ultimately she takes full control of Macbeth. It is as if Macbeth loses his manliness and become barren and castrated. French feminists Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous have tried to change definition of power in phallogocentric cultures, as they think that "if the feminists' aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallogocentric order (Irigaray 1985, 81). According to them "If we wish to challenge the phallogocentric order, we will have to reject a definition of power of the masculine type" (Irigaray 1985, 81). Echoing the same conception of gender subversion, Lady Macbeth suggests an alternative conception of power as transformative, a conception that is grounded in a specifically feminine economy. Even as Macbeth tries to logically argue against the murder plot by stating: We will proceed no further in this business. / He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon (1.7.30), his wife remains unsatisfied. This so-called feminine attitude of Macbeth brings about frustration and anger in Lady Macbeth who

starts to mock her husband's masculinity by suggesting that he is a coward. Macbeth tries one last time to reason with her by offering: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none"(1.7.30), yet even this powerful assertion is not enough. Although Macbeth wishes his words to stress that he represents the quintessence of manhood, his wife takes them as more of a confession that he is no man at all. She proceeds to deliver her distorted and haunting idea of what it means to be a man. Lady Macbeth assumes a cold, indifference to violence, drawing upon notions of masculinity established earlier in the play. Infanticide symbolizes her figurative rejection of motherhood as a channel to social ascension altogether. 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 brain out", (1.7.62). It is practically unbelievable thing for any woman to say. On the other hand it shows how Lady Macbeth has removed herself from her femininity which she obviously believed was holding her back. As a man, she believes she could commit any act of horror to get what she wants. Still, she relies on Macbeth to commit the deed itself, for even with all her newfound might, there is some sensitivity in her that she cannot seem to shake. In a very revealing passage she states "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't", clearly indicating that Lady Macbeth has arrived in the symbolic state where she gets herself assimilated with the language of her father i.e. patriarchy. The Lady Macbeth we are familiar with, at first, is a woman who seems to be mentally much stronger than her husband. When Macbeth voices his doubts regarding the murder- Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather The multitudinous seas incarnadine,/Making the green one red" (2.2. 59-62). It is she who dismisses them, saying- "A little water clears us of this deed" (2. 2.66). We feel that Macduff, unknowingly, underestimates Lady Macbeth when he announces the murder of Duncan- "Tis not for you to hear what I speak: The repetition, in a woman's ear, would murder as it fell." (2.3.82-83). Because it is Lady Macbeth who plans the manner in which the king is to be killed and takes matters into her own hands.- He that's

coming Must be provided for; and you shall put This night's great business into my dispatch"(1.5. 66-68). But curiously, just as the great business is about to be accomplished, it is she who becomes the one infirm of purpose as opposed to Macbeth, who then has to execute the final action. This is where Shakespeare shows a possible gender bias.

During the scene of in which Macbeth is terrified by Banquo's ghost, lady Macbeth several times turns on her husband contemptuously: "Are you a man" (3.4.57). He is, she says, quite unmann'd in folly" (3.4.72), and scornfully describes his terror as most suitable to a woman's story at a winter's fire,/authorised by her grandma"(3.4. 64-65). Macbeth insists: "what man dare, I dare, and argues that only if he were to tremble facing a real enemy could he be called the baby of a girl. When the ghost vanishes, he sighs: I am man again(3.4. 98-105). Lady Macbeth breaks the shackles of traditional norms of patriarchal society and takes a long flight far outside of the conventional gender roles in order to gain control of her own future. She uses her maternal power to manipulate the masculine power to change her position in the marginalized society. However after self destructing the role of a traditional mother as a means to usurp Macbeth's masculine power, she cannot return to the basic, and thus cannot survive in the new order of the society. Though Shakespeare presents a female character that defies the traditional gender roles, he also shows that society will not allow this powerful ambiguity to exist. Lady Macbeth's tragic end tells the story of a society which pulls her back to the traditional society and ascertains her death. Her madness is justified by the society as they fail to see the method in it.

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